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## Islam's Low Mutterings at High Tide: Enslaved African Muslims in American Literature

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## Abstract

This dissertation traces the underexplored figure of the African Muslim slave in American literature and proposes a new way to examine Islam in American cultural texts. It introduces a methodology for reading the traces of Islam called *Allahgraphy*: a method of interpretation that is attentive to Islamic studies and rhetorical techniques and that takes the surface as a profound source of meaning. This interpretative practice draws on postsecular theory, Islamic epistemology, and “post-critique” scholarship. Because of this confluence of diverse theories and epistemologies, *Allahgraphy* blurs religious and secular categories by deploying religious concepts for literary exegesis. Through an *Allahgraphic* reading, the dissertation examines modes of Islamic expression in a wide range of American works spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To unravel the diverse Muslim voices embedded within the American literary tradition, the dissertation proceeds chronologically through specific periods in African American culture and history, moving from slavery to post-Reconstruction to the post-civil rights era. The first two chapters focus on the nineteenth century and examine the works of ‘Umar ibn Sayyid, Bilali Muhammad, and Joel Chandler Harris. In these chapters, *Allahgraphy* is used to consider the material inscription of the source texts, specifically the African-Arabic manuscripts. The second half of the dissertation examines Islamic expressions in twentieth-century American texts. Through an analysis of works by Malcolm X and Toni Morrison, these two chapters explore the multiple sensory registers of *Allahgraphy*. The dissertation concludes by considering the appearance of the African Muslim slave in the diary of the Guantánamo prisoner, Mohamedou Ould Slahi. Ultimately, the dissertation aims to widen literary approaches to Islam in American works and to demonstrate the continuity of Muslim voices in the American literary works. In doing so, it delineates a long tradition of black Muslim Americans’ responses to Islamophobia.

## Keywords

African Muslim Slave; Transatlantic Slave Trade; African-Arabic Writings; Autobiography; Slave Narrative; Islamic Epistemology; Incomprehension; Zāhirite Tradition; *Huzn*; Melancholy; *Allahgraphy*; Postsecularism; Prayer; Post-Critique; ‘Umar

ibn Sayyid; Bilali Muhammad; Joel Chandler Harris; Malcolm X; Toni Morrison;  
Mohamedou Ould Slahi; *The Ben Ali Diary*; *Song of Solomon*; *The Autobiography of  
Malcolm X*; *The Story of Aaron*; *Aaron in the Wildwoods*; *The Guantánamo Diary*;  
Islamophobia.

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## Introduction: Reading Islam in American Literary Works

“I wish to be seen in our land called Āfrikā in a place of the sea/river (*al-ba-hr*) called K-bā (or K-bya),” ‘Umar ibn Sayyid writes in an 1819 letter (Hunwick 67). Rather than hide his desire, ‘Umar, an African Muslim from Futa Toro (present day Senegal) who endured fifty-seven years of slavery in North Carolina, made his moving plea explicit and manifest. Remarkably, ‘Umar wrote in Arabic, addressing the letter to the brother of his owner, Major John Owen, who was then a member of the North Carolina Senate. Notably, the high-ranking individuals who eventually received ‘Umar’s letter, including Owen, John Lewis Taylor, and Francis Scott Key (author of “Star-Spangled Banner”) neither read nor understand Arabic.<sup>1</sup> But even for readers who understood Arabic, his writing would prove difficult to decipher, since he transposed letters and misspelled words.<sup>2</sup> Thus, even when an African Muslim slave<sup>3</sup> left evidence of his

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Umar’s 1819 manuscript, his earliest extant manuscript, was housed at the Andover Theological Seminary in Newton, Massachusetts. Recently, however, the manuscript was damaged. ‘Umar’s letter was initially given to John Louis Taylor, vice president of the American Colonization Society in North Carolina, who then sent it to Francis Scott Key. Yet those involved in the circulation of the manuscript, such as members of the ACS, were invested in the potential to harness the slave’s Arabic literacy to convert African Muslims to Christianity, rather than engage with the Islamic ethos undergirding the documents.

<sup>2</sup> As Hunwick notes, ‘Umar confuses certain letters—for instance, he mixes up the *hamza* (ء) and ‘ayn (ع), and seen (س) with sheen (ش), among other letters—omits vowels, misspells words, and includes numerous citations that seem unconnected (64). For these reasons, to reach the English translation of ‘Umar’s request, translators must first edit, adjust, and make substitutions to ‘Umar’s original lines.

<sup>3</sup> For the past two decades, historians have debated the use of the terms “slave” and “enslaved persons.” I want to acknowledge this tension in the terminology and offer some clarifying remarks on my usage. While there seems to be a general shift among historians and literary critics toward using “enslaved persons” or “captive persons,” I find value in both sides of the debate. Scholars like Daina Ramey Berry and Deborah Gray White cite humanitarian concerns for this shift. They argue that the term “slave” reduces the subject to his or her legal status and therefore dehumanizes the enslaved person. For Berry, the term enslaved is more appropriate “because it forces us to consider that bondpeople did not let anyone ‘own’ them” (167, note 4). Other historians, like Eric Foner, Michael Gomez, and David W. Blight, maintain that the term slave is more historically accurate. Foner reminds us that “Slaves are human beings and can be husbands,

existence behind and articulated an appeal for freedom, this record has, until recently, been overlooked by literary scholars.

