

The African (Arab) American Muslim Slave Narrative:
Identities in Transition

by

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Table of Contents

| | |
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| Acknowledgments | ii |
| A Note on Transliteration | iii |
| Introduction | 1 |
| Chapter Two: "The Life of Omar ibn Said" | 17 |
| Chapter Three: Bilali's Manuscript | 52 |
| Conclusion | 76 |
| Bibliography | 84 |

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A Note on Transliteration

In the transliteration of the Arabic, I have largely followed the Library of Congress convention, except in the following instances. For the emphatic letters, I substituted the symbols that appear below for the symbols with a dot. I have followed the Arabic convention of pronunciation whereby the *l* of the definite article is incorporated into the following letter if it is a sun letter. For example, I transliterated *al-Rahmān* as *ar-Rahmān*. I have not utilized the rules of transliteration for the names of African Muslim slaves; but rather, I made use of the spellings that have appeared in my references. However, I have transliterated the names of other individuals with Arabic names. Finally, I have chosen to spell "Omar ibn Said" in this way in accordance with how as it appears on the cover of his manuscript.

Substitutions:

h for ح
ṣ for ص
ḍ for ض
t for ط
ẓ for ظ

Introduction

One can not address the past, present, or future of America without accounting for the impact of slavery and the ways that it continues to haunt any attempts to define American identity. Slavery in America was not the first account of slavery in humanity's history but has been practiced throughout time in various contexts. Even within African society, slavery was familiar, common, and many times Africans participated in actual trading with other groups within Africa and eventually with Europeans.¹ The history of slavery in Africa predates American participation in slavery; however, the shape that slavery took in America completely transformed the notion of slavery because it was defined by a particular harshness, brutality, and trauma, both physical and psychological. Out of the violent context of slavery emerged a form of resistance, a disruption of the foundation, that recorded the slaves' struggles to gain control over their identities and their stories and would become part of the American cultural and historical experience; namely, the slave narrative.

Disruption of the foundation meant reminding the slaveholders that while they had control of the slave's body they did not have control over their minds and identity. Their identity was intimately connected to their experience of slavery and thus faced several phases of negotiation. From the initial awareness of the reality of slavery, the slave had to find different means to locate some semblance in the chaos that now defined their world. The

¹ Despite an Islamic prohibition, there were many instances of Muslim traders selling fellow Muslims to European travelers and sometimes became slaves by the very same system. The Trans Saharan slave trade also resulted in the displacement of thousands if not millions of Africans; however, it still did not reach the level of the Trans Atlantic slave trade, neither in number or heinousness. While Islam does not abolish slavery completely because of its rooted-ness in tribal Arabian society and other societies, it views slavery as a social ill that needed to be remedied recognizing the obvious danger: unjustified theories of superiority. The remedy process was gradual and relied on reducing the reasons for enslavement and encouraging manumission. Prophet Muhammad himself rejected the practice and exemplified this rejection through his example of manumitting Zayd ibn Hārith and choosing Bilāl ibn Rabāh, an Ethiopian, as the first *mu'adhdhin* (the one who calls to prayer). These two examples, along with many others, were the first of many aimed at dealing with the practice of slavery and the implications it had on a society.

slaves resisted sometimes through physical acts of rebellion and other times through more subtle, yet equally dangerous, means such as expressions through language. Slave narratives are powerful and lasting examples of the latter and reveal a reality where slaves did not accept their condition passively or the idea that their identity was limited to their slave status. Rather, through narrative, slaves utilized the medium of language to reclaim what slavery had stolen (or attempted) from them: their stories and their identities. In order to understand the slave narrative, specifically those of Omar ibn Said and Bilali Muhammad, two African Muslim slaves, and to address questions of identity, memory and recollection, slavery as both a concept and an institution must be addressed.

Slavery was always shaped by violence whether within Africa or outside of it. The slaves acquired by the Europeans were often kidnapped or purchased straight from African traders²; more often, these slaves were prisoners of war. Intertribal wars provided a constant supply of slaves as a result of the constant shift and change in empires. Intertribal warfare also meant that slavery was a possibility for anyone who was on the losing side, as it was a common fate. Since slavery was a practice present in Africa for centuries, selling slaves, who were also Africans, was not a problem for these African traders; however, the African slave traders had an entirely different notion of what slavery meant and were not completely cognizant of the system—that is American slavery—they were participating in.

Within African societies, slavery was never institutionalized nor did it reach the scope of the transatlantic slave trade. Paul E. Lovejoy in *Transformations in Slavery: A*

² Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 1998) 9. Within Africa, however, Diouf underscores that the principal method to acquire slaves was through war. Thus, it was not common practice among Africans to engage in kidnapping or purchasing slaves from traders. Interestingly, Diouf asserts on page 16 that within Europe, Europeans acquired slaves (Slavs, Irish, Welsh) like Africans did in Africa: through war and not kidnapping.

History of Slavery in Africa outlines the history of slavery in Africa and the various systems of what he calls “dependency” and types of labor; the different systems provide a context for slavery in Africa. Among the systems of dependencies he includes: serfdom, clientage, wage-labor, communal work and slavery. He argues that slavery was a type of dependency and therefore was a smaller system, by virtue of the fact that it was one labor system among several, than what came to exist in the Americas where slavery was a major labor system.³

Lovejoy argues:

If they [the slaves] were allowed to do so, slaves could become full members of these groups, or they could be kept voiceless dependents, but their welfare was related to the fortunes of their master and his kin. In this setting, people had slaves along with other types of dependents, but society was not organized in such a manner that slavery was a central institution. These were not slave societies.⁴

What Lovejoy describes here differs considerably from the system that occurred in the America, where slaves for the most part existed within a specific position and they had no hope for improvement. More importantly, slavery in Africa was not a major institution nor was it built on race as it was in America. Although race was not a significant factor at the onset of the slave trade, it became so with the increasing contact between the Europeans and Africans in slaving and other commercial activities. Europeans used race as a means of categorization.⁵ Thus, the American system of slavery was unique in that it was a central means of labor within the United States during the era of slave trade⁶ and that race was used explicitly as a means of control. In fact, the way slaveholders rationalized the existence of

³ Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 5.

⁴ Lovejoy 13.

⁵ Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998) 11.

⁶ Gomez 27. He sites that even up to 1860, which according to Gomez is at least 50 years after the apex of the trade, the percentage of slaves in various states was significant: South Carolina, 57 percent; Mississippi, 55 percent; Louisiana, 47 percent; Alabama and Florida, 45 percent; Georgia, 44 percent; North Carolina, 33 percent; Virginia, 31 percent; Texas, 30 percent.

slavery on the basis of claims to superiority and economics gave American slavery its particularity and heinousness.⁷ African slaveholders, therefore, were not aware of the nature of the slavery that they would be selling Africans into because the form of slavery that they were familiar with was not built on the foundations that made American slavery what it was: economics, false claims to superiority and dehumanization.

The Transatlantic Slave trade lasted from 1350 to the early mid-1800's, with the apex occurring between 1700-1810, and caused the displacement of at least 11 million Africans with estimates reaching as high as 15 million.⁸ Displacement entailed separation from family and homeland—from any space that had a semblance of familiarity—and forced relocation to a realm marked by the unknown. Moreover, displacement initiated the trauma of slavery, which was the sense of being uprooted and forced into a chaotic state where the individuals who were to become slaves could not even locate themselves in a future that they could control, in addition to the physical pain they were forced to endure.

As an institution, slavery was especially dangerous in the way that identity was utilized for control. While slave holders may not have realized it, their actions in relation to their slaves revealed that they were certainly cognizant of how relevant and vital to human existence a sense of self and belonging was and expressed this understanding through the many strategies that they utilized to subdue and control slaves. Thus, control over the slaves began with destabilization of their identities and was challenged over and over again in the

⁷ Lovejoy 8.

⁸ There is no clear consensus on the exact number of slaves brought through the TransAtlantic Trade because of numerous factors that include discrepancies in the records of slavers, the exact number of slaves who did not survive the Middle Passage, and wide distribution of the slaves across the Americas. Lovejoy argues the smaller figure of 11 million slaves; however, Diouf in *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), on page 45, sites the work of historians Joseph Inikori and Stanley Engerman who argue that the estimates thus far have been too conservative and that in fact the number of slaves more likely lies between 12 to 20 million.

various phases of enslavement. All the strategies that began even in the barracoons, at their core, depended on disturbing the slave's identity, whether by stripping them of any clothing or jewelry, branding the slaves with marks of purchase, preventing them from speaking their language, changing their names or practicing their faith.⁹ The aim of all these actions was suppression and effacement of the individual slave's identity by destroying any links to a past or to a collective—basically their memory of who they were and their origin. The slave holders, therefore, not only comprehended the importance of identity to a person's existence but used this "knowledge" to subjugate and dominate. Each phase of the enslavement process destabilized the slaves' identity more and more, therefore, making reassessment of their identity vital and necessary.

The barracoons, the holding stations of the slaves before embarking on the Middle Passage, became the first instance at which the slaves encountered the mechanisms of destabilization that became central to slavery. In the barracoons, waiting became the most torturous aspect. Many times slaves remained in the barracoons for months awaiting the availability of slavers that required a certain quota of slaves. These barracoons ranged in their set up from weather-protected residences to fortified castles.¹⁰ During detainment in these facilities, slaves endured the first instance of the undermining of their sense of security and their identity. In the barracoons, slaves were stripped of their clothing and any jewelry that would indicate past status. A physical violence then took place as the slaves were then branded on the chest with the company's coat of arms, as if they were merchandise. Michael Gomez in *Exchanging Our Country Marks* highlights the destructive nature of what occurred

⁹ Diouf 82.

¹⁰ Gomez 156.

in the barracoons, only the beginning of the effacement of identity that was to come: “the psychological implications of denuding are both clear and clearly intended—profound humiliation and disintegration of identity.”¹¹ Identity became the means to control and continued to the next phase: the Middle Passage.

It was during the Middle Passage that the slaves were faced with a psychological transition. During the journey, many of the slaves realized that Africa and whatever constituted home was left behind and that all that lay ahead was an unknown space. In fact, Gomez aptly frames the Middle Passage as a rite of passage precisely because of the movement and suffering that it entailed physically, mentally, and perhaps even spiritually:

The Middle Passage was one of the New World’s most crucial and formative phases. The intensity of the suffering provided the survivors an opportunity to bond with others of differing backgrounds. Rites of passage were well understood in Africa, as the Middle Passage certainly qualified as one of the most challenging. As a consequence, those who bonded were taking the first faltering steps in the direction of redefinition.¹²

As Gomez suggests, the Middle Passage because of the great suffering engendered a number of redefinitions, not only individual identity but also collective. Slaves, many times unknown to one another, were forced together. Differences in language, culture, ethnicity, religion, allegiance were reassessed now that they shared a common fate: suffering. The suffering on these vessels left scars on the slaves’ memories that would remain forever a part of their consciousness and their identity. Since both Omar and Bilali make little or no mention of the

¹¹ Gomez 159.

¹² Gomez 158. In this section of the book, Gomez goes into great detail regarding the various aspects of the Middle Passage and sites records from some of the slavers. The picture that emerges from the historical accounts of the Middle Passage is dire. Control of movement and diseases like dysentery, measles, scurvy, smallpox, yaws, and ophthalmia are a few of the afflictions that Gomez discusses. In addition to the physical ailments, fear must have gripped the minds of the Africans on board multiplying the horribleness of the journey. With documentation that depicts the trauma of the Middle Passage, its absence in slave narratives becomes even more pronounced and requires more attention.

horrors of the Middle Passage, it is necessary to engage a more thorough discussion of this violent journey in order to address the void in their manuscripts.

Upon boarding the vessels, male and female slaves were separated. Male slaves, in addition, were chained at the wrists and ankles while female slaves were not. From experience, the Europeans were aware that their control over the slaves was far from secure as many times there were slave mutinies as well as slaves throwing themselves overboard, preferring death over the future that awaited them. It has been documented that the conditions on the ships led to a mortality rate of 15-20 percent.¹³ Lack of clothing, malnutrition, disease, difficult weather, tight packing in the ships, and melancholy led to the loss of Africans' lives. These conditions produced a sense of collectivity among the slaves as they suffered together.

According to Gomez, the Middle Passage ordeal established a process of re-negotiation of their identities, with three factors underlying this process. First, all the Africans through their suffering at the hands of white Europeans realized that their color, which was not as significant of a factor in their identity prior to enslavement, was intimately linked to their condition. Second, through their common desire to survive, these Africans had to form relationships that transcended ethnicity and depended on a common fate. The third factor that forced the Africans onboard to reevaluate and perhaps the most violent in nature was the rape of African women. Rape became a tool of deterrence to resistance. While rape was an obvious violation to African women that continued throughout the history of slavery, it also targeted the African men whose inability to intervene was emphasized. As a

¹³ Gomez disagrees with the percentage that is generally cited arguing that numbers are skewed by underreporting the number of slaves on board and over reporting deaths so that the captain could sell slaves on the side for his own profit. However, Gomez does assert that the figures were still significant considering the intolerable conditions.

result of all these factors, Gomez argues: "To the extent that African men and women suffered aboard the slaver what they and their progeny would suffer on the plantation, there developed a reorientation of identity, a rethinking of who and what constituted the community."¹⁴ Thus, the Africans who survived the Middle Passage and then endured Seasoning had the boundaries of self violated and challenged such that their concept of individual and collective identity had to be reassessed and strategies found to regain control.

After landing in North America, the Africans were then sold to the various buyers and began a process of seasoning. Seasoning differed from location to location and lasted anywhere from one year to three years; however, the central task of drivers who conducted the seasoning, was to train the new slaves in the skills necessary for the work. This training period, however, was not only vocational, but was also intended to force the new slaves to internalize their position in relations to whites, a point that Gomez underlines:

Thus a political education was embedded in the vocational training. White men, who in Africa were viewed as equals to their African trading partners, had emerged as the sole power brokers during the passage, and now represented ultimate authority on the plantation and farm. The objective of the African's forced migration from outlandishness [the newly arrived African] to newness was to fully appreciate this aspect of the white man, of whiteness. White was associated with power and control; black, blackness, black was the equivalent of subordination.¹⁵

Notions of color and power that formed the foundation of slavery were imposed on the new slaves. Their position, whether they continued to be "outlandish slaves" with all the images associated with that label or "new Negroes," depended on the extent to which they

¹⁴ Gomez 167.

¹⁵ Gomez 169. The central focus of the book is an exploration of the movement from an African identity to an African-American identity, which required a renegotiation of sorts in identity to move from an ethnically-based identity to a racial identity. The origin of this renegotiation lies in the dichotomy between white and black engineered by participants in the slave trade in order to maintain the system. Later in the discussion, the work of Frantz Fanon will also engage this dichotomy in relation to colonialism.

internalized these ideas. Whether it appeared to the slave holders and drivers (many times drivers were other slaves to further discourage unification and rebellion) that the slaves had internalized their slave status, they still did not have full control. The barracoons, the Middle Passage, and seasoning all entailed disrupting the slaves' identity and forcing them to internalize their status as slaves; however, many slaves resisted this hegemony and subjugation and continued to find means to resist. The slave narrative became one of the most lasting examples of resistance.

Of course, there are slave narratives that stand out as prominent examples, even receiving recognition in their day. Names such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Brent Jacob, and Olaudah Equiano to name a few are firmly implanted in American history. They carved out a space for slaves to tell their stories, experience in slavery, and their efforts to obtain freedom, essentially re-inscribing them into a history that aimed at silencing them. In addition, writing their stories constituted a way for these individuals to now address the void that slavery had created in their own identity: what inscriptions were relevant and in what way; how trauma, memory, and recollection played into this negotiation; and how they wanted the outside world to see them.¹⁶ According to Frances Smith Foster, many of the earliest slave narratives shared some characteristics that kept the audience interested but also allowed the slaves to relay some of their thoughts on slavery in a subtle manner:

...they tell of geographical explorations, oceanic adventures, and encounters with Indians. They, too, place a great emphasis upon the religious implications of the narrator's experiences. Like other personal narratives, the slave narratives chronicle incidents in an individual's experience...They investigate the process of their spiritual and emotional development and try to assess the effects of social and familial relationships upon the ways in which they see themselves.¹⁷

¹⁶ Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-Bellum Slave Narratives* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1979) 3.

¹⁷ Foster 4.

These characteristics suggest that not only did slaves reject their position but that they used their imagination, experience, spiritual journeys, and familial ties to arrive at a story that would capture (or attempt to) their sense of who they were—their identities. These slaves were filling in the blanks in their own story, in accord with their memories. While Douglass, Jacob, and Equiano are among the most well known concerning the slave narrative genre, they recall another void that has been left unattended.

