

from ARDENCY: A CHRONICLE OF THE AMISTAD REBELS

Kevin Young

preface

In the summer of 1839, fifty-three Africans illegally sold in Havana mutinied on the schooner *Amistad* while being taken to Puerto Principe. The rebels, mostly men from the Mendi people of Sierra Leone, killed the captain and the cook but spared their masters to help steer toward the rising sun and Africa. For nearly two months, the would-be slaveholders re-routed by night until a navy brig captured the ship off the coast of Long Island. Authorities quickly threw the Africans in Connecticut jails while deciding either to return their men to their Spanish masters or award them as “salvage” to the U.S. sailors.

White abolitionists took up the case, converting the Mendi to Christianity and teaching them English in preparation for the trial. *Ardency's* second section, “Correspondance,” partially excerpted here, consists of the Mendi’s letters and speeches from jail—and during their subsequent freedom.

from
ARDENCY
Kevin Young

WESTVILLE

October 30, 1840

dear Sir Mr tappan

I want tell you Some thing I going to write you a letter I will write you a few lines my friend I am began to write you a letter I bless you because I love you I want pray for you every night and every morning and evening and I want love you too much I will write letter for you from that time Jesus began to preach and say repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand My Dear friend I thanks you a plenty because you Send me letter and I thank you for it and I want pray for you every evening and every night and every morning by day and by night and his always

Mr Tappin Love us pray our father who art in heaven hallowed be I want to tell you Some thing I have no hat Dear Sir I write you if you please and so kind I please you that I please you Let me have A hat to cover my head that I please you dear friend I tell you Some thing I please you that you let me have A bible my friend I want you give me A hat and I thank you a plenty and I have no bible and hat both

my friend I give you good loves I believe you are my friend my Sir I want you tell your friends my good loves I want love all teachers who teach me and all my people good things about Jesus Christ God and heaven and every things I bless them that teach me good I pray for them I want write some your name thy kingdom come thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive forgive our debtors for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever Amen O Lord my friend I write this paper to you because I love you too much my Sir I want to tell you Some thing

When we in havana vessel we have no water to drink hen we eat rice white man no give us to drink when Sun Set white men give us little water when we in havana vessel white men give rice to all who no eat fast he take whip you a plenty of them died and havana men take them put in water I try to write letter of paper for Mr you and Jesus said unto him No man having put his hand to the plough and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God my friend I am Stop writing your letter Gone To you a letter my name Kale I am your friend I give you this letter

from
ARDENCY
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SPEECH

having English now
I hope to tell you what
it meant to hear your
words it was a river
slowly icing over it was
rain falling into water
was the night following
rain into water a father
crocodile waking early
to eat his children it
became the memory

of a gourd at my lips
the salt surrounding
the ship so white
& useless it was a thirst
a message thrown over
board a bottle a sudden
ash upon our skin our
tongues grown dark
& unavoidable as bay
leaves I thank you gentle
men for lending us yours

from
ARDENCY
Kevin Young

NEW HAVEN

January 4, 1841

Dear Friend Mr. Adams,

I want to write a letter to you because you love Mendi people and you talk to the grand court. We want to tell you one thing; stranger say we born in Havana, he tell lie. We stay in Havana 10 days and 10 nights, we stay no more. We all born in Mendi. Mendi people been in Merica 17 moons. We write every day; we write plenty letters; we read most all ways; we read Matthew, and Mark, and Luke, and John, and plenty of little books. We love books very much.

We want you to ask the court what we have done wrong. What for Mericans keep us in prison? Some men say Mendi people very happy because they laugh and have plenty to eat. No body give Mendi people any these things. Mr. Judge come with bars and sentences and Mendi people all look sorry. O we can't tell how sorry. Some people say Mendi people no got souls, white men afraid of Mendi people. Then we laugh. Why we feel bad we got no souls?

Dear friend Mr. Quincy, you have children, you have friends, you love them, you feel very sorry if Mendi people come and carry them all to Africa. When Mr. Jailer came hear with chains he put on some hands and he whip them to hard, he no feel a shame. We afraid for Merica people because Merica people say we make you free. If Merica people give us free we glad, if they no give us free we sorry; sorry for Mendi people little; sorry for Merica people great deal because God punish liars.

We want you to tell the court that Mendi people no want to go back to New Havana, we no want to be killed. Dear friend you tell our Judges let us free. Dear friend we want to know how we feel. Mendi people *think, think, think*. No body know what we think. We think we know God punish us if we have lie. We never tell lie; we fill truth. What for Mendi people afraid? Because they got souls.

Cook says he kill, he eat Mendi people; we afraid; we kill cook. Then captain kill one man with knife, and lick Mendi people plenty. We never kill captain, he kill us. If court ask who brought Mendi people to Merica? We bring ourselves. We hold the rudder. All we want is make us free.