Umar ibn Sayyid was just one of approximately forty thousand African Muslim slaves in the United States during the colonial and antebellum period (Austin, *Transatlantic Stories* 22). As historians Allan D. Austin and Michael A. Gomez have shown, many African slaves in the United States were Muslim, and a few of them even wrote slave narratives in Arabic. Historian Sylviane Diouf estimates that 15 to 20 percent of enslaved Africans brought to the Americas, which includes the Caribbean Islands and North and South America, were Muslim (48). Other historians, such as Gomez and Paul E. Lovejoy, however, estimate a smaller number. More recently, Lovejoy estimates that “fewer than 10 percent of Africans taken to the Americas came from Muslim areas, and even fewer were actually Muslims” (*Jihād in West Africa* 135). Even fewer African Muslim women were brought to the Americas. For instance, in the eighteenth-century only 28% of Senegambians—a term that refers to the regions of Senegal and Gambia—

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wives (in fact if not in law), fathers and mothers, members of religious groups, skilled craftsmen . . . All people have multiple identities, including slaves” (qtd. in Waldman’s “Slave or Enslaved Person?”). In an online forum, several scholars debated the use of this terminology, offering convincing justifications for both sides of the debate. The historian David Blight maintained that the current trend is presentist, writing:

Regarding the use of terms, “slave” and “enslaved African” or “enslaved person”: slave is the historically accurate term; enslaved person is a term born of and defined by our present. . . . Is our naming and terminology about ourselves, our emotional needs, or about the past we describe, represent, and explain? American slaves knew they had been “enslaved” by someone or some process. They didn’t choose the condition. Why can’t we muster the same strength they did and leave the historical language alone in its accuracy? (qtd. in Poe’s “Slave or Enslaved? A Discussion from the Recent Past,” Online Posting).

I am persuaded by both perspectives and use both terms in this dissertation, although I use enslaved more frequently. However, I deploy the term “slave” when I am referring more generally to the figure of the enslaved African Muslim. Moreover, that enslaved persons have complex inner lives, that they contested their slave status, is never in question, even when the term slave is being used. In addition, I do not believe that it is a scholar’s role to retrieve or withhold agency. Nonetheless, it remains crucial that we attend to the nuances and power of language. It is just as important to consider not only the terms being used, but also how, when, and to what end they are being deployed.

brought to the Americas were female (Diouf 184). This gender imbalance is due to one major factor: most African Muslims were captives of jihād, or religious and political wars, as was the case for ‘Umar ibn Sayyid.<sup>4</sup> These religious wars were largely carried out by men and, second, Muslim edicts prohibited the sale of Muslims especially to non-Muslims.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, some African Muslim women were captured and shipped to the Americas, although the paucity of the historical record makes it difficult to provide an exact estimate of the numbers of African Muslim women in the Americas.<sup>6</sup>

The clear gendering of the transatlantic slave trade was exacerbated when it comes to the treatment of enslaved women. Slaveholders exploited their enslaved women by reducing them not only to labouring bodies, but also to breeders. This absolute reduction and utter dehumanization of black women served to produce more slaves for slave owners. As a result, slaveholders in North Carolina, South Carolina, Maryland, and Virginia began the degrading practice of selling their slaves’ offspring further down south to the states of Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, and Texas.

African Muslim communities in colonial and antebellum North America came mostly from the regions of Senegambia, Sierra Leone, and the Upper Guinea Coast, and were mainly scattered on the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina, according to the

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<sup>4</sup> As Lovejoy surmises, to understand the transatlantic slave trade it is crucial that we consider the jihād movement of West Africa during the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, from an analysis of “108 biographical sketches of slaves from the central Bilād al-Sūdān in the first half of the nineteenth century,” Lovejoy conjectures that approximately five percent of the captives were female (*Jihād in West Africa* 150).

<sup>6</sup> A version of the material presented in paragraphs two to six appears in an article I wrote for the *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Culture* on women and slavery in North America (2016). The article, “Fragments, Faith, and Feminism,” focuses mainly on enslaved African Muslim women in Bahia, Brazil.

historian Michael Gomez.<sup>7</sup> African Muslims were forced to labour not just in the United States; they could also be found throughout the Americas. In fact, the presence of African Muslims in the so-called New World dates back to the sixteenth-century. As early as 1501, King Ferdinand II, (known as “The Catholic”), issued a decree banning Muslims, Jews, and heretics from entering the Western Hemisphere. Subsequent decrees stressed the prohibition of Muslims specifically, as Diouf points out, “[n]o fewer than five pieces of anti-Muslim legislation were issued by the Spanish authorities in the first fifty years of Spain’s establishment in the New World” (146). Despite such decrees, the population of African Muslims continued to grow throughout the Americas.

In addition to their religion, African Muslims identified themselves by their region and ethnic group. Many African Muslims traced their lineage to Fulani, Hausa, Nagô, Nupe, Soninke, Tukolor, and Wolof, among other ethnic groups. Fulbe, an ethnic group to which ‘Umar ibn Sayyid belonged, was among the most prominent in Islam’s expansion in West Africa. These ethnic groups can be found in present-day Benin, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, and Sierra Leone. Among this diverse group, some enslaved African Muslims were able to distinguish themselves from other slaves because of their literacy. The emphasis on literacy among some African Muslims meant that literate slaves left behind manuscripts throughout the Americas. For instance, in Panama, an African Arabic manuscript written by the African Muslim Sheikh Sana See during the Panama Railway construction was eventually circulated among members of

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Gomez’s landmark study *Black Crescent* reminds us that, “Muslim presence in the American South antedates the arrival of the English” (144). In fact, he reveals that “Spanish Florida’s St. Augustin (and nearby Fort Mose) featured a significant black population” as did French Louisiana, who had imported a large number of Muslims from Senegambia (144-145).

the American Ethnological Society in the 1860s and remains extant (Bayoumi 58).<sup>8</sup> Tellingly, the manuscripts penned by enslaved African Muslim often consisted of Qur'ānic scripture and *hadīth*. For example, Job Ben Solomon, who was enslaved in Maryland before being brought to England, demonstrated his expert knowledge in Islam by writing “three copies of the Koran, each time without ever looking at the preceding version” (Diouf, *Servants of Allah* 117).