Our focus here is not on the English slave narratives that are widely known and have entered into African American canon, but rather on those narratives that have escaped the historian's attention either purposely or not. Narratives in English do not comprise the entire corpus of slave narratives in North America nor do they relay the spectrum of experience of the entirety of the slave population. African Muslim slaves were also faced with the trauma of slavery and found strategies to regain a sense of themselves; yet, they have often been forgotten. These African Muslim slaves used their literacy—language—in Arabic to counter the attempts to erase any trace of their identity to maintain their faith and to control how they would be remembered.

Many of the writings of African Muslim slaves have either been lost or are currently in very fragile condition; however, some of the manuscripts have survived and offer us an aperture into their specific experiences and thoughts. As my discussion will highlight, African Muslims constituted a sizable number in the total number of slaves brought to America. The role of Islam in their experience of slavery has been underestimated. Moreover, the place of Islam in the historical and cultural fabric of America has also been displaced; the reality of these manuscripts destabilizes any suggestions that a homogenous and coherent American identity exists. While the number of manuscripts that have survived

is not large, the few that have survived provide textual insights about not only the author's historical experiences and cultural struggle but other African Muslim slaves' experiences. Moreover, these manuscripts reveal the struggle that these slaves faced of situating themselves within the American context through a process of negotiation of their identities.

The manuscripts of Omar ibn Said, a slave in Fayetteville, North Carolina and Bilali Muhammad, a slave in Sapelo Islands, Georgia who headed the only known antebellum Muslim community in North America¹⁸ are two examples that reveal how the trauma created by slavery was confronted and resisted through language. Both Omar and Bilali suffered the various phases of enslavement, including the initial capture, the barracoon, the Middle Passage, and seasoning and thus the trauma of slavery was an experience that challenged their sense of self in an intimate and real way. In each phase, memories were created; scars formed; and traces left that would become the rhetorical and visual traces that form their texts.¹⁹ Moreover, resistance to their enslavement was evident through the language of their manuscripts. By writing in Arabic, a language very few had access to, both Omar and Bilali's manuscripts were already out of the direct gaze of the slave holders; and both utilized various techniques to regain control over the images that slavery imposed upon them. The fact that Omar and Bilali wrote after years of enslavement demonstrate that they continued to engage, confront, and revisit the question of their identities, faith, and who would ultimately control

¹⁸ Allan D. Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles*. (New York: Routledge, 1997) 6.

¹⁹ Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser (New York: First Mariner Books, 1998) 194. Morrison in her essay discusses the necessity of moving from the image to the text rather than vice versa because that is the more reliable approach. In order to "reconstruct" the world of the slave, Morrison argues that she must use the images already present in the text in order to fill in the blanks in the narrative, especially in those sections of the text where the author stops short of relaying the unpleasant details of his or her experience as a slave; that is, Morrison aims "to part the veil that was frequently drawn."

their thoughts. Through an examination of both manuscripts, it is apparent that Omar and Bilali's Muslim identity emerges as the most defining aspect of their identity.

Among the fifteen million slaves brought to North America, African Muslims—that is, individuals who professed Islam or belonged to Muslim families and/or heritage—constituted a sizable group. Sylviane A. Diouf, in her writing on the presence of African Muslim slaves, has proposed that about 10-20% of slaves were Muslim, which is about 2.25-3 million African Muslims if we proceed with the larger estimate of a total of 15 million slaves.²⁰ Of these African Muslims brought as slaves, many were literate in Arabic, which meant that they could at least read Arabic if not write it as well (Arabic script was also used to write down West African languages, producing texts that are called *`ajamī*).²¹

Literacy was considered dangerous for slaves to attain. Moreover, a literate slave was a contradiction to the ideological framework of slavery and a slave literate in Arabic was even more problematic as the access to Arabic was minimal. Interestingly, though, the demand for Muslim slaves was not hindered by the possible danger attached to their literacy as Anglophone slave holders had a preference for slaves from Senegambia and Sierra Leone, often referred to as Mandingos, because they were skilled in certain types of agriculture. A high percentage of slaves coming out of this area were Muslims. Moreover, in relation with other Africans, Muslim slaves were viewed by the slave holders with higher esteem such that

²⁰ Diouf 48.

²¹ Ibid 8 and Austin (1997) 23. The term *`ajamī* stems from the root in Arabic *`ayn, jīm, mīm* which has the meaning of being non-Arab as well as speaking incorrect Arabic, being obscure and unintelligible, as opposed to *fushāh*, meaning eloquent and transparent. Literary Arabic, therefore, is referred to as *fushāh*. Thus, texts that use Arabic script but are not Arabic are referred to as *`ajamī* because they are not Arabic, meaning the literary language, and by definition 'obscure.' This is not limited to Africa and in fact has a history of usage in various parts of the world.

they were considered to have higher intelligence, more rational, and more physically attractive.²²

While these notions may not seem problematic, they are illustrative of the kinds of imaging that slave holders engaged in, in regards to slaves. That is, they projected the necessary images on to the slaves to maintain semblance in the ideological framework of slavery. Thus, if a slave was literate the only way to retain control and avoid disturbance in the ideological foundation was to construct more images to make sure that the literate slave remained on a continuum with other Africans and never with whites. In the discussions of the two manuscripts, it will become apparent that these slaves, in the perception of the slave holders, occupied a limbo state: they were neither completely African nor white. In this way, they were always kept at a distance from whites so that they could still fit within the conception of a slave: being other than white.

This limbo state entailed preferential treatment, where slaves like Omar and Bilali would occupy important positions on the plantations. Terry Alford in *Prince Among Slaves*, writing about Ibrahim 'Abd ar-Rahman Jallo, another African Muslim slave and a contemporary of Omar and Bilali, highlights the high frequency that the African Muslim slaves held high positions: "True or not, the planters agreed, for they turned to the Muslims for drivers, overseers, and confidential servants with a frequency their numbers did not justify...Sober, self-disciplined, and generally honest, a Muslim could be so useful that a planter might give him berth solely for financial advantage."²³ Alford's comments are

²² Gomez 82.

²³ Terry Alford, *Prince Among Slaves: The True Story of an African Prince Sold into Slavery in the American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 56. Alford's book is interesting in that it highlights some of the images attributed to the African Muslim slaves, apparent from the title, as being Arabs or Moors and princes. Interestingly, though, Ibrahim in an effort to gain his freedom gave his owner the impression that not

indicative that African Muslim slaves for various reasons were treated differently than non-Muslim slaves, perhaps in an effort to subdue any kind of resistance. In relation to Omar and Bilali, Alford's comments are relevant as little was required of Omar, which was unusual for a slave, and Bilali was a driver at Thomas Spalding's Sapelo Island plantation and managed somewhere between four hundred to five hundred slaves. According to Austin, Bilali was even given muskets to defend the island while Spalding was away and that this may have been the only instance in Georgia that slaves were in possession of arms.²⁴ Of course, there were non-Muslim slaves who held high position in plantation life; however, African Muslim slaves like Omar and Bilali present an unusual reality, in addition to the images and stories that surrounded them and the ways in which they still resisted, and thus, warrant attention.

Through various means, the slave holders perceived that they retained control over these slaves who had access to writing and that they did not present a threat of resistance. While they did not engage in physical resistance, Omar and Bilali did contest the efforts to interfere with their identity, especially their religious identity. Slaves such as Omar, Bilali, and other African Muslim slaves would communicate their experience of slavery, their continued commitment to Islam, and offer their opinions on what was now their permanent reality using their literacy in Arabic. Through Arabic, they had a voice. In order to trace the way in which Omar and Bilali utilized their literacy as a medium to relay resistance and to

only had he converted to Christianity but that upon his return to Africa he would preach the faith. The story continues with Ibrahim donning 'Arabian' clothing, maintaining a royal air, and touring the United States to raise money to free his children as well. Often times he was asked to write in Arabic, and he would write out *Surat al-Fātihah*, but identify it as the Lord's Prayer Arabic in effort to maintain the guise of conversion. Ibrahim upon reaching Africa, according to Austin, reverted to Islam, suggesting that his conversion was not sincere. Like Omar and Bilali, Ibrahim found subtle strategies to resist.

²⁴ Austin (1997) 87. In this chapter, Austin highlights the noteworthy particularities of Bilali's situation and his coreligionist and friend Salih Bilali who was the driver on James Hamilton's plantation. Like Bilali, Salih was entrusted with many duties, indicating that Hamilton held Salih in high esteem. Moreover, Bilali and Salih seemed to maintain contact with each other, although they were on different islands, which may also demonstrate greater trust on the part of their slave holders.

negotiate their identities a reading of both manuscripts must be performed. Thus, the usage of language, in both manuscripts, occupies an important space in the discussion.

Issues that need to be considered include orthography and readability, the possibility of translation and what does translation reveal about the manuscripts and the rhetoric in the manuscripts—were they simply the writings of individuals with rudimentary knowledge of Arabic or were they able to use the language to relay views and expressions. The readability of Omar ibn Said's manuscript offers greater access than Bilali Muhammad's manuscript, which is characterized by opacity since the actual writing is not clear. I will address Bilali's language in the third chapter that analyzes Bilali's manuscript. Other questions that require attention include: what does the Arabic text illustrate about how Omar and Bilali identified themselves? Is there evidence to suggest that they negotiated an identity framework? If so, what are the effects of trauma and recollection on the negotiated framework? How does the narrative provide a means for that negotiation? How does writing in Arabic relate to their Muslim identity? Looking at the manuscripts, however, in their original language will provide a conduit to reflecting on their identities and the inscriptions of their trauma and suffering. Through the discussion of the language of Omar and Bilali's manuscripts, I will argue that Omar and Bilali provide fragmentary descriptions of an identity that has been influenced by language, religion, and trauma.

The exact number of slaves brought to America will never be known and the extent of the suffering can never be measured. But what we do know is that each one of these Africans had a history, religion, language, family, community, and identity(s) prior to their forced enslavement. If they survived the Middle Passage, these slaves would come into contact with a reality where they were confronted with a new language, a new culture, a new religion, and

a challenge to their identities. At this site marked by unfamiliarity and violence, slaves were forced to find ways to resist and to renegotiate their identities and regain control. A song that Gomez cites illustrates the boundaries that the white slaveholders could not breach: "Got one mind for white folks to see, 'Nother for what I know is me, He don't know, he don't know my mind."²⁵

²⁵ Gomez 10.

Chapter Two: "The Life of Omar ibn Said"

"The Life of Omar ibn Said" was among the handful of slave writings in Arabic that have survived; however, his remains "the only extant Arabic autobiography written by a slave in the United States."²⁶ For many years, Omar's manuscript was assumed to be lost; only to be rediscovered in 1995. The rediscovery of Omar's manuscript, alongside several of his other writings, has opened a door to understanding Omar and offers a conduit to unraveling many of the images and stories that had been attributed to him. In addition, Omar's writings offer the possibility to now interrogate the great narrative of slavery, where slaves were fixed into images, positions, and roles. Through this manuscript, we begin to hear faintly the voice of the silenced slave. In what follows, I will examine the way that Omar, through his literacy, negotiated his identity within the frame of trauma and violence of slavery and problematized the images that the slaveholding society projected on to him. Arabic became the medium through which Omar regained control in order to dismantle the master's narrative that aimed at fully encompassing him and his story.

At present, there are fourteen extant Arabic writings left by Omar; his "Life" was his lengthy production. Omar ibn Said's story has been shrouded with ambivalence, mystery, and questions on the nature of his identity. His writings were of interest during his lifetime in the United States from 1819-1864²⁷ and continue to engender discussion and focus in the present. Omar's story becomes an important site of memory to engage in the pursuit of performing the literary archaeology suggested by Toni Morrison in her essay "The Site of

²⁶ Omar Ibn Said, "The Life of Omar Ibn Said," trans. Ala Alryyes. *Multilingual Anthology of American Literature*, eds. Marc Shel and Werner Sollers (New York: New York University Press, 2000) 58.

²⁷ Austin (1997) 129.

Memory”: “to reconstruct the world that these remains [slave writings] imply,”²⁸ because it raises many questions that not only carry historical relevance but continue to haunt present discourse on the nature of identity, the role of religion in identity, and the impact of trauma on identity politics. Since, Omar’s story comes to us masked with questions, makes an analysis of his manuscript the obvious and most necessary next step.

During his lifetime in the United States and through records about him, a legend emerged about Omar. The legend told the story of a slave of Arabian descent—in fact an Arabian prince—who despised Africans, found the American slavery system unproblematic and accepted his position as a slave, and upon his arrival to the United States and through the kind treatment of his owners discovered the truth of Christianity and abandoned Islam. This legend—this narrative *about* Omar—needs to be dismantled to examine the individual components that together assemble what was made-to-be-known about Omar until a voice emerged through his “Life,” along with his other writings, and challenged the imposed narrative. Allan D. Austin in his 1984 edition of *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook* includes examples of historical documents that perpetuated this legend about Omar and eventually led to an uncomplicated acceptance of Omar’s complete adherence to Christianity, for many years, and in some cases his supposed Arab origins. Omar’s supposed Arab origin will be the first aspect addressed, because of its apparent questionability. Austin offers the example from a letter in *Wilmington Chronicle* from January 1847 where the sender/translator comments on an Arabic manuscript by Omar ibn Said. He (assumably)

²⁸ Morrison 192. In her essay, Morrison specifies her use of “image”: “By ‘image,’ of course, I don’t mean ‘symbol’; I simply mean ‘picture’ and the feelings that accompany the picture.” In other words, the slave narratives are the images, the pictures, which Morrison utilizes to reconstruct what she refers to as the “interior” lives of the authors. In regards to Omar, it is his manuscript that constitutes the remains to trace his negotiation of identity and his resistance, entailing a process of revisiting as suggested by Morrison.

says: "He [Omar ibn Said] is an Arab by birth, of royal blood, and was captured during a war between his own and a neighboring tribe, conveyed to the coast, and sold as a slave."²⁹

Another example that Austin provides is an article by Louis T. Moore who wrote "Prince of Arabia" in the Greensboro *Daily News* on February 13th, 1927. In this article, Moore's statements regarding Omar's ancestry are more explicitly problematic:

From time to time many persons inquired with apparent interest and curiosity, after the venerable man. Some thought occasionally that Moreau³⁰ was of negro extraction. He always emphasized the fact that he was an Arabian and not a native of Africa. The two countries were separated by the Red sea and the narrow isthmus of Suez, now penetrated by the Suez canal.³¹

In Moore's statement, there already emerges an identity politics, where there seem to be images and narratives of identity (we will turn to this shortly) reflected *on-to* Omar by an "Other." He includes what people thought of Omar that he "was of Negro extraction," indeed based on his status, physiognomy, and origin, and then shifts in such a way so that those assertions remain falsities that are countered by Omar's own emphasis on his Arabness. Regardless of the images, Omar's identity was contingent on how others viewed him and *their* categorization, whether it is as a Negro or an Arab. Moreover, Omar, in Moore's description, not only is Arab, but also in fact must be from somewhere near Egypt, in a place between Africa and Asia, for his geographical description to be accurate, which contradicts Omar's own location of his origin in his manuscript. Whatever Omar's specific role in the initiation and/or perpetuation of this idea, the notion or image of Omar as an Arab, or in fact other African Muslim slaves classified as Arabs, can be traced, in fact, throughout several other writings and emerge as part of the matrix that needs to be unraveled. Locating the

²⁹ Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook*, (New York: Garland, 1984) 474.

³⁰ Assumingly, this term derives from the classification "Moor," an individual of mixed Arab and Berber descent; the conquerors of Spain in the 8th century.

³¹ Austin (1984) 494.

beginning point(s) of this mystification of these slaves' origins and how it evolved becomes something which will need to be interrogated further in the discussion.

The second aspect of this identification by the other(s), which alongside the decision on Arabness, is the question of Omar's conversion to Christianity and abandonment of Islam. Austin, again in his invaluable source book, includes references that attempt to identify Omar firmly within the sphere of Christianity—that is decidedly and perhaps forcefully. The first example comes from the secretary of the American Colonization Society in the *African Repository*, July 1837:

The anxious efforts made to instruct him in the doctrines and precepts of our Divine Religion, have not been in vain. He [Omar] has thrown aside the bloodstained Koran and now worships at the feet of the Prince of Peace. The Bible, of which he has an Arabic copy, is his guide, his comforter, or as he expresses it, 'his life.'...His prayer is that the Foulahs and all other Mahomedans may receive the Gospel...he [Omar] says, '...The Lord put religion in my heart about ten years ago [about 1827]. I joined Presbyterian Church, and since that time I have minded Jesus' laws. I turned away from Mahomet to follow Christ.'³²

From the picture that the secretary has painted regarding Omar's religious choice and identification, there seems very little room for negotiation. Here Omar's rejection of Islam and the "bloodstained" Qur'an ("Koran" in the secretary's comments) is absolute and complete, such that his desire becomes spreading the word of Christianity to his people. One must also wonder if Omar himself would have described the Qur'an in such violent terms that would mean an affront to many interconnected images of the Qur'an, Muslims, Islam, and the Prophet Muhammad—images that played an important role in his worldview prior to his enslavement (and arguably throughout his enslavement). Moreover, according to the secretary's assessment, Omar not only rejects Islam but does not recognize it as a religion,

³² Austin (1984) 469-470.

since religion was only put into his heart with Christianity. In these comments, once again we become cognizant of an identity politics and negotiation that is far from transparent and entirely too simplistic; what emerges is a binary opposition in this movement from Islam to Christianity that is reflected in the pairings of “bloodstained Koran”/ “Prince of Peace” and “Mahomet”/ “Christ” that when juxtaposed with Omar’s writings reveal numerous internal inconsistencies, especially considering the violent context of slavery that defined his reality and in which he wrote his manuscript. Louis T. Moore, from the discussion above on Omar’s “Arab” origin, also speaks to Omar’s conversion and asserts that Omar “worshipped as a faithful and devout Christian for many years prior to his death in 1859.”³³ Such comments negate the possibility of any real identity negotiation; rather the comments of Moore, the secretary of the American Colonization society, for example, fix Omar into a specific framework, and in fact other African Muslim slaves who were literate, ignoring the letters of Arabic that he had already put down that challenged such inscriptions, and inevitably silenced and condemned him to the narrative they told. Such writers, other than Omar became the authors of his narrative, until his manuscript was “exhumed” alongside his other writings and became a sort of palimpsest that voiced a story that lied buried, until now.

