



PROJECT MUSE®

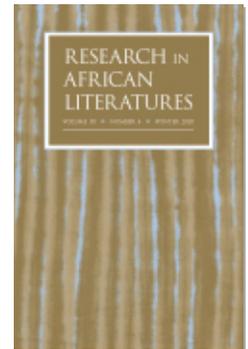
---

*Toward a Robust Culture of Public Memory Staging the Amistad: Three Sierra Leonean Plays* ed. by Matthew J. Christensen (review)

Stephen Ney

Research in African Literatures, Volume 50, Number 4, Winter 2019, pp. 204-205 (Review)

Published by Indiana University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/760290>

## WORKS CITED

- Diagne, Souleymane Bachir. *African Art as Philosophy: Senghor, Bergson and the Idea of Negritude*. Translated by Chike Jeffers, Seagull Books, 2012.
- Harney, Elizabeth. *In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960–1995*. Duke UP, 2004.
- Jaji, Tsitsi, Martin Munro, and David Murphy. "Introduction: The Performance of Pan-Africanism." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2019, pp. vii–xi.
- Snipe, Tracy. *Art and Politics in Senegal, 1960–1996*. Africa World Press, 1998.

YOHANN C. RIPERT  
STETSON UNIVERSITY  
YRIPERT@STETSON.EDU

## Toward a Robust Culture of Public Memory *Staging the Amistad: Three Sierra Leonean Plays*

ED. MATTHEW J. CHRISTENSEN  
Ohio UP, 2019.  
xxvii + 198 pp. ISBN 9780821423615 paper

Christensen concisely yet thoroughly contextualizes, compares, and contrasts three late twentieth-century Sierra Leonean plays about the 1839 Amistad rebellion, so this review can afford to be very cursory in doing so. The editor's introduction, historical timeline, and endnotes take up only 15 percent of the work and are all time well-spent for the contemporary reader. The plays by Charlie Haffner (*Amistad Kata-Kata*), Yulisa Amadu Maddy (*The Amistad Revolt*), and Raymond E. D. de'Souza George (*The Broken Handcuff*) share much in common—not only their historical references, but also many of their thematic emphases and some of their staging and style. This helps explain why the editor's contributions can be so efficient and satisfying and why the collection works so well.

The genesis of these plays is in the sociopolitical context of 1980s' and 90s' Sierra Leone, when Freetown boasted a lively and influential theater scene and when, in response to the false dawn of decolonization, many in the intellectual and artistic communities were beginning to identify as a root problem the lack of "a robust culture of public memory." Sengbe Pieh and the Amistad captives whom he led, via a long detour in the US judicial system, to freedom in their homeland seemed to these Sierra Leonean leaders to bear potential for development as hopeful symbols for indigenous agency, international significance, and freedom.

It isn't difficult for Christensen to show how the plays develop this potential because all three are quite explicit about what they're doing. For instance, all articulate the past's relevance for the present by incorporating contemporary (twentieth-century) scenes. Haffner has an old woman exhort her grandson, a college student, on the need for historical recovery; Maddy has Sengbeh's father

step forward to urge playgoers to give attention to the ancestors; and George conjures up a ghostly team of national heroes, including Bai Bureh and I. T. Akunna Wallace-Johnson, to excoriate contemporary Sierra Leoneans for their historical neglect.

Understandably, unlike the American versions of the Amistad story, such as Spielberg's 1997 film, all three plays include scenes about the characters' lives in Mendeland before they were sold into slavery by fellow Africans. So they assert proudly that this is a Sierra Leonean rather than an American story and reprov- ingly prompt reflection on the disunity and inhumanity of Sierra Leoneans that bears partial responsibility for the horrors of slavery that the Amistad story so blatantly reveals.

Christenson presents the three plays in the order of their composition, which is also in order of increasing aesthetic complexity. Whereas the first, Haffner's, follows a simple, chronological, and historically uncontroversial narrative apart from the scenes where the grandmother educates her book-smart grandson; Christensen shows that the second, Maddy's, draws equally on "fictional" and archival sources in order to highlight the problem of historical knowledge in the context of colonization and slavery. The third, de'Souza George's, deploys a more sophisticated architecture as exemplified in the ironic and allegorical scene where Sengbe reproaches the ghostly national heroes for the failure of self-critique that handicaps their noble anticolonial efforts.

This collection would be an excellent text for an undergraduate course on postcolonial African theater. In a host of other disciplinary contexts, it would also work well for stimulating discussion on the important political and social work of historical memory. This stimulation is exactly what it achieved at a series of public events in Freetown in late November 2019. By staging the theatrical production of excerpts from the collection, by presenting seminars for local secondary and tertiary educators, and by convening local scholars to give papers on historical topics, Christenson and the two surviving playwrights, Haffner and de'Souza George, continue to develop the potential that they all have shown to be implicit in the Amistad story.

STEPHEN NEY

STEPHENJMNEY@GMAIL.COM

*Queer Theory in Film & Fiction*, special issue of *African Literature Today*, vol. 36, 2018, pp. x–281.

(UN)MAKING QUEER AFRICAN IDENTITIES

Reflecting on desiring queer Africans by examining media, memory, and the resulting counter-publics is a vital exercise in realizing queer temporalities and epistemologies within African contexts that can both resist and address. But such a reflection goes further: encompassing intersecting analyses of colonization,