The experiences of African Muslims in the New World differed markedly. Unlike their counterparts in the United States, African Muslims in central and South America were associated with overt rebellion. As early as 1522 on the island of Hispaniola, enslaved African Muslims were involved in the “first collective insurrection of Africans in the Americas, a movement largely composed of Senegambians, a significant proportion of whom were probably Muslim” (Gomez 3). Of the twenty revolts that occurred in Bahia, Brazil between 1809 and 1835, the biggest and most cited was the Malê revolt of 1835. This particular uprising “involved as many as 500 African insurgents” (Gomez, *Black Crescent* 103). Although Malê has several meanings, in Bahia it referred “to Africans who adopted the Islamic faith” (Reis 97). The historian João José Reis corroborates Gomez’s conclusion on the role of Muslims, stating that “[b]eyond a shadow of a doubt, Muslims played the central role in the 1835 rebellion” (93). Elsewhere in the Caribbean, African Muslims organized themselves into communities that demanded repatriation. In Trinidad, the African Muslim slave Samba Makumba

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<sup>8</sup> For more on this manuscript, see Moustafa Bayoumi’s “Moving Beliefs: The Panama Manuscript of Sheikh Sana See and African Diasporic Islam.”

became a member of the Free Mandingo of Trinidad, also called, the Free Mohammedans Society of Port-of-Spain (Diouf 72).<sup>9</sup> Muslim resistance in Bahia, Lovejoy argues, must be understood in relation to the Sokoto jihād of 1804 in West Africa (208).<sup>10</sup>

By contrast, enslaved African Muslims in antebellum America did not resort to overt rebellion, perhaps because they were fewer in number. Their ethnic diversity also may have made it difficult to form communities. Gomez offers us another reason, namely “the engagement between Africans and Europeans in what would become Latin America was in many ways an extension of an interaction begun hundreds of years in Iberia, North Africa, and elsewhere in the Mediterranean” (5). According to Lovejoy, the Muslims in Bahia during the early nineteenth century were able to develop a sense of community because “the number of Muslims were significantly greater than anywhere else in the Americas at any other time” (184). He adds that the sense of community was strengthened when the African Muslims began to convert other enslaved Africans to Islam (184).

Despite differences in strategies between and ethnic differences among the enslaved African Muslims, several key factors connected them. First, whether in North America or Latin America, African Muslims took pains to continue observing their faith, with some of them even integrating Islamic expressions during Christian worship (Gomez 143). Whereas scholars such as Eugene Genovese contend that the form of Islam

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<sup>9</sup> See also David V. Trotman and Paul E. Lovejoy’s “Community of Believers: Trinidad Muslims and the Return to Africa, 1810-1850,” in *Slavery on the Frontiers of Islam*.

<sup>10</sup> This resistance must also be considered in light of Muslim commerce, which, as Lovejoy notes, “stretched to Bahia” (213).

that African Muslims brought with them to the Americas has disappeared,<sup>11</sup> Michael Gomez insists on the survival of Islamic sensibilities that African Muslims carried with them to North America. He writes that these sensibilities “transitioned into early-twentieth century North America” even if the practice itself “had been lost in the fading memories of the aged in the faith, who, without Islamic institutions such as schools and mosques and absent access to the Qur’ān (and the clarity to read it), were unable to convey Islam to succeeding generations” (374). Nonetheless, “the sense of heritage” among black Muslim Americans continues to influence and shape their responses to injustice and Islamophobia (Gomez 374). My research sheds further light on this Islamic sensibility by looking closely at a second characteristic that unifies enslaved African Muslims: they left behind texts in Arabic—the language of their religion—writings that often contained Islamic tropes and Qur’ānic verses. My dissertation explores the significance of these writings for nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literary traditions.

As this brief synopsis demonstrates, Islam has a long and rich history in American culture. As historian Denise Spellberg has compellingly illustrated in *Thomas Jefferson’s Qur’an: Islam and the Founders*, some of America’s founders, including Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, were not only curious about Islam, but also purchased their own copies of the Qur’ān. Indeed, Spellberg shows that Jefferson imagined American Muslims as future citizens.<sup>12</sup> This ideal, however, excluded enslaved African Muslims

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<sup>11</sup> Genovese argues that “Southern slaves developed their own religion and turned it to good effect, but they were not able to retain such African religions as Islam” (519).

<sup>12</sup> In 1779, Thomas Jefferson drafted the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, which became state law in 1786.

and, more broadly, women. At the same time that George Washington advocated a vision of religious toleration that included Muslims, he completely dismissed the possibility that some of his slaves may have been Muslim. Of course, he was espousing liberty at the same time that he owned slaves. Spellberg, and others, have noted that Washington may have himself owned two or four African Muslim slaves, “includ[ing] a mother and daughter, named ‘Fatimer’ and ‘Little Fatimer’” (Spellberg 121). My research builds on scholars who are excavating this history by focusing on the figure of the African Muslim slave in American works and culture and within the broader context of transatlantic passages. The overarching aim of my study is to expand the field of American literary criticism and studies on the African diaspora, which have not fully addressed the significance of African-Arabic manuscripts in general, and their expressions of Islamic faith in particular. To expand these fields, my research builds a reading practice that combines recent developments in Anglo-American literary and cultural criticism with Islamic epistemology.

Islamic epistemology, the study of *‘ilm*, considers divine revelation as the ultimate source of knowledge that structures how one thinks and understands her role in the world. It also comprises the notion that one’s knowledge is intimately bound to one’s knowledge of God. Islamic epistemology, then, is tightly bound to the Qur’ān, which is defined by the eleventh century theologian and philosopher Ibn Ḥazm as God’s speech (*kalām Allah*). Recent understandings of Islamic epistemology as described by Mehdi Ha’iri Yazidi in *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy*, define Islamic

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epistemology as knowledge by presence.<sup>13</sup> Although the question of knowledge is complex and could be the focus of a separate thesis, for the purposes of my study, I am concerned with Islamic epistemology as a mode of knowledge informed by divine revelation and is therefore not limited to rationalist philosophy. I will engage with traditional Islamic philosophy and concepts to posit an alternative approach to understanding Islam in America.

My analysis focuses on works by African Muslim slaves in the United States, specifically the slave narratives they left behind, which I situate within their historic contexts. The purpose of this approach is to not only enrich our understanding of the figure of the African Muslim slave, but also to expand American literary history. A history which has been informed predominantly by a Protestant ethos, which scholars have recognized as crucial for African Americans who adopted this ethos during the revival of religious piety that occurred in the Great Awakening of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America. Indeed, African American studies has drawn connections between Christian spirituality, the black vernacular, and black struggle. In the nineteenth century, African American abolitionists, like the famous abolitionists Frederick Douglass and David Walker, often drew on their Protestant faith to condemn the institution of slavery and the hypocrisy of white Christian slave-owners. This Protestant faith sustained African American struggles against injustice, according to Willie J. Harrell, Jr., Houston

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<sup>13</sup> Yazidi connects knowledge by presence to “the emanative system of the existence of the self” (151).