It has only been implied the danger and violence inherent in such a process that fixes individuals into an identity (s) determined by another. The result of this process is twofold: first, the individual’s voice is suffocated and second, a space opens up for the other to attribute a series of other narratives to the framework *they constructed*. This process of othering and exclusion—determined by the power and/or authority hierarchy in place at a specific time, though not necessarily permanent—projects an image(s) of an identity *on to*

³³ Austin (1984) 497.

the individual, in this case the slave. The image then develops into a series of narratives, which block out the voice of the slave, who must then develop strategies to counter the echoes of these narratives. We find this kind of process to justify colonialism and the process of colonizing one space and people by another *outside*. Many have dismantled the narratives of the colonized constructed by the colonizer that fixed the former into frameworks and narratives determined by the latter. In the contemporary context, we have seen how several African American and North African authors interrogate the suppressed history of the colonized. For example, Assia Djebar in *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* searched for the Algerian female voice that had been silenced by the French and their fellow Algerian brothers and re-inscribed their voices into the narratives that the French and Algerian men had created. To do this she had to search for the openings in the apparently "complete" and "fixed" narratives and the location of all these projected images. The search for the voice of the silenced becomes the fulcrum of this discussion, as it has reverberations even to the present in the ways that identity politics are far from transparent and require acuity to hear all the voices that are speaking.

To engage in this dialogue with the past (in addition to the present) it becomes necessary to delineate the theoretical foundation of the ensuing discussion. Three ideas will serve as avenues to play with the notion of identity: Margaret Somers's "narrative identity,"³⁴ Jacques Lacan and Frantz Fanon's discussions in "The Mirror Stage" and *Black Skin White Masks*, respectively, on the role of the Other in identification—in projecting *on to* another images and narratives, and the idea of a "Third space" that Homi Bhabha articulates in *The*

³⁴ Margaret R. Somers, "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach," *Theory and Society*, Vol. 23, No. 5 (Oct. 1994) 605.

Location of Culture. All three of these concepts evoke each other and eventually engage each other so that once applied in the exploration of Omar ibn Said's manuscript (and eventually Bilali Muhammad's manuscript) we are able to read carefully his writings.

Margaret R. Somers, in an essay titled "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach," begins with the suggestion that we address identity through the idea of narrative, what she calls the "narrative identity" to counter what she asserts is "A recurring problem...to conflate identities with what can often slide into fixed "essentialist"...singular categories."³⁵ Somers in her essay outlines an alternate methodology to deal with identity so as to avoid the danger of fixity. Discussions on identity that make use of fixed categories assume that they are "natural," a point that Somers contests: "If identities are fixed there can be no room to accommodate changing power relations – or history itself – as they are constituted and reconstituted over time."³⁶ According to Somers, identity is composed of a series of narratives (social, historical, and cultural) that are constantly being constructed; in some instances the individual locates himself/herself within the narratives and other times *they are located* within the narratives. Somers suggestion of approaching identity by way of narrative offers an insightful lens not only to engage Omar and Bilali's manuscripts, but also to think about identity.

Somers begins her discussion by broadening the understanding of narrative beyond representational form to a concept that becomes part of the process of identity formation and negotiation. She says:

These concepts [social epistemology and social ontology] posit that it through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world,

³⁵ Somers 605.

³⁶ Somers 611.

and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities...all of us come to *be* who we *are* (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by being located or locating ourselves...in social narratives *rarely of our own making*.³⁷

Identity(s) emerge, therefore, through a process of location: spatial, temporal, and cultural where narratives become the individual frameworks that contribute to an individual's sense of self; however, the most prominent aspect of these narratives is the fluidity of their borders. Through the concept of narrative, one can avoid fixing identity into a specific frame that does not account for shifts in time and space because the nature of narrative is such that there is a flow. Somers argues that this movement available in narrative acts to prevent rigidity in thinking about identity by "...destabilizing dimensions of *time, space, and relationality*."³⁸ The instability in these dimensions serves as the force to counter any attempts to capture identity absolutely, without attending to the ways in which identity becomes in fact a system in motion rather than a static figure that once formed remains unalterable. In fact, according to Somers and as we shall observe in both Omar and Bilali's manuscripts, "...narratives are constellations of *relationships* (connected parts) embedded in *time and space*, constituted by *causal emplotment*."³⁹ Our identities, as Somers so appropriately describes it through the use of the term "constellations," are these networks that shift and move through time and space, and remain subject to the relationships with others—that is identities are "constituted and reconstituted over time"⁴⁰ when faced with others and when we encounter the flow of life.

Accepting the notion of narrative identity to complicate our approach to identity (especially to steer away from any static forms), it becomes necessary to understand the role of the other in forming those narratives. Our sense of self in many senses becomes dependent

³⁷ Somers 606.

³⁸ Somers 606.

³⁹ Somers 616.

⁴⁰ Somers 611.

on the existence of another. Even the “ideal-I,”⁴¹ described by Jacques Lacan, that image that the infant encounters when he (or she) looks in the mirror is not devoid of the encounter with another: the mother, the father, the siblings, the strangers *etcetera*. Although there is that initial moment—that “private” engagement with the specular image⁴²-- this image does not *fully identify* the infant. Only with another outside will the infant begin to situate him or herself in this world and to negotiate their own identity. This initial moment of recognition Lacan refers to as a moment of *identification* because it is then that the infant becomes cognizant of the realities of images and imaging in relation to one’s sense of self:

It suffices to understand the mirror stage in this context *as an identification*, in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes...an image—an image that is seemingly predestined to have an effect at this phase.⁴³

The transformation that occurs within the subject is an awareness of a reality of images and perhaps also the recognition of something outside of one’s mental space. The image that the infant connects to in the mirror remains, though, premature, as it is devoid of the presence of others in this the process of identification. Or is it? Does the infant perceive the image in the mirror as separate to himself or herself—as an other? We leave that to others to determine that—if determination is a possibility—however, this discussion of the mirror stage has implications in our discussion of Omar’s manuscript and identity because it is a moment of images and identification.

The infant/mirror/image encounter is perhaps a true moment where an image and identification is attributed in a moment free of hierarchy—if it is, then it is last one.

⁴¹ Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1999) 4.

⁴² Lacan 4.

⁴³ Lacan 4.

Encountering others creates situations where identification and identity politics are no longer simplistic or transparent, and certain processes and actions exacerbate these situations. Slavery is the site that we are interrogating here in order to understand the identity politics of Omar and Bilali and the role that members of the slave holding community played in the way both negotiated their identity within the context of slavery.

Once we leave the moment of infancy and those precious moments facing the mirror and travel to the site of slavery, we find that identity politics and images are often convoluted and tainted with power, skewed and silencing narration, and violence. Frantz Fanon in “The Fact of Blackness” addresses this intricate identification and deconstructs the notion of “blackness” and the roles of those on top that narrate and project the images and those who remain on the opposite side(s), wherever that is, who are narrated and *receive* those images—many times violently. He questions the apparently “natural categorization” that has been accepted to explain and justify such practices as enslaving and colonizing others. Like Somers, Fanon seeks to disrupt the supposed fixity and stasis of the image of the black man. This becomes important in our discussion of Omar’s manuscript, and later Bilali’s manuscript, because their writings and identities require more than a cursory look and almost beg for an interrogation of the liminal spaces that exist in the encounters between Omar, Bilali and other African Muslim men and the white men who constructed their own narrative *about* them in order to encompass fully these slaves who could read and write to maintain the control.

Fanon captures the control of the other through a description of a chemical solution and the idea of piecing together fragments. He says:

But just as I reached the other side, I stumbled, and the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye...Now the fragments have been put together again by another self.⁴⁴

This image of the black man as fragments put together according to another's prerogative—the object in another's narration—becomes Fanon's central obsession. Fanon recognizes the danger in the way these images have been utilized not only as individual stereotypes, but also as central points in a network of images to create the narrative that would fix the black man into a place: "...the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes and stories."⁴⁵ The white man becomes the storyteller and the narrative usually included tropes of "...cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects, slave-ships."⁴⁶ The black man, according to Fanon, remains fixed within this narrative and any "victories" to disrupt these narratives have been tricks and games. Fanon's assessment here is problematic because it minimizes the effect of different strategies that challenged the master narratives; we will see, for example, how Omar's manuscript is replete with moments of resistance against the narratives of the white men *about* him in order to regain control over his own story and identity.

Fanon does, however, refine his view concerning the success of these attempts at disruption by suggesting that identity politics and negotiation are marked by postponement. This postponement opens up a space for resistance—what Fanon encourages as a challenge to these "master" narratives. He says, "...if I were asked for a definition of myself, I would say that I am one who waits: I investigate my surroundings, I interpret everything in terms of

⁴⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967) 109.

⁴⁵ Fanon 111.

⁴⁶ Fanon 112.

what I discover, I become sensitive.”⁴⁷ This idea of postponement recalls a point of Somers earlier, and that is, identity is never fixed (at least within oneself) but is subject to encounters with life and others across spatial, temporal, and cultural dimensions. Others may attempt to define the boundaries through their narrative about another’s identity, but in terms of oneself we see that all this actions of identification by the other remain incomplete. Fanon’s writing of his book has already disrupted the master narrative by virtue of the fact that *we hear his voice*. The voice of the silenced—their narrative—emerges as the most forceful opposition to narratives that aimed at silencing them.

Here will entertain a postponement in our theorizing. Omar’s voice needs to emerge, and through his manuscript the notion of the “third space” will offer a counter narrative. In his manuscript, Omar used Arabic to produce a coherent narrative, that despite graphemic displacements (for example, substituting the post-alveolar voiceless fricative (ش) for the plain palatal voiceless fricative (س)) and stylistic particularities (using the third person when he is referring to himself), was able to clearly relay his message. “The Life of Omar ibn Said” offers insight into the complexity involved in identity negotiation, especially in a situation that clearly aims at disrupting any formed identity narratives, such as ethnic and religious identification. Through Omar’s writing, the possibility of complete effacement of one’s identity by another identity becomes questionable. Also, the completeness of the “master” narratives that related the tale that Omar represented the ideal slave in his resignation to his enslavement and in his supposed dedication to Christianity face the prospect of dismantlement once we read and analyze his Arabic letters.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Fanon 120.

⁴⁸ The translations that appear in this paper of Omar’s manuscript are my interpretations and in the footnotes appear as “Omar ibn Said” and then the page number; however, there are references to comments made by Ala

From the opening of Omar's manuscript, we are confronted with a clear indication that Omar did not abandon his Muslim identity when he engages in the Muslim practice of beginning actions—in this case his narrative—with the *bismillāh*, a specific Islamic formula that begins every chapter (*sūrah*) in the Qur'an (with the exception of the 9th chapter). Since the practice of uttering the *bismillāh* before any action represents an important Muslim practice, Omar's retaining and utilizing the *bismillāh* demonstrates a continued connection to a Muslim identification. Omar then follows the *bismillāh* with the very specific Muslim practice of praising the Prophet Muhammad through the mention of his name as well as the supplication: *ṣallā Allāh 'alā sayyidinā Muhammad* ([May] God's prayer be on our master Muhammad).⁴⁹ In this supplication, the use of the term of *sayyidinā*⁵⁰ (comprised of the noun *sayyid* meaning "master" and a pronoun) with the possessive pronoun "our" indicates reverence for the Prophet Muhammad and a personal connection to the individual; in fact, the term *sayyid*, in general, is utilized within a context of respect and for that reason Omar's use of it in conjunction with the Prophet Muhammad cannot be dismissed. Prophet Muhammad's name acts as one of the most important symbols of Islam and it retains a pivotal role in the Muslim narrative. If someone had left behind their Muslim identity or did not find that narrative applicable within in their identity, they would not find a space for the Prophet Muhammad or anything that speaks to this understanding (as a prophet and/or individual deserving reverence) of his existence. In fact, Omar mentions the Prophet Muhammad two

Alryyes (in the footnotes "Alryyes" followed by the page number), whose translation of Omar's manuscript appears in *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature*.

⁴⁹ Omar ibn Saïd 64.

⁵⁰ Ala Alryyes translated this term as *sayyidikum* "Your Lord," suggesting that Omar used this form instead of the normal construction *sayyidinā* to set "...himself outside the group, he leaves no ambiguity that Mohammad is their Lord" (712). In my analysis of the manuscript, in terms of the orthography and in regards to what I believe Omar attempts with his writing, it is more convincing that Omar wrote *sayyidinā* "Our Lord" and in fact meant to include himself within the Muslim group.

other times in his manuscript and in one of those occurrences he actually uses the title of prophet with Muhammad's name as well as the expanded version of the supplication: "*Muhammad rasūl Allāh ṣallā Allāh `alayhi wa-sallam*" (Muhammad the prophet of God May God bless him and grant him peace).⁵¹ Omar's mentioning of the Prophet Muhammad from the start, as well as two other mentions of him in the manuscript, illustrates that Islam continued to be an important framework for his identity and problematizes assertions of his absolute conversion that have circulated.

Following the *bismillāh* and the supplication for the Prophet Muhammad, Omar postpones any actual production of his own until he writes out almost entirely *Sūrat al-Mulk*, the 67th chapter in the Qur'an. The source of the chapter is not explicitly cited; however, anyone familiar with Qu'ranic text would recognize the language and source of the "prologue." Omar's reference to this Qur'anic chapter is significant as it contests the situation of enslavement between humans. The title of the chapter *al-Mulk* indicates the subject of the chapter, namely God's dominion, power, and ultimate ownership over everything. The term *mulk* in Arabic means Lordship over the visible world and with the related term *malakūt* meaning Lordship over the invisible world construct a worldview that locates ultimate authority with God. Furthermore, the power of God attested to in this chapter implies also goodness and beneficence; that is, God's power is never oppressive. This is important in constructing the concept of power and justice in the Islamic framework as it relates back to a notion of God. All this becomes significant because Omar chose to begin his writing with this chapter suggesting that he contested the slave owners' authority and perhaps

⁵¹ Omar ibn Said 80.

their claims to fairness and morality. The choice of this chapter could have been a result of memory—that is he could only recall this chapter—or that he intended to relay a certain message. In fact, we do have examples of his writing where he recalls other chapters from the Qur'an. Later in the manuscript, for example, Omar references *Sūrat al-Fātihah*, the first chapter in the Qur'an; however, it is couched between his text and he does indicate its connection to the Prophet Muhammad. The fact that Omar makes the choice to begin his writing with *Sūrat al-Mulk* and he does not contextualize it at all suggests a deliberate action as the message in the chapter relays a meaning conducive for resistance, to counter the hegemonic narrative about him. The presence of the chapter should not be dismissed; the chapter acts as a central image necessary to tracing his identity in his manuscript.

If Omar had indeed “thrown aside the bloodstained Koran” as suggested in the secretary's comments mentioned earlier, then we could ascertain that encountering any Qur'anic material in the manuscript would be unlikely. Yet, the first words we read in Omar's manuscript come from what he had presumably abandoned. Anyone would be hard pressed to explain the presence of this chapter in Omar's manuscript in a framework that distanced him from some sort of Muslim affiliation. Moreover, the choice of this chapter out of the 114 chapters in the Qur'an suggests not only that Omar had in fact retained a connection to his Muslim identity but that he was using writings in Arabic, a language unknown to his audience, as a means of resistance and reflection in order to relay his own narrative that included the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad, and Islam as central signifiers within his identity.