This from my hand,
Kin-na

from
ARDENCY
Kevin Young

FARMINGTON

April 1, 1841

Dear Friend
Mr. L. Tappan

I embrace this opportunity of writing a few lines to you to inform you that I am well & when this come to your hand & I hope that it may find you in good health & yesterday our Judge set little girls free & we are thankful & girls have free now & I hope great God will bless you & keep those who want hurt you

& Tuesday night I wish & thank you very much because you make us free & Mr Adams he made us free & Menda people thank you very much I pray for you & I am sorry to hear your Children have sick I hope God to make them get well & I hope great God will bless you & be my dear benefactory

& I will pray for you when I go to bed and when you rise in the morning & when you go to bed & what we want you to do will you do it & I call you Dear Father because you so kind to poor Menda & I wish pray to great God to send us to our home he sent his Son to the world to save us from going down to held

all men have some work to do & suppose you must let us go home & tell them about you jesus said unto him foxes have holes & birds of the air have nests but the son of man hath not where to lay his head My friend I want you to carry us into Sierra Leone

& this from your friend
Banna

from
ARDENCY
Kevin Young

TESTIMONY

You call us rebels we were spoons
in that ship for so long the wood
dark, drowned as the men who
made it from song sold on land
like ships like us christened
out of water You call us rebels
we were thrown with schools of fish
in the stomach of that ship we slept
with the dead which is not at all
You call us rebels one day we took
the wheel from men with eyes of
water we turned the ship towards
the rising sun let the wind grace
our backs that night we slept like
anchors that night the sailors
turned us towards a Newborn
England in dawn we saw blesséd
land then felt the sun's heat
betraying our backs too late
we saw the sunless men their navy
racing to rescue us into chains
now we know the edge of setting
sun where only the dead are free
to come and go as you please

from
ARDENCY
Kevin Young

CON.

October 5, 1841

President Tyler:

You have done a great deal for us. Now we want to go home, very much, very soon. When we get to Sierra Leone, we get home, we find a good place for our teachers, then tell enemies and friends come see them. We want plenty of calicoes, not cut, for men's coats, pantaloons. For we think we wear Merica dress as long as we live. We want plenty to give our friends and have them give us elephant teeth, camwood, palm oil, and other things to send you to Merica. We will take good care of our teachers. We will not leave them.

When we are in Mendi we never hear of such a thing as men taken away and carried to Cuba, and then return back home again. The first thing we tell them will be that great wind bring us back. We tell them all about Merica. We tell them about God and how Jesus Christ, his only beloved Son, came to down to die for us, and we tell them to believe, for these your sons were lost before now. We want you to give your children to us, give to the teachers to teach them to pray, and not to pray to any thing but God.

Some wicked people here laugh at all our Committee for spending so much on Mendi people. They say we are like dogs without any home. But if you will send us home, you will see whether we be dogs or not. O please let us go to the Africa. We want to see no more snow. We no say this place no good, but we afraid of cold. Cold catch us all the time.

With becoming respect &c.,
MR. CINQUE

from
ARDENCY
Kevin Young

BOSTON, MASS.

November 8, 1841

To the Hon. John Quincy Adams:

Most Respected Sir,—the Mendi people will never forget your defence of their rights before the Great

Court of Washington. They feel that they owe to you, in a large measure, their delivery from evil

hands. They will pray for you as long as you live Mr. Adams. They never forget you. We are about

to go home, to Africa, we reach Mendi very quick, then tell the people of your kindness. Good

missionary will go with us. We will take black Bibles in our mouths,—it has been a precious book

in prison, in writing you, in fire, and we love to read it now we are free. Mr. Adams we want

to make you a present of a beautiful Bible. Please accept it, and when you look

at it, remember your grateful clients. We read in this holy book:—*If it had not been the Lord*

upon our backs when men rose up against us, then they had swallowed us up quick. Blesséd

be the Lord, who has not given us a prey to their teeth. Our soul is escaped as a bird

out of the fowler's snare,—the snare is broken and we soar into the gate and airs of Heaven.

For the Mendi people,
Cinque
Kinna
Kale

from
ARDENCY
Kevin Young

GENTLEMAN

at sea, near Sierra Leone

January 13, 1842

Dearest Tappan—this Captain good—
no touch Mende people. We have seen
great water—no danger fell upon
us. I tell you to make letters
for those who no touch us. All
Mende people glad for white men

you give to go with us. Mister
Steele—he left ship to find place. He stop
in Tucker’s town—who drink rum all
the time—who is a drunkard. Who like
money better than his own soul. He
tell us the ground costs six hundred

bars—Steele would not give so much.
All the rest of Mende left ship to find
their parents. I think that they will
come again. If they no come, I think
God will punish them forever—one
day. You see we are ten now to stay

behind Steele, and three girls. We will
work wood, we will farm and cut
for him every day. You no feel
bad for that—dear friend—some
Mende men will take care
of your mission. Soon I catch

Sierra Leone—my country—make
home—and take care of white
man. Oh, dear Mister Tappan
how I feel for these wondrous
things! I cannot write so true
because the ship rolls. Pray—

Jesus will hear you—if I never
see you in this world—send word
from the next and the new—

GEORGE BROWN (FU-LI)

from
ARDENCY
Kevin Young

This excerpt appears in *At Length* with the generous permission of the author and Alfred A. Knopf. We strongly encourage you to buy the entire book online or from your local bookseller.

Kevin Young is the author of six previous collections of poetry and editor of five others. *Jelly Roll* was a finalist for the National Book Award and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, and won the Paterson Poetry Prize; *For the Confederate Dead* won the 2007 Quill Award for poetry. The recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and a United States Artists James Baldwin Fellowship, Young is currently the Atticus Haygood Professor of Creative Writing and English and curator of Literary Collections and the Raymond Danowski Poetry Library at Emory University in Atlanta.