A. Baker, Cornel West, and others.<sup>14</sup> As my research shows, however, an Islamic ethos undergirds both American literature and black struggles.

This dissertation also builds on a growing body of work that is shedding light on Islam in nineteenth-century American literature, most notably Timothy Marr's *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism*, Jacob Rama Berman's *American Arabesque*, and Jeffrey Einboden's *The Islamic Lineage of American Literary Culture*. Central to my dissertation are Marr's insights on Islam's influence on America's national identity and literary imagination, and Berman's strategy of mobilizing Arabic and Islamic history to read American cultural texts. Taking inspiration from Berman's approach, this dissertation marshals Muslim modes of knowledge, as disseminated in African Arabic texts, to develop a reading practice that melds Islamic expressions and New Formalism.<sup>15</sup>

My research also draws inspiration from Keith Cartwright's *Reading Africa into American Literature*. In this book, Cartwright attends to the echoes of Senegambian culture and traditions in American works to argue that Africanisms inform Southern American literature and culture. Cartwright's book takes up "Senegambian bodies of epic, folk, narrative, and scripture to develop lenses through which we read American literature" (8). Following Cartwright, I, too, "hope to render greater visibility to some previously invisible or misread African American cultural currents that have long shaped

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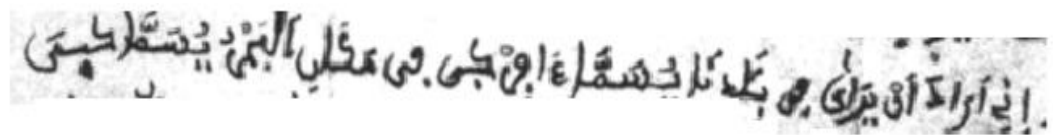
<sup>14</sup> See Willie J. Harrell, Jr.'s *Origins of the African American Jeremiad: The Rhetorical Strategies of Social Protest and Activism, 1760-1861*; Houston A. Baker's *Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and Culture*; and Cornel West's *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*.

<sup>15</sup> "New Formalism," as Verena Theile lays out in her introduction to *New Formalisms and Literary Theory*, "seeks to understand the way in which form is reinvented and reshaped and reinterpreted, and it does so against a historically and politically charged background, one that is, above all, meaningfully informed by both literary and literary-critical tradition" (9).

American language and consciousness” (2). However, rather than argue that the presence of Senegambian Muslim slaves haunts Southern gothic literature, as Cartwright does in his reading of Melville’s *Benito Cereno* and Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven,” among other works, I engage in a mode of reading that, to borrow from Heather Love, “leaves no room for the ghosts of humanism haunting contemporary practices of textual interpretation” (381). Instead of perceiving ghosts, I look to the surface of texts to interpret presence or, to borrow from the insights of Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, I perceive the “ghosts as presences, not absences” (13). Taking inspiration from these so-called post-critique authors, I build on these insights and offer an approach to reading the figure of the African Muslim slave. By examining closely the surface in addition to the depths of texts, I attend to the preservation, however partial, of Islamic faith as a means of cultural survival.

## Islam on the Surface

What does a surface reading look like? Consider the following line from ‘Umar’s 1819 letter:



This statement can be roughly transcribed as

“إني أراك أن يترأى من بلدنا يسمى على أجركم في مكلى البحر يسمى كبرى”

Although translation can be messy and, in some cases, defies literal translation, critics generally agree that translators should retain the meaning of the source text. In his discussion on translation, Jacques Derrida wrote that “. . . the thesis of philosophy is

translatability in this common sense, that is, as the transfer of a meaning or a truth from one language to another without any essential harm done” (“Roundtable on Translation” 120). In this sense, the translation offered by John Hunwick of ‘Umar’s text (with which I began), captures the spirit of the original sentence—and editorializes it.

I am not claiming here that the more conventional approach to translation is inadequate, but that it may at times tame a text by filling in the missing gaps. It may be just as significant to contemplate the inscrutability of the text as it is to read the text at a semantic level. I want to consider a different translation, one that refrains from editorializing or manipulating the original text. An unedited literal translation would read as follows: “I see to appear/envision [although this word is not entirely clear] from our country named on [illegible words] in the sea called Kaba” (1.11). Here, ‘Umar’s wish is not fully legible. While it is possible to make out some of the key words in this sentence, such as “our land,” “name,” “sea,” and even the prepositions “from” and “in,” the rest of the sentence seems to comprise a collection of random letters. What would it mean to read this statement at the literal level or to read for its explicit meaning?

Recently, scholars such as Rita Felski, Heather Love, Sharon Marcus, and Stephen Best have called for alternative approaches to literary criticism that extend beyond what Paul Ricoeur described as “a hermeneutics of suspicion.” Drawing on the writings of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Friedrich Nietzsche, Ricoeur identified a model of interpretation that is committed to unearthing the underlying or repressed meaning of literary works. While critics have deployed this hermeneutical tradition in powerful and effective ways, Felski argues that Ricoeur’s critical model encourages literary critics to be suspicious, mistrustful, and paranoid of the texts they examine (216).

In her words, “the hermeneutics of suspicion, after all, assigns a unique depth of understanding to the trained reader or theorist, equipped to see through the illusions in which others are immersed” (218). In an attempt to depart from suspicious hermeneutics or symptomatic readings, I extend Marcus and Best’s interpretative approach that attends to the surface of a text by “tak[ing] texts at face value” (12). Following Marcus and Best, I take the surface to denote “what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in geometrical sense, has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth” (9). Nonetheless, this departure from a hermeneutics of suspicion does not foreclose close readings. Rather, it allows for what Love calls “modes of reading that are close but not deep; rather than adding anything ‘extra’ to the description, they account for the real variety that is already there” (377).