Omar does write out the majority of the chapter with the exception of verses 20 and 29. Here we can certainly indulge the suggestion that these gaps resulted from a loss in memory as he says early on in his manuscript, "...I have forgotten much of my talk along with the talk of the Maghreb."⁵² The "talk of the Maghreb" probably refers to Arabic and the speech he refers to as "my talk" refers to Fulfulde, a language that uses Arabic script.⁵³ In addition to forgetting these verses, he repeats part of verse 30 which is a parable that states: "Say: 'Consider if all the water that you have were to sink down into the earth, who would give you running water in its place?'" This rhetorical question posed in the Qur'an is meant as a reminder of the ultimate centrality of God in this world, such that all things return to Him. The message related in this verse counters the authority of the slave owners as it implies that eventually there will be an end to this temporary and incomplete authority. If Omar had accepted his position as a slave and the authority of the slave owners, he probably would not have chosen to cite this particular chapter, especially this verse/parable. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the fact that the final verse is a parable and not a clear statement could in fact parallel Omar's use of this chapter that he does not specify; it seems that Omar's manuscript and his identity are not as transparent as was once assumed.

Following the citation of *Sūrat al-Mulk* from the Qur'an, Omar begins his actual narrative (although in reality it began with the *bismillāh*). He begins by addressing someone by the name of Sheikh "Hanta" or Hunter,⁵⁴ presumably the individual who requested that Omar write this narrative. About a line later, Omar also asks that his brothers not blame him. It is unclear who Omar meant by "brothers," considering that his audience remains

⁵² Omar ibn Said 72.

⁵³ Austin (1997) 152.

⁵⁴ Alryyes' translation 73.

ambiguous. According to Ala Alryyes, a translator of Omar's narrative, argues that Omar was quite aware of who he perceived to be his audience. In other words, although asked to write his autobiography to serve as an example of a "good slave," Omar, while writing, spoke to those who had access to the Arabic language and would not betray him. He depended on the camouflage of the Arabic letters that created a barrier to those who he really meant to resist against. Moreover, Alryyes paints the picture of an individual who knew what was "expected" from this narrative and yet found ways to insert utterances that would demonstrate resistance. Alryyes says:

However, it is only on the surface that Omar's autobiography can be thought of as a "safe" proslavery story...The text is replete with esoteric utterances that not only hide his views from potentially dangerous readers, sifting them into those can interpret the utterances and are, therefore, within Omar's circle—his community—and those who cannot...The autobiography strongly indicates that Omar did not "convert" in the sense that his masters and white visitors thought.⁵⁵

Omar does prove through the remainder of his manuscript that he was not as passive as those around him assumed him to be. After addressing his audience and giving praises to God (both a Muslim and Christian practice), Omar reminds his audience of his commitment to Islam by utilizing the *bismillāh* a second time. The use of this formula seems more than coincidentally, but let us set this aside temporarily and continue.

At this point, we begin to gain a glimpse of what fits into a definition of an autobiography as Omar offers details of his life prior to his enslavement. In this section, he includes information on his birthplace, his educational background, and the circumstances of his enslavement. Setting the scene from across the Atlantic Ocean. From Omar's "Life," we know that he was born in Futa Toro, near the Senegal River in present day Senegal, around

⁵⁵ Alryyes 60.

1765 (we estimate this from comments in his "Life" on his age at capture and how long he says he is a slave). By locating his birthplace in Futa Toro, in present day Senegal, claims of Omar's Arab origin are thrown into disarray. The question becomes: If Omar locates himself in West Africa and does not indicate any Arab background, how then do we address the image of Arabness projected on to Omar in the narrative constructed *about* him?

His father had six sons and five daughters and his mother had three sons and one daughter (his father must have engaged in polygamy). Omar mentions an educational background of twenty-five years studying under the tutelage of three sheikhs: Sheikh Muhammad Sayyid, Sheikh Sulaymān Kimba, and Sheikh Jibrīl (Gabriel) `Abd Allāh. This instruction probably entailed religious education in the Qur'an and Hadith, as well as studying Arabic enough at least to read if not write in Arabic. According to Diouf, literacy was widespread in Muslim West Africa such that "A large proportion of the Muslims could read and write in Arabic... They were avid readers of the Koran, and many knew it by rote."⁵⁶ John Hunwick emphasizes the link between the spread of Islam and literacy that produced the situation that Diouf describes. According to Hunwick:

Wherever Islam spread encouragement was given to the learning of Arabic and to the foundation of both small schools for teaching and reading of the Koran and higher schools for deeper study of the Arabic language and the literature of Muslim peoples—more especially the theological and legal literature which was to form the basis of both the spiritual and temporal life of the new converts. Once established in an area as the language of the religion, Arabic was soon put to other more worldly ends, for purposes of trade, politics and family records.⁵⁷

From his writings, it is obvious that Omar was among those who were literate and could use Arabic productively to express himself, beyond simply writing down verses from the Qur'an

⁵⁶ Diouf 8.

⁵⁷ John O. Hunwick, "The Influence of Arabic in West Africa," *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, 1964: 24.

from memory. Since, Omar utilized Arabic as a language of expression indicates the powerful force that Arabic, presumably learned in religious schools, had in his life—that is the link between language, spirituality, knowledge, and expression. One could be a bit presumptuous in assuming that Omar's extended study produced a connection to Arabic as a language of communication and of Islam. In his case, the two functions of Arabic appear to be firmly interrelated and make his Muslim identity—as expressed through his Arabic letters—more engrained and difficult to disrupt.

After twenty-five years of study, Omar returned to what he refers to as “his place,” presumably his home, for six years before war broke out. The circumstances for Omar's enslavement were not unusual for the time: he was captured during war by a group of people who Omar describes as *kuffār*, which are “non-believers.”⁵⁸ The war he describes that resulted in his capture may have been a war between the non-Muslim Bambaras forces from Kaarta from Massina (in present day Mali) the Muslim Almaamy of Futa Toro, where the latter was defeated around 1807.⁵⁹ The same year, Omar was sold to Europeans or what Omar calls *naṣrānī*—Christian—and taken to Charleston.⁶⁰ Omar describes this scene in his narrative: “A big army came to our country. It killed many humans (people). It took me, walked me to the big sea. They sold me to the hand of a Christian. He bought [me]. I walked

⁵⁸ I chose to define the term *kuffār* as non-believer as opposed to “infidel” as it appears in Ala A. Alryyes' translation because of the already problematic attribution of the latter term to the Muslim lexicon when in fact it recalls a specific point in Christian history.

⁵⁹ Austin (1997) 134.

⁶⁰ While the Arabic word *naṣrānī* means “Christian,” it is unclear from Omar's writing whether his use of the term in relation to his buyer was utilized to suggest religious affiliation or as a label to identify white men in general. Later, however, with his increased contact with Christianity it would seem that Omar used the term as a religious label.

(or he walked me) to the big ship, the big sea.”⁶¹ Alryyes offers an insightful observation into Omar’s repetition of the verb “to walk.” He says:

If consent and the freedom of movement are inextricably related, how poignantly ironic Omar’s intense repetition of the verb ‘walk’ is. The repetition of the word calls forth the processions of chained slaves—the physical repetition of nameless slaves—to which he probably submitted.⁶²

If indeed Omar utilized this verb in such a way to create this sort of imagery, then once more we are faced with the reality that Omar was not resigned to his position and was able to use his Arabic in an evocative manner to express thoughts that at the least countered the narrative related about him. Moreover, citing the slave dealer’s religion in his description of his enslavement was most likely not innocuous, but was meant to highlight the role of Christianity in slavery. In fact, Omar uses the term “Christian” as an adjective to describe the man who bought him but also the English language and America, which seems peculiar after 24 years of enslavement and a complete conversion to Christianity, particularly when he juxtaposes that adjective with comments that relate to his Muslim identity.

Omar, after being enslaved and bought by a Christian man, is taken initially to Charleston, South Carolina. His comments on the Middle Passage are minimal. Omar simply says, “I walked [sailed] in the big sea for a month and half of a month. I came to a place called Charleston in Christian talk [language].” This absence of description of the torturous Middle Passage is worth noting since Omar voiced his sentiments and resistance several

⁶¹ Omar ibn Said 74.

⁶² Alryyes’ Notes 713. It is unclear from the Arabic whether or not the verb should be read as “I walked” or “he walked me (made me walk).” Although, Omar uses the present tense of the verb, *al-mudāri*, the context suggests the past tense meaning; and therefore the translation of the verb is in the past tense. Since Omar uses the third person masculine singular throughout the manuscript when he is the subject of the verb, it becomes difficult to know if it is the first form of the verb *يَمْشِي* (he walks) with Omar as the subject or the second form of the verb *يَمْشِي* (he made walk) with the slave buyer as the subject.

times in his writing and yet does not address the passage that marked the rupture between the familiar and not. Morrison discusses these absences in regards to English slave narratives and argues that the aim was to “to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things, and they ‘forgot’ many other things.”⁶³ Thus, the slaves had to engage in their own censorship in order to “to appear as objective as possible—not to offend the reader by being angry, or by showing too much outrage.”⁶⁴ Since Omar, in the view of the white slave holders and members of the slave holding community, exemplified the ideal slave, he was trusted and encouraged to write,⁶⁵ making his situation precarious. Omar probably understood the volatility of this situation and perhaps decided on a pragmatic approach where he would not risk revealing the details of the Middle Passage—which would raise a red flag immediately if the Arabic was understood—in favor of expressing resistance through more subtle references and comments. Moments such as the fleeting line about the Middle Passage reflect a certain degree of negotiation.

Omar then discusses how he was purchased by a man called Johnson, who he describes as “a small, weak, evil man...[and]a *kāfir* who does not fear Allah in anything at all.”⁶⁶ It is interesting that Omar uses the term *kāfir* as opposed to *naṣrānī*. The term *kāfir* suggests a greater degree of disbelief in the Islamic worldview and is very negative, which indicates that Omar retained an Islamic terminology and framework and that his use of the term was to differentiate between two types of people. This kind of statement is not unusual within the context of his writing since Omar expresses clearly his opinion several times

⁶³ Morrison 190.

⁶⁴ Morrison 187.

⁶⁵ Austin (1997) 135.

⁶⁶ Omar ibn Said 76.

throughout the manuscript. Moreover, Omar still maintained the Islamic moral framing as suggested by his designation of actions and individuals as those of *kuffār* (plural of non-believers) and those of Christians. After only a month, Omar ran away to Fayetteville, North Carolina because Johnson forced him to do hard work.

At this point in Omar's manuscript, we see the first instance where he practices an Islamic ritual of praying. He says, "I walked to a place called Fayetteville. I saw houses. In a month [after a month], I entered in the houses in order to pray."⁶⁷ Although Omar use of the word for prayer *yusallī* is a general term, it can be assumed that at this early point of Omar's experience in America that the real exposure to Christian ideology was negligible and that in this instance he meant the Islamic prayer. In addition, the fact that Omar wrote this narrative as an old man and a supposed convert to Christianity and inserts this mention of prayer is significant. Mentioning prayer locates him within that practice and that worldview, such that even within the entirely unfamiliar space he found himself in, he prayed one of the five daily Islamic prayers.⁶⁸

In the next several sentences, we get a glimpse of how Omar was not silenced but in fact expressed opinions, which he exemplified through expressions of refusal and

⁶⁷ Omar ibn Said 77.

⁶⁸ Omar was eventually found in Fayetteville by a young man and his father who identified him as Sudanese (*sūdānī*); however, this is not in reference to the present day nation located in East Africa. In Arabic, *sūdānī* comes from the Arabic word *aswad* which means black. According to Alryyes, this was and is a common practice to refer to Africans as such even if they are not actually from the broad geographical area of the Sudan, so it was not unusual for Omar to use this label. He was taken to "jail," a term that Omar locates within the "Christian language" for sixteen days and nights. Logically one can presume that Omar had lost track of the days, especially with the temporal disruption caused by the Middle Passage, yet he states it was a Friday, the Islamic holy day, that many men came to the jail to see him and eventually buy him. In his footnotes, Alryyes contemplates the possibility that in fact it was a Sunday, the Christian Sabbath. Alryyes does not elaborate on the implications of such an assumption; however, if Omar meant the Christian Sabbath and yet after 24 years of enslavement and 10 years of being baptized (and exposure to an Arabic Bible where presumably he would have encountered the Arabic word for the Christian Sabbath) utilized the Islamic holy day as the closest reference point, this would be one more aspect making his conversion questionable.

admonition. When Omar was asked by Mendel (there is no clear indication of who this individual was but presumably he was among the men who came to see him at the jail) if he would walk to Charleston, Omar responds by saying “no” seven times and that he would stay in the hands of Jim Owen, who becomes his new owner. Keeping in mind that Omar is writing all of this in hindsight makes this kind of refusal more suggestive of how Omar expected to be treated and how Johnson failed in that regard, such that Omar associates the place Charleston with him. Omar continues by addressing the people of North Carolina, South Carolina, and America in order to ask the question: “Is there among you (plural) two good men [like] a man called Jim Owen with John Owen?”⁶⁹ He then goes on to give reason for describing these two men, Jim Owen who purchased Omar and his brother, as *ṣāliḥayn* (good, virtuous, pious, devout): “They are two good men. Everything they eat they give to me to eat, everything they wear they give me to wear. Jim with his brothers read the Bible to me. God, our Lord, our Creator, our Owner, the Restorer of our conditions in state and wealth, grace not from duty but from his Power.” The initial portion of this quote recalls, perhaps, the notion of slavery outlined in Islamic law, where the slave eats and is clothed like his or her master. Under American slavery, the justification of slavery rested on the constructed inferiority of Africans and as such the kind of treatment that Omar received was exceptional and not the norm; yet, Omar sets Jim Owen and his family’s treatment, as well as their assumed religiosity, at the center of his remarks for the people of America. The tone of Omar’s comments does not denote a slave who had accepted his status, as was narrated about him: Omar did have opinions that he directed to a very broad audience and therefore refused to be silenced.

⁶⁹ Omar ibn Said 80.

The Omar that we have encountered so far already challenges the narratives that were constructed about him. He located himself within West Africa without any trace of an Arab origin, he retained a voice and opinions that had not been extinguished by slavery, and evidence of a connection to Islam can be traced in his writing. In many ways, Omar's writing introduced problematic aspects that disrupted the legend; yet, the question becomes was there any seed of truth to those stories about Omar? And, how can we read these fictional narratives about him? Through Omar's writing, we witness encounters between individuals, histories, and narratives that might shed light on this essential question. Before delving into these encounters, it would be instructive to return briefly to the concept of the "narrative identity" introduced earlier by Somers. Somers use of narrative as a way to address the fluidity inherent in identity also allows for the possibility of encounters with others that would influence and/or impact the trajectory of the narrative. In fact, Somers emphasizes the importance and role of all our encounters in identity formation:

Narrative identities are constituted by a person's temporally and spatially variable *place* in culturally constructed stories composed of (breakable) rules, (variable) practices, binding (and unbinding) institutions, and the multiple plots of family, nation, or economic life. Most importantly, however, narratives are not incorporated into the self in any direct way; rather they are mediated through the enormous spectrum of social and political institutions and practices that constitute our social world.⁷⁰

As Somers states, identities are constructed and exist within a world of encounters that mediate the shape that identities take. This shape constantly faces the possibility of modification and negotiation because the context also shifts. What Somers does is to contextualize identity such that we can address how identities can be constructed by others but also the internal construction each individual faces within their world of encounters.

⁷⁰ Somers 625.

Through Somers framework, we can situate Omar's manuscript, which is marked by traces that signify encounters and their effects on his identity as reflected in his writing. This becomes relevant in the next few pages of Omar's manuscript where there is a juxtaposition of Islamic and Christian references that dislocate the legends attributed to Omar, as he was dislocated.

The first encounter between the Christian and Muslim references occurs when Omar begins by supplicating to God that he "Open my heart to the path of guidance to the path of Jesus the Messiah to a great light," and continues by stating that "before I came to the country of the Christian my religion,⁷¹ religion of Muhammad the Prophet of God. May God bless him and grant him peace."⁷² Perhaps, someone reading Omar's manuscript with the assumption of complete conversion to Christianity would rationalize the presence of the name Muhammad and this reference to Islam as indication of the trajectory suggested in the legend. This movement, however, is complicated by these juxtapositions. The presence of Islamic references at all already interrupts the narrative projected onto Omar, creating a point of rupture, and as such needs to be interrogated. What we find in this moment in the manuscript are a series of complications that point to resistance and a negotiation of sorts; regardless of the nature of the negotiation, however, the narrative that seemed to have no apertures to question its absoluteness in fact faces dismantlement now that the encounters between Omar's Muslim and Christian identity come to the fore.

⁷¹ It is not clear from the Arabic whether Omar meant Islam was or is his religion. Alryyes includes both words in his translation of the manuscript; however, he argues in his footnotes that since Omar does not use *kāna*, the past construction, a literal translation would be: "Before...my religion is the religion of Muhammad."

⁷² Omar ibn Said 80.