By following the example of these “post-critique” scholars by jettisoning the notion of the critic as the seeker of encrypted expressions of truth, we will be able to avoid textual correction as a means to verify our suspicions. This is not to say that textual correction is a component of depth reading, but that suspicious reading can lead to blind spots in readers who may align a text with their assumptions. In order to read ‘Umar’s line at the surface level, we must account for the document’s idiosyncratic nature. Instead of searching for hidden clues that might unravel aspects of ‘Umar’s strategies of resistance, we might account for what is present or manifest in the document. In so doing, we might nuance this line, which has been interpreted as a subversive strategy, to attend to ‘Umar’s confusion, insecurity, and uncertainty in the face of slavery’s horrors. Indeed, the very haphazardness of the words, the move between comprehension and incomprehension, certainty and uncertainty, more closely reflect ‘Umar’s position as a

man condemned to slavery. Whereas ‘Umar’s “I” is clear, what he sees—for the emphasis appears to be on seeing and on being seen—can only be murky and inaccessible to readers. Rather than perceive a subversive voice buried below the mysterious text waiting for critics to uncover repressed meaning,<sup>16</sup> we perceive that the moments of unintelligible writing convey as much about the slave’s condition as do other instances that editors have translated in clear, polished prose that erases the uncertainty and messy qualities that characterize ‘Umar’s writing.

In seeking deep meaning that underlies ‘Umar’s letter, critics have privileged ‘Umar’s request over the rest of the document’s content. In addition to this plea, ‘Umar’s document also contains verses from the Qur’ān and lines from an Arabic grammar book by the twelfth-century writer Abu Muhammad al-Hariri of Basra.<sup>17</sup> John Hunwick’s authoritative and important article on ‘Umar’s 1819 manuscript argues that “[t]he rest of the document is . . . padding for [‘Umar’s] expressed wish, which is buried deep among Qur’ānic and other quotations” (68). Yet in using the term “padding,” Hunwick ascribes depth or profound meaning to ‘Umar’s wish, while conceiving of the citations, the rest of ‘Umar’s letter, as superfluous in comparison. By reading the citations as vehicles for ‘Umar’s wish, Hunwick places more value in ‘Umar’s original pronouncements than in his borrowings. That is, Hunwick elevates the role of originality and imagination by subordinating ‘Umar’s borrowed citations. Because this subordination assumes a

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<sup>16</sup> This is not to deny or undermine the importance of reading resistive tactics within a slave narrative. Instead, it is to suggest other modes of reading these narratives. Indeed, this dissertation also addresses the issues of resistance and political writing.

<sup>17</sup> For more on ‘Umar’s borrowings and citations, see Hunwick’s “‘I Wish to be Seen in our Land Called Āfrikā’: ‘Umar b. Sayyid’s Appeal to be Released from Slavery (1819)” (65).

hierarchical relationship between mimesis and individual creativity, it risks reducing the manuscript to a single line. At the same time, however, Hunwick does not dismiss the power of the citations. He writes, “[i]n using such quotations [‘Umar] not only ‘wraps’ his sentiment in the language of God, but he uses the quotations to deliver some messages to his master and his master’s family and friends” (68).

Although I recognize the value in approaching the text as an enigmatic document full of underlying meanings, I would also like to consider what critics might miss when they are preoccupied with unearthing deep messages. When we read the manuscript at a surface level, we start to notice other aspects of the manuscript, including marginal notations, which might be as valuable as ‘Umar’s “request.”





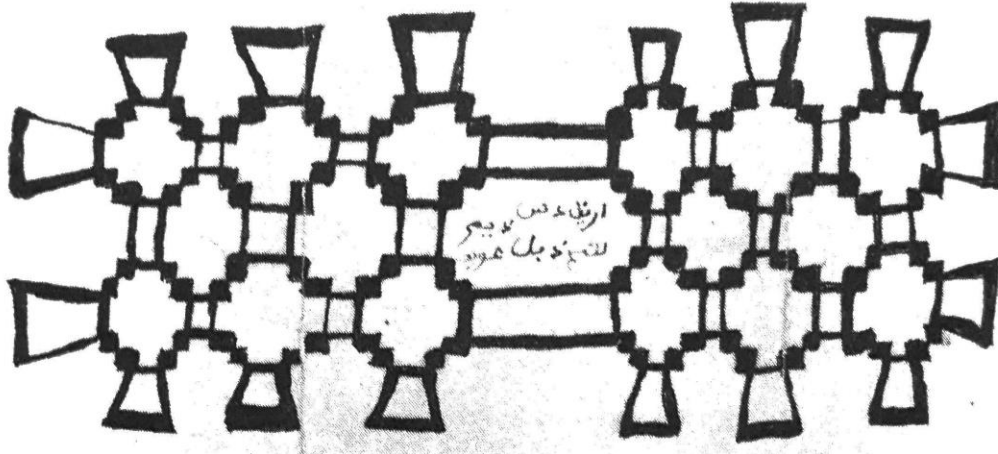
In glossing the manuscript’s purportedly unintelligible surface, we can discern several symbols, including the Seal of Solomon (خاتم سليمان), , and the following markers that appear as the Arabic vowels: , , and —*sukun*, *kasratein* or *fathatein*, and *dammatein*—and geometric patterns with barely readable words inscribed within (fig. 1). These markers seem to point to an encoded and opaque document, tempting the critic to decode or elucidate the manuscript. These markers are in fact symbols of faith, which are neither silent nor repressed, but visible and manifest. Paradoxically, then, the meaning of the symbols lies on the surface. More precisely, I suggest that these markers are clear signs of faith. They reveal a truth that is at the surface. Because these symbols point to a subject’s adherence to Islamic faith, they make obvious ‘Umar’s Islamic sensibility. This sensibility is patently and beautifully illustrated in ‘Umar’s rectilinear geometric figure (fig. 1). Rather than imply a resistive tactic, the

image testifies to his faith as it is a characteristic feature of Qur'ānic aesthetics, common in Islamic manuscripts.



**Figure 1:** ‘Umar ibn Sayyid, “I Wish to be Seen in our Land Called Āfrikā”

(1819), 2:6. Reproduced in Allan Austin, *AMAA*, 456.

When we look at the surface of the manuscripts left behind by African Muslims, it becomes apparent that the literal surface of these documents is suffused with Islamic tropes (fig. 1). Because of the obvious attachment to Islam by African Muslims, I derive a model of surface reading that draws not only on recent trends in literary methodologies, but also on Islamic intellectual traditions. Turning to this latter tradition, I find an exoteric model of Islamic hermeneutics, known as *zāhir* (literal meanings) and *sharh* (gloss), to examine enslaved African Muslims’ engagement with Islam in America. In contrast to *tā’wil*, or spiritual hermeneutics that aims to find the esoteric or inner meaning (*bātin*) of a sacred text, the Zāhirite school of interpretation recognized meaning at the



surface of a text.<sup>18</sup> In *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Edward Said contrasted the two medieval schools of interpretation, *Bātin* and *Zāhir*, observing that, “[t]he Zāhirite effort was to restore by rationalization a system of reading a text in which attention was focused on the phenomenal words themselves, in what might be considered their once-and-for-all sense uttered for and during a specific occasion, not on hidden meaning they might later be supposed to contain” (36-7). This interpretive method that privileges the phenomenal and literal comes from the Islamic jurisprudence school of thought known as al-Zāhirī (*al-madhab al-zāhiri*), which was founded by Dawud ibn Ali al-Isfahani in the ninth century. Similar to recent modes of literary criticism that depart from symptomatic readings, Zāhiri is a method of interpretation that takes the zāhir (manifest or evident) as the ultimate source of meaning.<sup>19</sup> One of the most important practitioners and commentators of al-Zāhiri school was Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1065), also known as al-Andalusī az-Zāhirī (the literal or manifest Andalusian). In *The Perfect Knowledge of the Principles of Jurisprudence*, Ibn Ḥazm laid out some of the al-Zāhiris’ key precepts. According to Ibn Ḥazm, “every term is to be interpreted in its widest possible extent unless it is particularized by a valid indicator (*dalīl*) . . . [and] that every statement tells us only what it says and does not indicate anything beyond this” (Osman 81).<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the

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<sup>18</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr identifies three main levels of interpretation in the Islamic hermeneutical tradition “*tafsir* (the literal interpretation of the Qur’ān),” “*ta’wīl* (its symbolic interpretation),” and “*tafhīm* (in-depth comprehension of the Sacred Text)” (29). Although Islamic hermeneutics is most commonly known as *ta’wīl* (symbolic or expansive interpretation), which shares traits with hermeneutics of suspicion as it engages in esoteric readings with the aim to unveil or decode divine secrets, I am turning to another interpretive tradition, known as *zāhir*, that is closer to what critics Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best call “surface reading.”

<sup>19</sup> The Zāhirite school flourished under Almohad Caliphate rule (a Muslim dynasty founded in 1121 and which had conquered Cordoba in 1148) of Al-Andalus.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Gleave adds that “the *zāhir* meaning of revelation, then, is not to be found in the immediate understanding of the listener, even if that person is an expert in the *lugh* [language]. It is, instead, to be

Zāhirites rejected the practice of analogy (*qiyas*) and ruling that is based on personal preferences (*istihsan*) (Alalwani 72). Although this school of thought was short-lived and had its own shortcomings, it established a mode of interpretation that eschewed suspicion or depth hermeneutics.<sup>21</sup> However, unlike the Zāhirite school, I do not suggest that the Qurʾān and the *hadīth* (collections of stories, statements, or actions ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad) are the only sources for interpretation.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the reading practice I introduce locates Islam in the entirely different context and setting of American cultural texts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

I call this methodology *Allahgraphy* or اللهgraphy, an approach to interpretation that is attentive to Islamic studies and rhetorical techniques and that takes the surface as a source of meaning. I also invoke the term Allahgraphy as a homophone for holography—a handwritten document—to highlight and explain the visual and auditory elements—the way the words sound when read aloud—of the African Arabic manuscripts. This term, furthermore, brings together calligraphy—the art of beautiful writing—and autobiography. In the Islamic tradition, the very shape of Arabic letters in a religious context reflects the spiritual realm of Allah since letters in Jewish and Islamic traditions “testify to the material traces of divine self-disclosure” (Bruckstein 56). By taking into

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found through the application of linguistic rules to words or sets of words resulting in a single, unambiguous meaning” (173).

<sup>21</sup> According to Christopher Melchert, the Zāhiri school failed because of its rejection of the principles of *taqlid* (the notion that believers follow scholars of jurisprudence) and *qiyas* (deductive analogy), which were both deemed important by “the juridical theory of Sunnism” (187).

<sup>22</sup> The terms manifest or surface, however, are not necessarily the same as the obvious. As Robert Gleave observes, “. . . the *zāhir* is not obvious (*jāli*) is clearly Ibn Hazm’s position. . . . The scholar’s task is to ‘demonstrate proofs and clarify what is obscure to the ignoramus, so that he might understand and it become clear to him’” (173). The *zāhir*, then, does not preclude interpretation, but demands linguistic analysis, as well as attention to historical circumstances.

account calligraphy, I also highlight the aesthetic dimensions of the African Arabic manuscripts.

## Postsecular Allahgraphy

As an interpretative practice, Allahgraphy is also in keeping with recent work on postsecularism insofar as it blurs religious and secular categories by deploying religious concepts for literary exegesis. Although postsecular approaches cross multiple disciplines, including sociology and anthropology, in literary studies, this term, according to Michael Kaufmann, “complicat[es] our understanding of the terms ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ by deepening our awareness of the ideological, cultural, and historical valences of those terms . . . and by moving beyond any model that posits too stark a binary opposition . . .” (68-69). For philosopher Charles Taylor, our secular age has birthed a “new spiritual landscape,” which gives rise to postsecular literary criticism (513). Talal Asad provides a succinct explanation for the postsecular as the contention “that a straightforward narrative of progress from the religious to the secular is no longer acceptable” (1).