Keeping in mind that Omar had access to a Bible in Arabic which he read,⁷³ the fact that he would use the name for Jesus that appears in Christian discourse in Arabic, *yasū*, would not necessarily be awkward, especially since he seems to be somewhat pragmatic in his resistance to the narratives about him (see the earlier discussion on the Middle Passage). Since, Jesus as a figure occupies a central role in Islam and is considered to a prophet of great renown and reverence, Omar probably did not find including this form of his name in his writing to conflict with the Islamic framework. The ambiguity in his temporal framing of his adherence to Islam, indicates that he could have meant to surround that moment—that a Christian slave holder might focus on—with an air of doubt that only those who sought to hear his voice under the Arabic letters would decipher. Moreover, his supplication for the Prophet Muhammad and the inclusion of the epithet “the Prophet of God” is not a practice that an individual who had renounced Islam would maintain or even recognize.

Omar does not stop at simply at praising the Prophet Muhammad, but goes on to include details about how he would practice Islam before he came to America. In his description, he mentions that he would go the mosque and pray the five daily prayers; he gave alms every year, which included such things as gold, silver, agriculture, and cattle; he walked to jihad every year to the *kuffār*; and he walked to Mecca and Medina for “those who are able.”⁷⁴ With the addition of jihad, Omar basically outlined the four of five pillars of Islam (fasting of Ramadan is not mentioned nor the testimony of faith (*shahādah*), but the latter can be assumed). The narrator that emerges through these details of ritual practice was at some level committed to Islam; such commitment would seem to make a complete

⁷³ Austin (1997) 135.

⁷⁴ Omar ibn Said 82.

effacement of this part of his identity challenging to say the least. Furthermore, the presence of description of Islamic practices is paralleled with the absence of descriptions of his Christian practices. Considering that he wrote this manuscript as a baptized Christian for 10 years, the fact that he described practices of Islam—the renounced faith—in some detail and did not incorporate any discussion of his Christian practices once more creates disquiet within the two narratives: the narrative about Omar’s conversion as well as the one that emerges between the lines of his manuscript underneath the surface.

At this point, Omar describes the family that he was forced to leave through enslavement. Omar’s mentioning of the members of his family is not as harmless as it may appear. Rather Omar reminds his audience, in a critical way, that he remembers after twenty-four years what enslavement robbed him of—quite unbecoming for a slave whose identity and memory had been completely and “successfully” altered by his acceptance of his position. He says, “Your father [it is implied that it is his father] had six boys with five girls and [my] mother [had] three boys and one girl. I [was] the day I left our [my] country thirty-seven years old. I have resided in the Christian country twenty-four years.”⁷⁵ In addition to the picture of a large family that is depicted here, we find that Omar was not a teenage boy nor a young man at capture, but an adult. The detail of his age does not mean anything conclusive; however, the question emerges of how easy it would have been to interfere with an adult’s identity in such a destructive way, such that one’s prior years and experiences that contributed to a sense of self are wiped out with such ease. Omar’s memory, through the trauma of slavery, as well his expression of this connection to a site in the past in his writing,

⁷⁵ Omar ibn Said 82.

creates a disjuncture that casts doubt on the possibility of his complete forgetfulness of Islam and adherence to the Christianity—used as a justification for slavery.

Once more we encounter Omar as the pontificator, at this next site in the manuscript, when he addresses the people of North Carolina, South Carolina and America to talk about “the good generation”⁷⁶ which comprises Thomas Owen, the son of Jim Owen, and his sister “Maas Jen” (Alryyes suggests the possibility that this is Martha Jane⁷⁷). He goes on to list out the Owen family inserting comments about their righteousness and their goodness that they as a family reflect. Omar then asks the following rhetorical question three times: “Is there among you a good generation [like this generation] that fears God so much?”⁷⁸ In this instance of “excessive” praise, the question of the purpose (if there is one) of over a page of commentary on his owner’s family and Omar’s sincerity comes to the fore. We have encountered several times an individual—who not surprisingly—appears to be more complex than the stories told of him suggest. Interpreting this moment of praise as representative of a grateful slave becomes problematic since the context of this whole narrative is slavery and that Omar died in enslavement; therefore, whatever he wrote must be read in conjunction with that reality. Perhaps, Omar did in fact appreciate his owners’ unusually kind treatment, but he has already indicated several times in his manuscript that he understood the connection between his good treatment and his outward resignation to their wishes, in this case to write a narrative that would support their claims about him and would ease their minds about his enslavement (they did treat him well after all!). In other words, it seems that Omar recognized the necessity of pragmatism in his resistance.

⁷⁶ Omar ibn Said 84.

⁷⁷ Alryyes 83.

⁷⁸ Omar ibn Said 84.

Even if one cannot question with any certainty Omar's praise of the Owen family, what Omar does next, in the second of three juxtapositions of Islamic references and Christian references, begs for a re-reading in order to encounter the underlying narrative. In the three places that Omar indicates an inclination towards Christianity, the references to Islam are immediately mentioned in conjunction. In this example, he says, "I Omar love to read the Book the Great Qur'an. General Jim Owen with his wife read the *Injil* [Bible]. They read it to me a lot. ..Open my heart to *al-Injil* [the Bible], to the path of guidance. Praise be to God the Lord of the Worlds, much praise and thanks."⁷⁹ We are faced once more with an inconsistency in Omar the convert to Christianity, who not only included the supplication for God to open his heart to the Bible after 10 years of being baptized but also stated, without ambiguity as occurred earlier in the first such encounter, that he maintained a link to the Qur'an. Is it plausible that an individual who had completely abandoned Islam for ten years (at least) would read the Qur'an? Moreover, why would Omar, who had an Arabic Bible "that was used so much that it had to be recovered, apparently more than once,"⁸⁰ juxtapose *his* reading the Qur'an with Jim Owen and his wife and *their* reading of the Bible *to him* rather than insert himself in their place? It is clear from Omar's comments that he was instructed and educated about the Bible by his master, perhaps without the option to refuse. And that despite his access to an Arabic Bible it was not the book that he would read. At this site, we encounter ambivalence between Omar and the Bible that represents the entrance into Christianity and towards letting go of the Qur'an. In addition, the phrase *al-hamdulillahi rabbi il-`alamīn* (Praise be to God the Lord of the Worlds) from the Qur'an is couched within

⁷⁹ Omar ibn Said 86.

⁸⁰ Austin (1997) 135.

the supplication to God to open his heart to Christianity, engendering a kind of mediation between Christianity and Islam. Omar seemed to use his writing to tell two stories, which becomes more apparent as the manuscript opens to the reader of Arabic and reveals this complexity. On the one hand Omar's manuscript does not allow for an absolute conversion to Christianity; on the other hand, it seems that without the ability to fully practice Islam as he once did and access only to the Church and the Bible, Omar incorporated aspects of Christianity that were not doctrinally oppositional to Islam in order to preserve some kind of spiritual life in enslavement, producing a kind of dual identity in the religious sense.

The complexity that Omar accomplished throughout his writing comes across with force in the final pages in the narrative. He accomplished this by saying enough to appease his slave owners, without also disrupting the surface narrative too much. Of course, he depended on an audience with limited access to Arabic. However, there are moments, glimpses of another narrative, which for the attentive reader of Arabic can be read as a kind of resistance, making the smooth surface narrative uneven. At this point, we come across the final parallel example of an Islamic reference and a Christian reference.

Juxtaposed, Omar writes out *Sūrat al-Fātihah*, the opening chapter in the Qur'an, and the Lord's Prayer in Arabic. Omar does not deviate from the pattern he established early on and that is citing *Sūrat al-Fātihah* and then the Lord's Prayer. Surrounding these two references, once again, is a temporal ambiguity; he says, "First, Muhammad. I prayer saying [writing out *Sūrat al-Fātihah*]...and now [or but now], the saying of Jesus the Messiah [writing out the Lord's Prayer in Arabic]." ⁸¹ Alryyes, in his translation, reiterates the

⁸¹ Omar ibn Saïd 88.

obscurity in what Omar meant with the phrase *wa-al-ān*, “The Arabic construction *wa-al-ān* is ambiguous in that it can be translated as the inclusive ‘and now’ or the exclusive ‘but now’.”⁸² If one wishes to maintain the narrative about Omar’s conversion to Christianity they would most likely read (if they could) that phrase as the exclusive “but now”; however, the issue does not rest solely on the translation of the phrase, but on the presence of the name of Muhammad and the Islamic reference that disrupts the flow of the conversion narrative whether read inclusively or exclusively. Furthermore, even if one argued that there is nothing in the Lord’s Prayer that doctrinally conflicts with an Islamic framework,⁸³ it remains firmly rooted within a Christian framework and does not address the issue convincingly. Rather, the issue becomes that throughout Omar’s manuscript we have seen that there has not been one instance where Omar mentioned Christianity without also including and/or referencing Islam and his Muslim identity, as if one could not exist without the other within the context that Omar faced.

In addition to the disruption of the conversion narrative, Omar, in the final pages, resists the notion that he had accepted his position as a slave, such that he had no interest in returning to Africa.⁸⁴ In fact, in a lucid statement Omar emphasizes the trauma of slavery and retells his story of enslavement. He says, “I have been residing in our country because of the great harm. The *kuffār* took me in oppressively, selling [me] to the hand of the Christian who bought [me]. I walk[ed] to the big ocean for a month and a half month...”⁸⁵ Explaining his presence in America in these terms, Omar indicates that he did not forget—even after

⁸² Alryyes 714.

⁸³ Austin (1997) 136.

⁸⁴ Austin (1997) 130.

⁸⁵ Omar ibn Said 90.

twenty-four years of enslavement—the violence inflicted on him by slavery. He accentuated his memory of the violence, by retelling the circumstances of his enslavement, “The *kuffār* took me in oppressively, selling [me] to the hand of the Christian who bought [me].” There are fleeting moments referring to the Middle Passage, the actual site of permanent rupture, but it continued to resist narration. Earlier in the discussion, the lack of detail concerning the Middle Passage was noted as a way to suggest Omar’s pragmatism in his resistance, this second mention underscores Omar’s resistance, pragmatic or not. Omar relays the message that his sense of self had not been effaced as his slave holders and constructors of the legend about him assumed and he could clearly locate the site of the trauma that would define the remainder of his life.

The question one might raise: was Omar permitted that kind of freedom to relay this message? Probably not and for that reason, his resistance was surrounded by ambiguity, such that at some moments his voice came through esoteric comments and other times it was more obvious. Revisiting the Middle Passage and his enslavement is an example of Omar’s daring in his resistance. Omar, however, demonstrates his cleverness in his resistance in the same space when he immediately references General Jim Owen and his siblings and describes them and their treatment of him: “God, our Lord, presented us [he probably meant himself] to the hands of a good man who fears God and loves to do good work. He is called General Jim Owen with his brothers...I have remained in the hands of Jim Owen. He does not hit [me], nor does he insult [me]. I do not experience hunger or shame or heavy work.”⁸⁶ He ended the narrative by saying, “I am not able to do heavy work. I am a small, sick man. For

⁸⁶ Omar ibn Said 90-91.

twenty years, I have not seen any harmful thing in the hand of Jim Owen."⁸⁷ There is a paradox that emerges in Omar's comments. He first asserted that he was not required to do heavy work because of the kindness of his slave master and then goes on to say that he did not have the ability to do heavy work. This is characteristic of Omar's style where he reveals and veils. Although Omar's audience is not entirely clear, in comments like these, he indicated that he knew the politics involved in the slave owners' encouragement of his writing as well as the treatment that he received. His emphasis on his health serves as a way of surrounding Omar with an air of harmlessness: who would expect resistance on this level from a small, old, sick slave? Moreover, Omar's praise might suggest a slave who appreciated his owners, however, the fact that slavery served as the larger context problematizes such a conclusion. Omar was never manumitted nor returned home; thus, one must recognize the ways in which the framework of slavery defines and re-defines all the words that Omar wrote within his enslavement—these are not the words of a freed man. Throughout the manuscript, we find that Omar's words carry within them multiple meanings and in that way, perhaps, he was able to resist.

Omar the ideal slave proves to have a multidimensional identity where many different identifiers or signifiers (that call to a specific aspect, such as gender, class, religion, cultural) factor into its formation and re-formation; that is its negotiation. The multidimensional identity that is manifested in Omar's writing is itself subject to change across space and time; thus, we witness the presence of clear intertextual moments in his manuscript that drew from other experiences, opening a space for interpretation (and continued interpretation)—a sort of

⁸⁷ Omar ibn Said 91.

third space as defined by Homi Bhabha. According to Bhabha, we need to move away from singular and fixed categories in identity claims and instead interrogate the moments and spaces of cultural meetings—the “in between spaces—that produce cultural differences.”⁸⁸ It is within these interstices that the negotiation of identities occurs. The Third Space is that “which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew.”⁸⁹ Through the concept of the Third Space, Bhabha opens up the possibility of multiplicity rather than fixity and hybridity rather than homogeneity in relation to culture, history, identity, and language; such that every one of these realms face the possibility of interpretation and re-interpretation. Applying this concept to Omar’s manuscript as well as to his identity, provides us with a conduit to read into the letters he wrote so many years ago and to follow the traces that he left behind so that we can then paint a picture of this individual that is more than what his masters, who encouraged this writing, had in mind. This conclusion of multidimensional identity and intertextuality is only “surprising” in the context of Omar and other slaves because they were not to have an identity, especially one of depth, except what was violently constructed (first being destructed) under slavery.

⁸⁸ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 2.

⁸⁹ Bhabha 55. In an interview that appeared in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart Limited, 1990). Bhabha offers another definition of the Third Space when he says, “The third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom” (p. 211). This is necessary, according to Bhabha, because while there is an endorsement of culture diversity on the one hand, there is a counter process of containment where non-dominant cultures are located within a structure defined by the dominant culture. To address the issue of containment, Bhabha uses the notion of cultural difference: “With the notion of cultural difference, I try to place myself in that position of liminality, in that productive space of the construction of culture as difference, in the spirit of alterity or otherness” (p. 209). Following Bhabha’s articulation, it becomes possible to perform readings that explore the liminal spaces in manuscripts in order to offer insight in discussions of identity.

Slavery depended on a number of general dichotomies, of which Self and Other were the underlying one along with master/slave, free man/enslaved man, access to writing/exclusion from writing, that did away with concepts of complexity, multidimensionality, hybridity, and intertextuality (in writing and in reality on the ground). All these dichotomies are negations⁹⁰; that is, the slave was everything that white slave master was not: he was devoid of control over himself, physically and mentally; he was excluded from writing and by extension rationality; and his identity was fixed and singular. It is through this kind of framing that the slave masters justified slavery and further anchored their control. Yet, through Omar's manuscript these dichotomies are unable to imply a homogeneous and a coherent identity. He convolutes all these binaries by being an enslaved man, who is conscious of the oppression—that is, at one level is free, and he has access to writing but in a language unknown to those around him. Moreover, the legend that emerges about the "Prince of Arabia" as Moore named him falls apart as well in the face of Omar's writing because it attempted to silence Omar's own narrative and how he would be defined; however, it is his writing—the critical point that led to the formation of the legend—which turns back and resists. What Omar most certainly asserts through his writing is that he was not going to be determined and imagined by Others. He did this by producing a manuscript that is surrounded by esotericism and ambiguity and yet with moments that suggest multiplicity; all this providing the cover to resist and put down a story to be interpreted over 174 years later that would make his voice heard.

⁹⁰ Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991) 83. In this book, Memmi explores the way in which dichotomies were used in colonization to maintain a structure of control and the psychological implications. Although Memmi focuses on North Africa specifically, his discussion of the dynamics between the colonizer and colonized can be extended to any systems of oppression where dichotomies are utilized to establish a power hierarchy. Memmi, in fact, dedicates his American edition of his book "to the American Negro also colonized."

Chapter Three: Bilali's Manuscript

Memory and recollection are the material of the human imagination. The way one relays an event is contextualized within the individual's process of remembering the event and their particular vantage point. Many times these memories remain etched within the individual's mind out of the reach of outsiders, and other times these recollections make their way on to paper to be shared and re-imagined by others. In Toni Morrison's essay "The Site of Memory," she highlights the intimate connection between self recollection and autobiography, a work that often times falls within the realm of non-fiction.⁹¹ Morrison argues that as a fiction writer she does engage the actual moment and event by a process that she refers to as "literary archaeology": "On the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to the site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply."⁹² Through imagination, we fill in the gaps in an event based on the artifacts.

Morrison draws on slave narratives as an important moment in not only her experience, but also in the literary heritage of African Americans. The slave narratives, according to Morrison, are examples of the kind of recollecting that she explores in the essay. She argues that these texts were written in order to express two ideas. One, through the narrative the author relays his or her "historical life," whereby the author sites his or her personal experience as a one that is representative of the entire race; that is, the narrative was a testament of individual and collective identity. Second, the narrative is meant to persuade the reader—the other—that slaves are humans and thus undeserving of the inhumanity of

⁹¹ Morrison 185.

⁹² Morrison 192.

slavery. Morrison further asserts that these narratives aimed to affect change by introducing the problematic of a literate slave to the conception of a slave that underlie the ideology of slavery as “A literate slave was supposed to be a contradiction in terms.”⁹³ Thus, it is apparent that the authors of these narratives understood what their literacy really meant to the slaveholding society: a disruption in the foundation.

The process of reading—and in some moments deciphering—a text, in order to engage in the literary archeology that Morrison articulates, becomes amplified in a text that is unreadable. Compounded with the attempt at tracing identity and its movements, the unreadable text challenges notions of reading that assume the possibility that the reader will always decipher the signs, that those “deciphered signs” will fit neatly within a system of transparency such that meaning reaches the reader without doubt (i.e. meaning is completely knowable), that the meaning is stable, and with that completely known text the reader can know the author’s intent. We have such a text that calls into question all these assumptions, namely what has been designated as the Ben Ali Diary written by Bilali Muhammad and kept currently at the Hargrett Rare Books and Manuscript Library at the University of Georgia Library in Athens, Georgia. Like Omar ibn Said, Bilali (his name will be addressed shortly) has also left his trace in an Arabic manuscript that has fascinated, puzzled, and escaped any attempts at concrete designation. Is it a diary or a plantation record or something else? What is this manuscript that we have physical access to (we can hold it) yet eludes all its readers? This question of designation of this manuscript anchors the inquiry of identity in a way that delimits rather than limits as we follow the ways in which the letters of this 3.75 x 6.31 inches manuscript confronts and complicates the images surrounding it and reveals the

⁹³ Morrison 189.

instability of identity. Just as “something as ineffable and as flexible as a dimly recalled figure, the corner of a room, a voice” offered Morrison an opening “to fill in the blanks,” the Arabic letters of Bilali’s manuscript will “part the veil”⁹⁴ drawn over his story.

The Ben Ali Diary, as it has been categorized and catalogued, is a small 13 page manuscript contained in a flapped buffalo skin cover with Arabic written in *al-khatt as-senegalī*, a Kufic script used in the Senegambia region⁹⁵ that was first given to Reverend Francis R. Goulding, a local children’s storyteller, in 1859. Benjamin Goulding, Francis Goulding’s son, then inherited the manuscript and eventually presented it to the Georgia State Library in 1933. In 1992, the manuscript was transferred to the Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library at the University of Georgia and has remained there until today. The Library catalogued the manuscript as it was described by Benjamin Goulding—namely, as a diary. That designation along with the affidavit that Goulding attached to the manuscript has determined in large part how many approached the Arabic manuscript; his story became the “official story” of Bilali. Goulding in his affidavit, a document that claims authenticity as its foundation, stated that Bilali (or Ben Ali as he referred to him) was the author of the diary and was the son of an Arab prince; that he was educated and fully literate in Arabic, that he had converted to Christianity, dying as a Baptist; and that Bilali featured in Joel Chandler Harris’s novel *The Story of Aaron (So Named) The Son of Ben Ali*.⁹⁶ In fact, concerning Bilali’s origins, one can trace that Goulding borrowed heavily from Harris’s novel, which is

⁹⁴ Morrison 194. With this idea of parting the veil, Morrison is addressing the absence in English slave narratives in regards to the details of violence and to their interior life. In regards to Bilali’s manuscript, parting the veil requires not only addressing those gaps in regards to the violence and his interior life, but also the way stories about him shroud his own story.

⁹⁵ Ronald Judy, *Disforming the American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993) 266. He also notes that this script is also referred to as *al-khatt at-takrūrī* or *al-khatt at-timbuktūī*.

⁹⁶ Judy 211.

clear from the following quote from Harris's novel. Here, Aaron is speaking about Ben Ali, his father, to Buster John, Sweetest Susan and Drusilla:

From his pocket Aaron drew a little package—something wrapped in soft leather and securely tied. It was a memorandum book... Thereupon Aaron began to read from the book in a strange tongue... 'Arab—man of the desert—slave hunter—all put down here,' said Aaron, tapping the little book with his finger... Ben Ali was the leader of a band that made constant war on some of the African tribes in the Senegambian region. With their captives this band of Arabs frequently pushed on to the Guinea coast and sold them to the slave traders. The excursions continued until, on one occasion, the Arabs chanced to clash with a war-loving tribe... The Arabs who were left alive were led captive to the coast and there sold with other prisoners to slave traders. Among them was Ben Ali, who was then not more than thirty years old.⁹⁷

In this passage, two of the images that became central to the story constructed about Bilali are present. First, the book, identified already as a memorandum, is written in a tongue that is unrecognizable and thus mysterious. Second, Ben Ali is an Arab, specifically an Arab slave hunter, turned slave during a war. The passage from Harris's book touches on many of the points that this chapter will investigate: identity and how it factored into slavery, esotericism of Bilali's manuscript and the fascination with it, imagery (who projects and who receives), and traces and their readability. Throughout this chapter, I will unfold these ideas which are staged in this passage from Harris's tale.

Bilali's appearance in Harris's tale and Goulding's consequent quoting of the tale in his affidavit, begs the question: how is a fictitious tale taken as a source of authentication? Harris maintained that the source of his tale was Bilali's manuscript; yet, he did not have any knowledge of Arabic nor was there any translations of the manuscript available.⁹⁸ This poses a problem for unfolding the story told of Bilali because the circularity of Goulding drawing from Harris (but also stating that he had shown him the manuscript) and Harris claiming

⁹⁷ Joel Chandler Harris, *The Story of Aaron. So Named, The Son of Ben Ali* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1924) 12-14.

⁹⁸ Judy 215.

(doubtfully) to have drawn from a manuscript he had no point of entry into, fully encompassed the manuscript and projected the images of Arabness, royalty, and slave hunter who becomes a slave onto Bilali; such that there was no aperture in which to enter and question the story. We encountered the first two images with Omar as well. Of course, this "official story" has always existed in a state of instability by the very presence of Bilali's manuscript that poses a threat to attempts to determine the images that were projected onto him.

There was another contemporaneous story that was juxtaposed with Goulding's official story and in which the author engaged in his own image projection. Since the author was a white man writing about Bilali and depended on the circulation of information from another white man, we face the same kind of circularity as was discussed earlier between Goulding and Harris. Although these stories did not determine in the absolute sense, as such, what was known about Bilali (as Goulding's did) since they did not carry with them an affidavit to "prove" their authenticity, they were published, consequently assuming a certain level of authority. The details in the other story do not mimic Goulding's tale exactly, but they do draw from the same pool of imagery; yet, all these images and their constellations remain unable to really control how the written letters in Bilali's manuscript evaded their attempts to trace his identity. The starting point for this particular storyline was in 1839 when James Hamilton Couper, Esq., the plantation owner of Hopeton Plantation on St. Simon's Island, Georgia, sent a letter to William Brown Hodgson, the founder of the American Ethnologist Society, about the constitution of the slaves at his plantation and the Thomas Spalding plantation in Sapelo Island, Georgia, which included what he described as

a “remarkable man.”⁹⁹ Couper was referring to Salih Bilali, his head driver,¹⁰⁰ and later to Bilali; his letter becomes the first published reference to Bilali.¹⁰¹ Hodgson later included this letter in his *Notes on Northern Africa, the Sahara, and Soudan* in the chapter that he discusses the Foulah people. He later elaborated on this letter in a paper he presented to the Ethnological Society of New York titled “The Gospels: Written in the Negro Patios of English with Arabic Characters.” The basic points that Hodgson underlines from this letter in his paper are: that Bilali was a Foulah slave held in high esteem by his Spalding, that he was a Muslim and died as such, that his children were Christians, and that he wrote Arabic and maintained the practice of reading from the Qur’an up to his death in 1859.¹⁰²

Hodgson’s version of Bilali’s story existed alongside Goulding’s, countering some of the latter’s contention and problematizing further the dilemma presented by Bilali and his manuscript in terms of clear traces of identity. Hodgson’s comments destabilize Goulding’s seemingly authenticated assertions concerning Bilali’s origins and religious allegiance. Obvious questions arise from the gaps between and within all the stories concerning Bilali that are exacerbated by the Arabic manuscript itself. Was Bilali in fact a Foulah or an Arab? Did Bilali retain his Islam or did he convert to Christianity? How does Bilali’s manuscript contextualize and/or resist any concrete answers to these questions? Why are these questions

⁹⁹ William B. Hodgson, *Notes on Northern Africa, the Sahara, and Soudan* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1844) 68.

¹⁰⁰ Austin (1984) 310. Although Salih Bilali, also known as “Tom,” is not dealt with in this study, it should be noted that he was one of the African Muslim slaves to have left his mark. Salih Bilali was a contemporary of Bilali Muhammad.

¹⁰¹ Judy 209.

¹⁰² Judy 209. The quote as it appears in Judy’s text is as follows: “A biographic sketch of another Mohammedan Foulah [sic] slave, Bu-l-ali (Ben Ali), may be found in my ‘Notes on Northern Africa’ published some years ago. This Mohammedan [sic], the trustworthy servant of Mr. Spalding of Sapelo Island, Georgia, died recently, at an advanced age. He adhered to the creed and the precepts of the Koran. He wrote Arabic, and read his sacred book with constancy and reverence. It is understood that his numerous descendants, who are Christians, buried him with the Koran resting on his breast. He left various papers, supposed to be ritual, which, I hope, may be preserved.”

significant to an understanding of identity? The central focus of this chapter is to explore these questions and the implications in terms of language, imagery, and traces.

Hodgson, unlike Goulding, does not seem to make any kind of claim regarding the categorization of Bilali's manuscript. He attempted primarily to draw attention and highlight the unusual characteristics of slaves like Bilali. Although, Hodgson shies away from classifying Bilali as an Arab, in other traces he leaves behind through his various writings, he delineates a theory concerning the Foulah people whereby he states that "the Foulah are *not* negroes. They differ essentially from the Negro race, in all the characteristics which are marked by physical anthropology. They may be said to occupy an intermediate space betwixt the Arab and the Negro."¹⁰³ Hodgson suggests that the continuum between Arab and Negro is one of superiority, where the former is superior to the latter; such that Bilali, a Foulah, is superior to other slaves who are "Negroes." This continuum, however, did not apply to white men. In this way, Hodgson's statements are marked by a highly racialized and racist tone, incorporating discussions from physical anthropology. To Hodgson, this may have seemed to be a simple enough attempt at "understanding" the Foulahs; however, his assertion in particular with Bilali, as an example, and his manuscript lingering around the discussion, in fact offers a specific moment of the instability and slipperiness of classification, whether it be of Bilali or his manuscript. He is unable to comprehend with certainty what Bilali "is" since he is already un-like the other slaves by his literacy, especially his ability to write in Arabic. Goulding also encountered the inconsistency of Bilali's literacy, although the authentication that was presumably guaranteed by his affidavit might suggest that he had reconciled the contradiction. His lack of acceptance of Bilali as anything but an extraordinary slave may not

¹⁰³ Hodgson 49.

have been as explicit as Hodgson's comments, but emerges in the obvious contradiction that slaves like Bilali, who was already literate, to the extent that he used Arabic purposively, must have posed to the stereotypical images that were often projected onto slaves. The problem that the presence of slaves like Bilali seemed to have provoked and perhaps even plagued American slave holders in general concerned the disconnect between these slaves and the notions about Africans as uncivilized (literacy being an important "marker" of civilization); thus, creative stretches had to be employed to reconcile the inconsistency, which apparently meant introducing Arabness into the equation in order to destabilize their identities. This moment of ambivalence in Hodgson's thought, along with the complex of images that he, Goulding and Harris wove around Bilali will be taken up with more detail further in the discussion when the translation(s) of the manuscript are addressed and apertures reveal themselves as points of entry.

Keeping in mind the question of classification, but now in regards to Bilali's manuscript, there have been other indications that it is a different genre other than a diary. Joseph Greenberg, a well-known linguist, offered his own intervention in regards to the manuscript in 1940 in "The Decipherment of the 'Ben Ali Diary,' a Preliminary Statement."¹⁰⁴ Greenberg early on in his article determines that the manuscript cannot be a diary, nor plantation record; rather, he identifies the manuscript as a collection of excerpts from *ar-Risālah*, a tenth century Malikite legal treatise written by the Tunisian writer Abū Muhammad 'Abdullāh ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī. Interestingly, he noted that malams (learned men) in Northern Nigeria when asked to read the manuscript initially "declared the

¹⁰⁴ Joseph H. Greenberg, "The Decipherment of the 'Ben Ali Diary,' a Preliminary Statement," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (1940).

writing to be the work of jinn (spirits)¹⁰⁵ but later recognized the name al-Qayrawānī; but of course it entailed a process of deciphering of sorts. The presupposition that beings of another space, foreign to man, wrote this manuscript, and the subsequent “recognition,” captures the elusiveness of Bilali’s letters that resists the process of reading that assumes the possibility of complete knowledge. By locating the manuscript in a foreign space, Greenberg intimates that the manuscript cannot be read as a result of its mysteriousness and not for lack of trying; thus, removing the responsibility to thoroughly read the manuscript.

He also argues that African Muslim slaves’ use of Arabic was simply to copy works; in other words, their Arabic was not used for original composition. Thus, it would not be unusual to suggest that this manuscript drew from another or simply was a copy. Here Greenberg indicates an assumption that African Muslims were limited in their capacity to think and write, as if any use of Arabic would always be imitation of another’s work. While Greenberg does not attribute a different origin to African Muslims, as Goulding did for example, he does locate a source for their writings to address their literacy. Greenberg determines the origin of Bilali’s manuscript based on his recognition of certain religious formulae; even it was assessed with a “cursory examination.”¹⁰⁶ Although Greenberg never translated the manuscript, he continued with an analysis of its language. He argued:

it is apparent that this manuscript was written by a man who had memorized the text, using a pronunciation of Arabic in which many consonants were not distinguished...[the writing] would seem to indicate that the writer came from some part of northwest Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunis) or from the Western Sudan.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Greenberg 373.

¹⁰⁶ Greenberg 373.

¹⁰⁷ Greenberg 374.

This quotation alludes to the problematic nature of the language of the manuscript for Greenberg, precluding any kind of definitive observations. For example, Greenberg without having translated the manuscript asserts within one sentence that Bilali's Arabic indicates memorization of a manuscript (presumably) in standard Arabic, which earlier in the article he refers to as "correct written Arabic,"¹⁰⁸ and a form of spoken Arabic. There is an ambivalence, especially without a translation, in Greenberg's statement about Arabic as if he is trying to create an intermediate space, to explain what escapes him in Bilali's manuscript—the letters themselves—such that he suggests an unclear intersection of sorts between the standard Arabic of al-Qayrawānī's text and Bilali's spoken form of it. His attempt to elucidate Bilali's Arabic highlights Greenberg's persistence in withdrawing from Bilali's manuscript by arguing that even when Bilali copied al-Qayrawānī's text he did not do it correctly so it cannot be read. Moreover, Greenberg locates him in the broad geographical space of northwest Africa and Western Sudan based on "the misspellings in the document."¹⁰⁹ All of Greenberg's comments reflect his uncertainty in regards to Bilali's manuscript that stemmed from the fact that he was unable to read Bilali's Arabic.

Greenberg alternates between statements that emphasize the enigmatic nature of the Arabic that prevents any kind of easy accessibility and statements of a definitive nature: the work is both that of jinn and certainly excerpts of *ar-Risālah*. His analysis highlights the mystery surrounding this manuscript and its author and the way in which it has prevented any conclusions. What is more, Greenberg concludes the article with that very admittance and indirectly destabilizes the theory he set up throughout the article when he says,

¹⁰⁸ Greenberg 374.

¹⁰⁹ Greenberg 375.

“Unfortunately, however, it is likewise impossible further to explore this promising lead at the present time, since no reports are available of any African language spoken by Mohammedanized natives which fits this pattern.”¹¹⁰ The constellation of images that surround and follow the manuscript and Bilali are fundamentally generated by the existence of Arabic letters in a manuscript that belongs to an individual who used a language that no other seems to have access to, including Greenberg. Thus, his definitive statements on the manuscript already reveal their incompleteness.

The discussion about the classification of the manuscript and its language calls forth another uncertainty that reminds us of the instability of identity addressed here; that is the author’s name. Bilali’s name has appeared as Bu Ali, Bul Ali Ben-Ali, Bu Allah¹¹¹; moreover, the manuscript does not offer any clarity as the name of the author does not appear. Although several scholars have discussed Bilali’s work, many do not discuss why they chose one variant over another. Of the scholars referred to in this chapter, both Ronald Judy and Allan Austin addressed the issue of Bilali’s name. Ronald Judy explained his choice of Ben Ali over the other variants in a footnote to an excerpt of Couper’s letter to Hodgson. While Austin does not initially offer an extended line of reasoning in his 1984 edition concerning Bilali’s name, he does rebut Judy’s argument in the 1997 edition.

Interestingly, Judy dismisses the variant of “Bilali” that Austin utilizes on the grounds that it is “fanciful” and that his choice of “Ben Ali” is based on the words of those who “had some direct contact with the manuscript’s author or were in close and regular contact—i.e., Hodgson, Dwight, and Goulding.”¹¹² While Judy recognizes the necessity to highlight the

¹¹⁰ Greenberg 375.