I invoke Allahgraphy, then, in the spirit of postsecular literary criticism, by extending criticism beyond the binary of secular versus religious discourse. Rather, this interpretative approach takes religious tropes and traditions seriously in relation to literary works, but not as a means to affirm or solidify religious principles. To clarify: Allahgraphy does not seek to intervene in Islamic studies, which is more concerned with theological doctrines and questions of belief. In this renewed engagement with religion, I instead take concepts and ideas from Islamic discourse without seeking to engage with

debates in Islamic studies. What postsecular Allahgraphy does, however, is disrupt the secularization thesis put forth by scholars like Max Weber. It does so by borrowing from Islamic epistemology in order to shed light on American encounters with Islam in the nineteenth century and the reception to Islam in the twentieth century.

To appreciate the challenges of reading the manuscripts African Muslims left behind and the way they might have been picked up by later writers, I consider one of the foundational moments of Islam: Prophet Muhammad's first Revelation. I take this primal scene as the starting point for developing an Islamic reading practice and grappling with the role of incomprehension and illegibility in Islam. In so doing, I aim to advance an approach for interpreting Islamic signs and incomprehensibility that does not necessarily entail modifying the source text. When critics render illegible signs legible they wind up erasing a crucial part of the text's meaning, which is that incomprehension can in itself be meaningful.

While meditating in a cave in Mount Hira near Mecca, Prophet Muhammad received his first Revelation in the form of a book, from which he was asked to "read" (أقرأ). According to Abu Muhammad ibn Hisham, Prophet Muhammad's biographer, the Prophet is recorded as saying: "Whilst I was asleep, with a coverlet of silk brocade whereon was some writing, the angel Gabriel appeared to me and said, 'Read!' I said, 'I do not read'" (39). The injunction, here, is to read the unreadable. In this decisive moment of Islam's beginnings, the unfamiliarity of the writing and the strangeness of the voice so unsettle the Prophet that he fled the cave and returned to his wife Khadija bint Khuwaylid. Khadija, in turn, interpreted Muhammad's experience with the unreadable as a sign of his prophecy. As the Moroccan literary critic Abdelkebir Khatibi put it, Khadija

“deciphered certain signs of prophecy . . . . on that of her husband. She read, in a way, on the imaginary body of Islam where, illegible to Mohammad himself, the prophetic message becomes apprehensible by the feminine body” (692). This reading also elevates the place of the female reader in the Islamic tradition, even when she has gone unnoticed by some Muslim scholars. Indeed, Khadija’s reading dramatizes the Islamic reader par excellence: she looks for signs of revelation on the surface of Muhammad’s body, which would include his countenance and demeanor in his response to the unreadable.

Significantly, while Khadija makes sense of the incomprehensible, she does not make it legible. That is, Khadija cannot and does not translate the content of this revelatory moment, but finds value in Muhammad’s encounter with the incomprehensible. In her interpretation, then, she finds profound significance—signs of prophecy—in that which cannot be read. This primal moment of Islam, Muhammad’s experience of Qur’ānic Revelation, which is characterized by the unknown and temporarily unreadable book, paradoxically offers a model of interpretation, one that also recognizes the female reader.

While on the one hand, this interpretive approach suggests that Revelation or divine knowledge can take place outside intelligible language, it also suggests that the illegible and unreadable become necessary conditions for producing knowledge. In this context, the illegible text enables a state of *hayrah* (الحيرة) in the reader, a term denoting puzzlement or perplexity, that initiates learning. Illegibility as producing a state of *hayrah* (perplexity) that eventually leads to knowledge resonates with the philosophical concept *aporia* insofar as the term *aporia* denotes an impasse or moment of puzzlement that

instigates new thinking and understanding.<sup>23</sup>

Although other religious traditions, including Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism, among others, underscore this point in their understanding of mystical experiences, the Islamic version is most relevant for my discussion here. I turn to this tradition not only because I am investigating the figure of the African Muslim slave, but also because Islam's primal moment, unlike other faith traditions, captures the epistemic value of the incomprehensible and unknowable through a scene of reading.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Muhammad's state of *hayrah* is prompted by the imperative to read, *iqra* (اقرأ). In this tradition and particularly through its primal scene, we also find the idea that meaning can be communicated without the receiver fully comprehending it. Or, as stated above, incomprehension can be meaningful. This idea is important because it enables us to grapple with the issue of incomprehension that arises in relation to African-Arabic manuscripts, including literary references to these works. I take incomprehension, then, as neither simply an effect of confusion that requires resolution, nor merely as a strategy of resistance. Rather, incomprehension can be experienced as a confession of sacred knowledge that is consonant with faith in Islam.

While I draw on Islamic intellectual traditions, I do not rely on a single or set theory of Islamic practices. Rather, my work falls under postsecular literary criticism, as mentioned earlier, by blurring the boundaries between secular and religious criticism. I

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<sup>23</sup> The Judeo-Christian tradition also takes up the idea of *aporia*, mainly under the concept of perplexity (see Moses Maimonides' *A Guide for the Perplexed*).

<sup>24</sup> For instance, in the Christian tradition, the central moment or primal scene may be recognized as the annunciation: the moment when the angel Gabriel announces to the Virgin Mary that she will give birth to the Son of God, Jesus.

combine various principles and ideas from the Islamic intellectual tradition, as well as offer a multilingual consideration of the African Arabic documents, with the aim of proposing a method of literary practice that attends to scriptural interpretation as well as to recent trends in Anglo-American literary studies. To put it differently, I combine and apply scriptural interpretation and literary exegesis to American literary and cultural texts.