¹¹¹ The following sources listed one or more of these variations: Judy 323 and Austin (1984) 265.

¹¹² Judy 323.

instability of even the name, his reasoning is questionable. As Judy states in the chapter “Designating Ben Ali’s Manuscript Arabic,” Hodgson never actually had contact with Bilali nor could he turn to the manuscript for an answer; therefore, he cannot act as a stabilizing force for the issue of the name. Furthermore, Hodgson contributed to the tenuous imagery surrounding Bilali. As for Goulding, this becomes even more problematic. His “official” story for Bilali already is destabilized by all the moot images and its dubious connection with Harris’s tale, all of which Judy offers a detailed analysis; thus, Goulding’s account does not seem credible in its own space nor as a way to counter another’s theory. Austin in his later edition argues as well that there is no evidence of Goulding, Hodgson or Dwight’s having met Bilali. He also asserts that Couper knew both Bilali and Salih Bilali, Bilali’s friend and fellow religionist, and carefully transliterated their names as “Sali-bul-ali” and “Bul-Ali.” Moreover, Austin states that in the Works Project Administration interviews, Bilali’s descendants referred to him as “Belali.”¹¹³

Judy’s assessment that Bu Allah and any variant of it, suggesting the word for son (*ibn* or *bin* when in the middle of a construction) and Allah, is unlikely is accurate since it would be blasphemous in Islamic thought. Judy does show an awareness of the Islamic space that Bilali came out of, but his comment concerning Austin’s choice, that it is “fanciful,” is puzzling because Austin roots his argument in the same space. Austin suggests that Bilali’s name derives from the name of Bilāl ibn Rabāh, the first *mu’adhdhin* (the one who calls to prayer) and an African, a common name among Muslims, seems to have grounding, unlike the construction of “Ben Ali” (meaning the “Son of Ali”), which is a *nasab*, the part of a

¹¹³ Austin (1997) 90.

name that indicates lineage, and does not commonly occur as the given name, the *ism*.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, those who have written recently about Bilali, with the exception of Judy, most often make use of Bilali rather than Ben Ali. Richard Brent Turner, in "What Shall We Call Him? Islam and African American Identity," reiterates the plausibility of Austin's suggestion by stating that among West African Muslims there is a "fascination with Bilal, the Prophet Muhammad's black companion."¹¹⁵ Whatever forms the name morphs into, the discrepancy that we encounter serves as a reminder of the obscurity surrounding this manuscript and Bilali.

Although the variants of Bilali's name, cannot be definitively reduced to one, there is one point that can be asserted with relative certainty and that is whatever form his name appears in it derives from an Arabic name and not an Anglo-Saxon name. This in itself is worth noting, since most of the slaves arriving in the Americas were assigned new names as part of the process of effacing any remnants of their identities and their dignity.¹¹⁶ In his article, Turner corroborates this point further when he says:

The act of taking away an African's name and religious traditions and assigning him a new name and new religion in an alien land imposed on the black a rite of a passage, an unholy confirmation—"branding a mark" into his consciousness that symbolized his depersonalization and his subordinate state in a new social order.¹¹⁷

Drawing on the graphic imagery of physically branding the African slave as if he was chattel, Turner encapsulates the trauma engendered by the multifaceted attempts to disrupt the slave's sense of self. Under these conditions, therefore, the fact that Bilali was able to retain

¹¹⁴ There are a few cases where the *nasab* occurs as the *ism*; namely, where the individual is well-known like Ibn Battuta, the traveler, Ibn Khaldun, the historian, and Ibn Sina, the philosopher.

¹¹⁵ Richard Brent Turner, "What Shall We Call Him? Islam and African American Identity," *Journal of Religious Thought*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (1993): 31.

¹¹⁶ John C. Inscoe, "Carolina Slave Names: An Index to Acculturation," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Nov. 1983): 538-539.

¹¹⁷ Turner 34.

some semblance of his name and to continue to practice Islam represents a subtle form of resistance against the challenges to his identity, demonstrating the inability of slave owners and slavery to efface identity or even to control it absolutely.

Control over his name reflects the broader concern of control over signification: what he will be called and subsequently anything that he produces within the context of slavery. Turner's article attempts to offer answers to this question in regards to the African Muslim slaves with the concept of signification. Signification, which he defines as the issue of naming and controlling identity, becomes the foundation upon which other ideas emerge. His argument revolves around the idea that Islam played and continues to play a vital role in the way that African Americans, with the African Muslim slaves as central predecessors in the discussion, identify themselves:

The questions...regarding black identity and names permeate the history of Islam in America from the eighteenth century to the present...Signification, the issue of naming and identity, is not only the interpretative thread that runs through the historical narrative of Islam in black America; it is also the key to understanding that history in the context of global Islam...Since slavery...Islam has undercut this signification [by Europeans that categorized and exploited based on color] by offering black Americans the chance to signify themselves.¹¹⁸

Here Turner highlights Islam's relevance, especially to African Muslim slaves, as a means of resistance because it offered a means to dictate the process of naming themselves and negotiating their identities. Thus, Bilali's retaining of his Muslim name becomes a noteworthy example of Turner's argument because whatever its form (although I agree Bilali to be more plausible than Ben Ali) he was able to defy the hegemonic signification imposed

¹¹⁸ Turner 26.

(in most) cases by the slave owners. Even after slave times, Turner asserts, names continued to play a role in how African Americans resisted. He says:

Since the colonial era, Islam provided black Americans with alternative names and identities...In American a black person preserved his or her Muslim name to maintain or reclaim African cultural roots or to negate the power and meaning of the European name. The African American adoption of a Muslim name...always signified a radical change in political, cultural, and/or religious identity.¹¹⁹

Islam, therefore, through the use of names, became a fundamental aspect of African and African American resistance against slavery.

Immanent within the concept of signification, that is naming and defining identity, is the idea of power and manipulation. Bilali, through the process of defining his identity in terms of his name (and in his manuscript as will become clear), he manipulated (positively) his situation in slavery in order to deal with the affronts to his identity; in other words, he kept his Muslim name. On the other hand, the slave owners and other participants in slavery (whether directly or indirectly), made use of signification to disrupt the slaves' identities; however, this disruption was more complex than what is generally assumed, by stripping them of their clothing, jewelry and names. Retracing our steps, we find indications of this complexity in Goulding and Harris's comments earlier in the discussion and the way in which they dealt with these slaves who could read, write and resisted their attempts to delineate their identities. Namely, they characterized them as anything but Africans, and thus slightly superior.

We encountered this earlier with Omar ibn Said and with Bilali in Goulding's affidavit. The white men arabized the African Muslim slaves in order to maintain power over how they would be identified. The signification of the African slaves had to be refigured

¹¹⁹ Turner 25-27.

because the reality posed by these slaves deeply disrupted and problematized notions of superiority of white men based on language since these slaves had access to a written language, especially one that many white men did not understand. Diouf addresses this point when she says:

Muslims who distinguished themselves and were literate were thus presented as superior to the rest of the slaves on the basis their racial origin was different. It was more acceptable to deny any Africanness to the distinguished Muslims than to recognize that a 'true' African could be intelligent and cultured but enslaved nevertheless. So, gradually, the African Muslims were seen as owing their perceived superiority not to their own "genes," not even to their culture or proximity to the Arab world, but to foreign 'blood.'¹²⁰

Diouf hits on several key ideas that surround both Bilali's person and manuscript and other African Muslim slaves and draws on this idea of naming and defining identity. Diouf asserts that the African Muslims, probably in response to enslavement, revealed their religious commitment and/or literacy as a way to counter or attempt to control the slave owners' actions toward their identity; yet, the response was another signification other than the initial of the African as a heathen in need of civilizing and thus deserving of slavery. Rather, they had to attribute this "enigma" that these slaves presented to something other because it destabilized an already flawed justification and theory for slavery.

Arabs were not necessarily considered to be completely civilized, but they were Muslim and whiter, they were considered to be a "reasonable" stock for the foreign genes these slave owners needed to refigure their naming and identifying of these slaves, and they were the other that would explain the "unusualness" of these slaves. Hodgson in his *Notes* highlighted this kind of thinking when he attributes to Islam a certain degree of civilizing in

¹²⁰ Diouf 99.

order to explain how the Foulah are superior to other Africans; yet, he makes sure to reserve ultimate humanizing to Christianity. He says,

My views upon the humanizing influence of Mohammedanism upon the barbarous pagan tribes of Africa, are contained in my remarks upon the Foulahs. It cannot be denied, that this religious creed has in it, some of the elements of trust; and that it is incomparably superior to all pagan systems which mostly inculcate brute worship and human sacrifice...Whilst a certain low degree of intellectual and moral improvement, is thus being effected...by a false religion, Christianity is introducing a higher civilization.¹²¹

These comments along with Hodgson's comments earlier regarding Foulah's as being in between Arab and African come together to explain African Muslim slaves like Bilali—that they were not complete Africans so that they did disrupt white notions of Africans. Moreover, the Arabs had already encountered the European gaze and its attempt to name and define and thus there existed a repertoire of possible images, which was quite extensive, that these white men could draw from. In the case of these slaves, it was the access to Arabic that needed explaining: thus, Bilali becomes both an Arab prince and an Arab slave hunter, in Goulding and Harris's accounts respectively. The aim of these designations is simply to give a locus, an explanation for the language in order to preserve a kind of semblance not only for theory for slavery but for the general theory of white superiority over all others. Yet, we find that early on that even this signification of Arabness is extremely troubled by the fact that there was a place of origin for Bilali and a description of him that called into question these attempts of re-imagining Bilali.

In all the comments regarding Bilali's "Arabness," there still remained a sense of ambivalence, which stemmed from the fact it was another image being projected onto Bilali—there was nothing to support this idea of Arabness except his "unusual" literacy. As

¹²¹ Hodgson 82-83.

opposed to this imaging and signifying, it was known that Bilali came from Timbo, Futa Jallon in what is now in present day Guinea, Conkry. Salih Bilali stated this in a short comment.¹²² The western coast of Africa was a common point of origin for many slaves. In addition to Bilali's clearly non-Arab origin, Austin cites that one of Bilali's descendants by the name of Shad Hall gave a description of Bilali in *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* stating that he was "coal black."¹²³ Although the Arabs are not a homogeneous group on many levels, Hall's comments along with a known homeland in the southwestern coast of Africa highlights the obvious unlikelihood that Bilali was an Arab in order to explain his literacy and "exceptionality"; rather, the more likely conclusion is that the theory of slavery itself and the images projected onto Africans as being primitive were deeply flawed. Slaves like Bilali, for example, simply exposed these apertures.

All of the discussion thus far illustrates the elusiveness of Bilali; elusive because of the network of images that have been projected on to him and have followed him to this day. The signification by white men such as Goulding, Harris, Hodgson and Greenberg of Bilali—who he was, his name, and his manuscript—have obscured who Bilali may have been and the nature of his manuscript. Unlike Omar's manuscript where the Arabic is accessible in terms of the script and readability, the Arabic in Bilali's manuscript is extremely difficult to read for several reasons. The most immediate obstacles to Bilali's manuscript are the obscurity of the script and the bleeding of the ink on the pages, both of

¹²² Austin 268.

¹²³ Austin 298.

which have rendered any cursory or immediate reading highly unlikely; this is in addition to the language of the manuscript itself.

Both Judy and Muhammad Abdullah al-Ahari have translated a large portion of the manuscript, in *Disforming the American Canon* and *Bilali Muhammad: Muslim Jurisprudent in Antebellum Georgia*, respectively. B.G. Martin also translated a portion of Bilali's manuscript in his essay "Sapelo Island's Arabic Document: The 'Bilali Diary' in Context." All three of the translations raise questions concerning the possibility of (complete) translation in general and the possibility of reading Bilali's manuscript in order to dismantle the network of images that has surrounded this individual. None of these translators were able to translate all thirteen pages of the manuscript: Judy did not translate page one lines eleven through fourteen and pages two through six and al-Ahari did not translate pages three through six. Martin's translation is not extensive; however, his few interjections are insightful to the general discussion of the structure and content of the manuscript. These partial translations, with their breaks, all reveal their internal instability, as well as highlighting the volatility of the manuscript itself as well as what has been transmitted about Bilali.

Like the images surrounding Bilali, the manuscript resists complete comprehension. Any cursory attempts at reading Bilali's Arabic are quickly interrupted by instability in the spelling in addition to a script that further complicates the process of reading. There are moments where the language appears to stabilize to a point where some comprehension of the message occurs, only to be followed by a disruption that quickly creates a sense of volatility. What can be said initially about this manuscript is that it is highly questionable that this is a diary because personal information about the author cannot be located nor does the

authorial “I” appear outside of the proclamation of faith, which is formulaic. Rather, the manuscript appears to be some type of manual as Bilali describes rituals of Islam, such as ablution and prayer.

Whether or not the manuscript is a diary or mirrors *ar-Risālah* in its instructional language, the manuscript clearly reflects an engagement with Islamic thought, which seeps through the few moments of clarity. The author of the manuscript reveals a level of commitment to Islam through several of the words and phrases that have incredible stability in the orthography and are quickly identified by all those who have attempted a translation of the manuscript. The most prominent example is the formula that also began Omar’s manuscript and that is the *bismillāh* (“In the Name of God the Most Beneficent, The Most Merciful”), which is quickly followed by praising the Prophet Muhammad. Interestingly, the two words that are hauntingly clear throughout the entire manuscript, even in the pages that have not been translated by anyone, are “Allah” and “Muhammad.” These two words symbolize Islam in a very precise way and their clarity and occurrence in the manuscript (around forty-one and ten times, respectively) problematize in a serious way any argument of Bilali’s conversion to Christianity, such as the argument put forward by Goulding. In fact, Austin suggests that not only did Bilali not convert, but that he was a leader of a Muslim community in Antebellum America,¹²⁴ which accords with the language of the manuscript. Thus, the orthographic soundness of the *bismillāh*, the praises for the Prophet Muhammad, and the words “Allah” and “Muhammad” opens a space for arguing Bilali’s maintained adherence to Islam.

¹²⁴ Austin (1997) 85.

Two other words that are readily identifiable in the manuscript are *rasūl* and *al-mulk*. Although in some places in the manuscript *rasūl* is separated into two parts, with one part on one line and the second on the following line, the appearance of *rasūl* (Messenger), following Muhammad and in conjunction with Allah to mean “Muhammad the Messenger of Allah,” is an obvious recognition of Muhammad’s role in Islam as a prophet, which is a central tenet of the faith. Someone who had renounced Islam most likely would not acknowledge this tenet. Another word that is quite recognizable in the manuscript is *al-mulk* (rule, dominion, supreme authority), which is in reference to Allah. This word is reminiscent of Omar’s manuscript and his citing of *Sūrat al-Mulk*. As in the case with Omar, the presence of this word in relation to God’s dominion may in fact represent Bilali’s resistance to his enslavement, by locating ultimate authority and control with God. Akin to the use of the two terms “Allah” and “Muhammad,” the use of *rasūl* and *al-mulk*, especially within the context of “Muhammad” and “Allah,” respectively, and their relative unambiguousness¹²⁵ indicates a familiarity with that type of language, which a Muslim with minimal education would have.

There are, however, other words and phrases that requires some decipherment in terms of some of the orthographic interchanges in the manuscript, but anchor further Bilali’s commitment to Islam. One example occurs with some frequency and that is the familiar Islamic phrase of *Allāhu Akbar*, which Bilali often couches within the *adhān* or call to prayer. In four of the nine times that this phrase occurs, Bilali substitutes a *qāf* (ق), an uvular voiceless stop for the *kāf* (ك), a velar voiceless stop that is closer to the English “k.” This

¹²⁵ On page seven of Bilali’s manuscript, Judy notes *al-mulk* as *al-Haqq* (“The Truth” in reference to God) in his translation; however, I disagree with this decision because the orthography of the letters to spell *al-mulk* is consistent with instances of these letters elsewhere in the manuscript. In addition, *al-mulk* is followed in the manuscript by *wa-lahu al-hamd* (and to God is praise), which is a common construction. Al-Ahari translates this word as *al-malik* (the King), which is a plausible translation since Bilali does not make use of diacritic marks and the consonantal skeleton of the word suggests either *al-mulk* or *al-malik*.

substitution is unusual because Bilali more often makes the opposite substitution, which is a common exchange in several Arabic dialects¹²⁶; however, from the context of the *adhān* it becomes clear that despite the interchange that this word can be read as *akbar*.

In addition, also with some tracing, the verb *ashhadu* (I bear witness) occurs eight times. Of the eight instances of this verb, seven times it appears within the *shahādah* or the proclamation of faith (“I bear witness that there is no God but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God”), either in its entirety or the first part regarding the oneness of God. The *shahādah* is fundamental to an individual’s faith, as it the center around which everything revolves. In the one instance where the verb is not found within the context of the *shahādah*, Bilali uses *ashadu* to say that he bears witness that absolute dominion belongs to God; thus, even here it returns to the idea of God and faith. Although the *shahādah* as a concept is stable in its centrality to Islam, Bilali’s orthography of the verb *ashadu* involves a few substitutions that includes using *hā’* (ح), the pharyngeal voiceless fricative in the place of *hā’* (ه), the glottal voiceless fricative; and *sīn* (س), the plain palatal voiceless fricative is confused with *shīn* (ش), the post-alveolar voiceless fricative such that sometimes he used *shīn* correctly and other times used *sīn*. Another substitution can be found in the *shahādah*, when Bilali writes the word *inna* (that) in the *shahādah* using *ʿayn* (ع), the pharyngeal voiced fricative in the place of *hamza* (ء), the glottal voiceless stop.¹²⁷ The numerous substitutions that appear in Bilali’s manuscript are traceable in some instances as in the case of the verb *ashadu*, which perhaps reflects a level of familiarity and/or significance, but in many other moments prevent decipherability. It is this seeming chaos that requires some attention.

¹²⁶ Judy 219.

¹²⁷ Other graphemic displacements include: *shīn* (ش) for emphatic *ṣād* (ص); emphatic *ṣād* (ص) for *sīn* (س); *kāf* (ك) for both *khā’* (خ) and *ghā’* (غ); *yā’* (ي) for *hamza* (ء); *sīn* (س) for *thā’* (ث); and emphatic *tā’* (ط) for *tā’* (ت).

Judy in his comments preceding his translation (of a portion) of Bilali's manuscript engages Greenberg's linguistic argument. He argues that Greenberg introduces the concept of interchangeability as a deviation in regards to Bilali's manuscript; however, Judy in fact connects this interchangeability with the Arabo-Islamic linguistic theory of *tashīf*. *Tashīf* according to Judy occurs when: "two distinctly different phonemes are confused and transcribed by one grapheme, so that the graphemic representation of sound is no longer reliable. Graphemic unreliability, in turn, produces orthographic irregularity... With *tashīf* a dissonance of linguistic referentiality occurs."¹²⁸ Greenberg asserts that it is this interchangeability and the unreliability produced by it that prevents him, and in fact many others as well, from translating the manuscript (but not on commenting on it), thus relegating the manuscript back into a space of the unknown and unapproachable and leaving room for those who would still like to comment on Bilali and his manuscript to continue to do so without interference. Bilali, therefore, is silenced once more. Judy, on the other hand, accepts the interchangeability as the site from which he embarks on his translation. The *tashīf* in Bilali's manuscript does interfere with Judy's ability to completely translate the manuscript; however, Judy, as well as al-Ahari, is still able to find some points of entry in order to question the very process by which Bilali has become known, which has been constructed mainly through the comments about the manuscript without actually engaging it. Despite these interchanges that destabilize the readability of the manuscript, tracing the substitutions reveal apertures, through which the reader can access certain portions of the

¹²⁸ Judy 218. According to *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (Ithaca: Spoken Language Services, Inc., 1994) on page 590, *tashīf* means "misplacement of the diacritical marks; misspelling; slip of the pen; (grammatical) mistake; misrepresentation, distortion." All of the aspects of this definition factor into any analysis of this particular manuscript because the readability of the manuscript is hindered by the instability of the spelling in many instances.

manuscript in order to disturb the seemingly stable and coherent constellation of images that has surrounded Bilali. Through this manuscript a voice emerges that reveals at the very least a proclamation of faith, an expression, which in a fundamental way already shakes the foundation of the official story left by Goulding.

The focus in my discussion of Bilali's manuscript has been to highlight the readability of particular words and phrases because the manuscript itself is not a coherent narrative, as such. This piecemeal approach, however, indicates the possibility of interacting with the manuscript and suggests that those who claim that the manuscript simply does not allow any kind of accessibility and prefer to anchor the images of Bilali and the manuscript are simply and out rightly not engaging the manuscript at all. This haphazardness in the approach to the manuscript reflects the instability that lingers below the un-readable sections and haunts the readable sections of a manuscript that seems to be a commentary on different rituals. Yet, central to the manuscript is the faith and ritual of Islam. Tracing the displacements and interchangeability of the manuscript mirrors in interesting way the attempt here and by others to sort through the images that have displaced Bilali, his story, and faithfulness to Islam. Bilali, like Omar, seemed to have found a way to resist.

Conclusion

At the end of *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said made an observation about identity that not only is relevant to the discussion of Omar ibn Said and Bilali Muhammad's manuscripts but anchors it in an obvious, yet fundamental way. He said, "No one today is purely *one* thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind."¹²⁹ Following his articulation, once experience is accounted for then any homogenous identification that does not reflect its multifaceted nature quickly becomes obsolete and unsuitable. Tracing Omar and Bilali's identity inscription and renegotiation in their manuscripts echoes Said's observation and suggests that identity is neither stable nor fixed in one framework. While both came as African Muslims from the Senegal region with their specific experiences that would define their immediate sense of self, the traumatic rupture of slavery fundamentally disrupted their identities and they became more than just African Muslims. They were among who used their literacy to record their stories and the traces left by the violence and trauma of slavery.

Akin to Morrison's process of revisiting sites of memory where she begins with the artifacts that are left behind to imagine and reconstruct the story, that kind of journey and imagination has guided this discussion. Omar and Bilali's African Muslim identity and their manuscripts become the aperture, the archaeological artifacts and images, that map out different inscriptions of their identity and their stories as slavery left its marks. Through their experience of slavery and the numerous affronts to their sense of self, Omar, Bilali, and other slaves were faced with no other choices but to reassess their self in relation to the

¹²⁹ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994) 336.

experience that enveloped them. This process of reassessment entailed protean strategies depending on the individual and their history, with instances of physical resistance and in the case of Omar and Bilali resistance through language.

Resistance meant not only rebellion against the physical assaults and humiliation, but also against the structure of imaging that maintained the ideology of slavery. It was always the white man gaze towards the black man and it was always unidirectional. A slave was everything that a white man, specifically, was not. In this context, slaves found strategies to challenge this gaze and all the images that it projected onto them. The slave narrative has become an expressive medium to reassert a sense of self and to problematize notions about the in-humanity of slaves.

From the beginning of his manuscript, Omar destabilized stories of his conversion to Christianity. While Omar went through the exercise of attending church and was given an Arabic Bible, what he writes in his manuscript divulges a more complicated reality concerning his religious affiliation than many writing about him assumed. By utilizing sections of the Qur'an and juxtaposing Islamic references with the Christian references, the stability of his absolute abandonment of Islam is called into question. If Omar had completely renounced Islam as many of the sources that were cited in the discussion of the manuscript indicate, then how should the Islamic references be reconciled? In other words, what is their place in Omar's manuscript, his worldview, and the masked identity that he faced in slavery? In fact, these juxtapositions dismiss any attempts of fixing Omar into one image and/or label. They indicate a negotiation of his identity and a resistance to the essentialization of the slaves and the images that were projected onto them.

It is the essentialization that Fanon dismantles and the notion of “blackness” becomes instructive. Fanon’s argument that essentialization fixed the black man into a position through images tainted with power and violence offered a theoretical aperture through which to examine Omar’s cognizance of a similar set of images designed to relegate him to a fixed status. Reminiscent of Fanon’s argument, Omar, through language, redirected the images that had captured and sought to fix him as an Arab prince, a convert to Christianity, and a slave who was accepting of his status. As the analysis of the manuscript highlighted, Omar used his literacy in order to shed light on the fictionality of these images that attempted to erase his identity and create one for him. The images that the slave holders projected on to Omar, as well as on to Bilali, aimed towards explaining away his reality of being a slave who was literate prior to enslavement (problematizing the idea that the slaves was in need of civilizing), by locating Omar and other slaves within a mold that they controlled. Yet, Omar found strategies in his writing to displace these images that implied a controlled homogeneous and coherent identity. Whatever a cursory reading of the manuscript may suggest, it must reiterated that these are not the words of a freed man. As a result of this fact, the liminal spaces—the openings that destabilize any absoluteness or homogeneity—become even more pronounced as the sites of memory, as suggested by Morrison, where a re-imagining of Omar’s story begins.

Moreover, the instability of the fragments in those third spaces, borrowing from Bhabha, in Omar’s text reflects the changing nature of his identity in reaction to the experience he was faced with; that is, his identity was not stagnant and not homogeneous, a point that Said suggested is true of all identity: “I am saying that ‘identity’ does not necessarily imply ontologically given and eternally determined stability, or uniqueness or

irreducible character, or privileged status as something total and complete in and of itself.”¹³⁰

Thus, Said argued that identity is something dynamic that changes and develops in accordance with the numerous experiences and encounters that are a part of an individual’s life and can never transcend experience. Therefore, the presence of Christian references alongside Islamic references in Omar’s manuscript reveals a process of negotiation where Omar’s experience of slavery, especially the trauma that it engendered, and Christianity meant a destabilization of his identity and a re-evaluation in light of the new overlapping of cultures and histories surrounding him.

Bilali’s manuscript raised questions that did not occur in regards to Omar’s manuscript; however, many of the underlying issues that surrounded Omar’s manuscript and person were mirrored in relation to Bilali and his manuscript. Unlike Omar’s manuscript, Bilali’s manuscript presented an obstacle of readability from the outset. The graphemic displacements, orthography, lack of a coherent narrative are among the various challenges that face the reader approaching the manuscript. These challenges led to the assumption that the manuscript could not be accessed and have been central in the construction of images that have been projected on to Bilali. By presupposing obscurity about the manuscript, Goulding, Harris, Hodgson, and Greenberg projected various images onto Bilali, constructed and maintained a story about Bilali that depended on a displaced origin, conversion to Christianity, mystery, and jinn. These images defined how Bilali or Ben Ali would come to be known.

With the exception of Judy, Ahari, and Martin, no one has published a translation or even partial translation of the manuscript; thus, the “official” story that Goulding left of

¹³⁰ Said 315.

Bilali remained relatively unchallenged. However, with their partial translations, they have all brought to light numerous openings in which to access the manuscript and interact with it in its own space; their work also reveal many of the instabilities in the story left by Goulding as well as the assertions of Harris, Hodgson, and Greenberg. By using his literacy in Arabic, Bilali, like Omar, dismantled many of the images that were projected on to him. His manuscript, arguably, is another example of resistance to the control imposed by slavery within the intimate sphere of identity beginning with Goulding's assertion that he had converted to Christianity.

While there remains some obscurity in identifying with certainty the content of Bilali's manuscript, whether it is a series of excerpts from *Ar-Risālah* or not, it can be asserted indisputably that Bilali focuses on Islam in his manuscript. In other words, the moments of clarity in the manuscript are overwhelmingly references to Islam. As it was suggested earlier with Omar, if Bilali had in fact converted to Christianity and died a Baptist, as Goulding testified, then it would be inappropriate to include so many references to Islam including the most central of the tenets: the *shahādah* or proclamation of faith. Moreover, in Bilali's manuscript these Islamic references are not paralleled with Christian references as in Omar's manuscript. This absence, in addition to the Austin's assertion that Bilali was in fact the leader of a Muslim community in Georgia, destabilizes Goulding's assertion and reveals the logic behind this imagining of slaves such as Bilali and Omar where a very intimate aspect of their identity—their faith—became a necessary point of subjugation and silencing.

Both Omar and Bilali preserved a connection with their faith that comes through their manuscripts. Omar, faced with a different predicament, engaged in a more conspicuous negotiation in his religious identity in his manuscript than Bilali, incorporating the ideas from

Christianity that were not doctrinally opposed to Islam; however, as the analysis of the manuscript indicated, Omar's Muslim identity continued to define his sense of self in a very real way such that his conversion becomes doubtful. While we do not find the same kind of negotiation in Bilali's manuscript, that does not imply that Bilali did not face a challenge to his identity. Rather, it is apparent from the extensive imagery that followed the manuscript that there was an effort to redefine Bilali's identity. Thus, the reality of slavery forced Bilali, similar to Omar, to find a medium to maintain a connection with his faith and to write out words that were sacred in his worldview, querying all the legends that surrounded his person and manuscript. Bilali was not the character created in Harris's stories or who Goulding described in his affidavit and Omar was not simply a good slave who had converted to Christianity.

The manuscripts of Omar and Bilali highlight significant points that have arisen over the course of the discussion. Perhaps the most obvious of these points is that identity was a conduit for hegemony on the part of the slave holders but also one of resistance for the slaves. While slaves many times could not acquire their freedom of body, the manuscripts indicate that their minds and sense of self still remained beyond the slave holders' reach. In an effort to regain the control robbed from them through enslavement, slaves engaged various strategies to re-identify now within the context of slavery. Despite all the attempts to completely disturb and eradicate their identities, the slave holders could not force the slaves to internalize the ideology of inferiority or inhumanity that they purported defined the African. Omar and Bilali's manuscripts are two examples of this refusal to internalize the slave holders' will.

Omar and Bilali's manuscripts reveal a more specific aspect to their resistance for their identity: religion, namely Islam. Despite all the attempts of slave holders' to interfere in their religious identity, Omar and Bilali, through their manuscripts, problematized the stories that suggest the possibility of their absolute conversion. Even after years of enslavement, their Muslim identity remained a significant aspect of who they were. Anchoring their Muslim affiliation was the fact that their literacy was intimately linked to their faith; both Omar and Bilali received religious instruction that included study of Arabic. Thus, their internalization of Islam occurred in two mediums, the spoken word and the written word, representing their connection with their faith. Slave holders, who more often discouraged slaves' literacy, did not prevent, and in some situations encouraged, Omar and Bilali to use their literacy, underestimating their faithfulness to their religion of birth by assuming their distance from Islam. Yet, they both made use of their literacy to suggest an alternate reality where Islam continued to hold a pivotal role in their identity and their negotiation of it within the context of slavery.¹³¹ Their manuscripts underscore the role of language in their resistance, a point that Said emphasized when he said, "But reading and writing are texts are never neutral activities: there are powers, passions, pleasures entailed no matter how aesthetic or entertaining the work."¹³² Omar and Bilali's use of Arabic became a medium to express their resistance and the continued relevance of Islam in the construction of their identity.

¹³¹ By utilizing the concept of negotiation throughout the discussion, it is to make clear that as Gomez and Said suggest that identities are not stable entities unchanged by experience, but rather are dynamic and reflect experience. Omar and Bilali, like all the slaves, were no doubt faced with the challenge of negotiating their identity, even if the end result indicates that they retained their connection to Islam.

¹³² Said 318.

In addition to their own identity negotiation, the existence of Omar, Bilali, and other African Muslim slaves shed light on issues that relate to present day discussions on American identity and histories. What their manuscripts underscore is that American history is replete with numerous experiences that all contribute to the notion of American identity. While this may seem to be a manifest reality, the contemporary debates suggest that this reality requires revisiting sites of memory to re-imagine the cultural, historical and religious landscape of America. The various ethnicities, languages, and religions of slaves brought to America left their mark on American soil; yet, there continues to be a void in incorporating their experiences. Said attributed this lack to an attempt to maintain an official history that is purposeful in what it includes or not: "The internalization of norms used in cultural discourse, the rules to follow when statements are made, the 'history' that is made official as opposed to the history that is not: all these of course are ways to regulate public discussions in all societies."¹³³ The manuscripts expose another history and offer new directions.

The recent scholarship on African Muslim slaves emphasizes the need for a re-examination and negotiation of American identity that accounts for all the overlapping histories, to borrow Said's concept, on the American landscape. These texts communicate that African Muslims left their traces, placing Islam and Arabic on the historical landscape of America much earlier than the arrival of Arab immigrants in the 1900's.¹³⁴ In addition to the historical documents left by slave holders, writers, and other members of the slave holding society, the written words left by Muslim slaves themselves demonstrate that there was acknowledgement of their Muslim identity and that their presence challenged many ideas in

¹³³ Said 323.

¹³⁴ Sulayman S. Nyang, *Islam in the United States of America*. (Chicago: KAZI Publications, 1999) 16-18.

circulation. Their presence has also introduced many fresh ideas to contemporary discussions on slavery, American histories, and American identities including the constitution of slaves and the diversity of their ethnicities, the presence of slaves who were literate before enslavement, the existence of slave writings that have not been accounted for in canonized literature, another set of histories to consider and represent, and that Islam is a part of the American landscape beginning with the efforts of African Muslim slaves who strongly resisted challenges to their faith. Although Islam did not survive through slave times to the present as a constant or coherent presence and was revived again with the arrival of Muslim immigrants, some aspects of the faith, for example the use of Muslim names among African-Americans, have remained in circulation. The traces left by African Muslims on the American landscape remind us of their resistance, their faith, their place in American history, and a past that continues to reverberate into the present.

“The African Muslims may have been, in the Americas, the slaves of Christian masters, but their minds were free. They were the servants of Allah.”
~Sylviane Diouf, *Servants of Allah* (p.210)

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