Although my aim is to expand approaches to literary criticism, I do not draw on Islamic epistemology merely to find traces of Islamic faith in American works. Neither is the presence of Islam limited to works by Muslim writers. Literary scholars have examined the presence of Islamic ideas, themes, and terms in the works of key American figures, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson (Jeffrey Einboden and Suzan Fakahani), Lydia Maria Child (Einboden), Edgar Allan Poe (Jacob Berman), Thomas Jefferson (Denise Spellberg), and Herman Melville (Timothy Marr), among others. In the early to mid-nineteenth century, Emerson, a key figure of the American Transcendentalist movement, turned his gaze toward the East, perusing Islam along the way, even assuming Muslim pseudonyms in his private journals such as by adopting the persona of Osman and Saadi, as Einboden observes (130).<sup>25</sup> Rather than search for Islam in American works, this dissertation seeks to offer new ways to grapple with the significance of Islam in American literary culture with the overall objective of establishing Islam as a faith familiar to rather than foreign in the United States. To read Islamic traces, whether

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<sup>25</sup> For more on Emerson's engagement with Islam, see Suzan Fakahani, "Islamic Influences on Emerson's Thought"; Jeffrey Einboden, *The Islamic Lineage of American Literary Culture*; and Mehdi Aminrazavi, *Sufism and American Literary Masters*.

legible or illegible, I turn to a practice of reading that will provide new insights on the figure of the African Muslim slave and, more generally, on Islam in American literary works.

With the help of new models of interpretation, I aim to broaden the parameters of American literature, or to borrow from Wai Chee Dimock, to “decenter [and] . . . denaturalize . . . ‘Americanness’” (30). In her article “Hemispheric Islam,” Dimock adds that this decentering of Americanness involves “not only mapping [America] against other coordinates but also . . . situating it within an alternate set of relations, linking it to a history older and broader than territory and chronology of any single nation” (30). By opening up the coordinates of American literature as suggested by Dimock, this dissertation challenges American exceptionalism and the implicit protestant ethos of American works. More importantly, these manuscripts establish the legitimacy of Muslim Americans’ sense of American belonging and, more specifically, outline a long tradition of black Muslim Americans’ powerful responses to Islamophobia.

Allahgraphy enables us to draw on Islamic modes of expression in a wide range of works spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including writings by ‘Umar ibn Sayyid, Bilali Muhammad, Joel Chandler Harris, Malcolm X, and Toni Morrison. The first two chapters approach Allahgraphy as an interpretive methodology that considers the material inscription of the source texts. The second half of the dissertation investigates the multiple sensory registers that the texts invoke from the embodied performance of submission in Malcolm X’s *Autobiography* to the sonic registers of an enslaved African Muslim woman in Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*. By focusing on these diverse writers, my dissertation, *Islam’s Low Mutterings at High Tide: Enslaved African*



*Muslims in American Literature* moves chronologically through diverse critical periods in African American culture and history, moving from slavery to post-Reconstruction to the post civil rights era. In Chapter One, I will elaborate on the concept of Allahgraphy through an analysis of another manuscript penned by ‘Umar, his slave autobiography *Life* (1831). I read the literal surface of ‘Umar’s *Life* by taking account of his marginal notations. Reading the manuscript at the surface also means recognizing the recitative possibilities of the document since the Qur’ānic passages ‘Umar cites are meant to be read aloud with specific notations in mind, a practice known as *tajwīd* or the art of Qur’ānic recitation. By focusing my interpretation on what is manifest, I offer a textual analysis that departs from common treatment of the manuscript as a primarily subversive document. As a result, by distancing analysis from narratives of resistance, critics will be better able to draw attention to ‘Umar’s everyday activities, such as his walking. Indeed, the numerous references to ‘Umar’s walks or to “مشية”, I suggest, hint at his transnational ambitions.

In the chapter that follows, I examine Bilali Muhammad’s *The Ben Ali Diary*, a manual on Islamic ritual, although it has been termed a diary and placed in the genre of autobiography. While Bilali’s manuscript shares characteristics with ‘Umar’s manuscript that also make it difficult to read, such as Bilali’s unique orthography, the idiosyncratic nature of this manuscript is far more pronounced than ‘Umar’s. In fact, fragments of this manuscript are completely illegible. Because of the incomprehensible elements of the document, I suggest that Allahgraphy, in this context, constitutes a reading practice that also moves beyond rationally reading content at the semantic level of the text. Instead, I examine the embodied performance of the manuscript’s incomprehensibility. Bilali’s

manuscript also surfaces in Joel Chandler Harris's children's stories *The Story of Aaron (so Named)*, *The Son of Ben Ali* and its prequel *Aaron in the Wildwoods*. Harris's stories, written during the post-Reconstruction era, a time when white supremacy was on the rise and re-segregation was taking place, express American racial and religious anxiety. In his appropriation of the manuscript, Harris participates in American racist logic by erasing Bilali's blackness and supplanting it with an Arab identity. Bilali's manuscript, however, offers an interpretive model by which to unsettle Harris's erasure of an African Muslim slave's identity.

The last two chapters examine Islamic forms of expressions in twentieth-century American texts. Chapter Three analyzes the works of one of the most influential black American Muslims, Malcolm X, who had also adopted the name el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz. I turn to his *Autobiography*, which he co-authored with Alex Haley, and a select number of his speeches and letters, to argue for a religiously-inflected political rhetoric in Malcolm X's works. I explore the implications of prayer for Malcolm X, from the moment of his conversion to Islam in prison to his experience in the Hajj, which culminates in his submission to Allah, a stance that he politicized. This chapter also complicates the boundaries between secular and religious themes and readings to suggest that Malcolm X's rhetoric encompassed a broad range of forms, including prayer. More broadly, I argue that Malcolm X's embodied prayer and the physical movement of protest during the Civil Rights Movement were intimately linked.

In my last chapter, I examine Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, which subtly references an enslaved African Muslim named Ryna. In her novel, Morrison uses interviews by former slaves and descendants of slaves, some of whom were Muslim, such

as the figure Ryna. These interviews were conducted in the 1930s by the Georgia Writers' Project, a federally funded program of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration (WPA). I explore the marginal figure of Ryna who appears in the novel as a disembodied wail. To analyze the surface, or *zāhir*, in a novel that is so layered and complex, and on a character that rarely surfaces, I take into account the physical landscape of the story, specifically, the place where Ryna's wail is located. Deploying Islamic epistemology, I place Ryna's seemingly unintelligible wail in the Islamic tradition of *huzn* or melancholy to draw out the spatial dimension of her wail and show that the figure of the enslaved African Muslim woman is embedded in an American landscape. By focusing on the spatial dimension of Ryna's wail, I contend that her wail is one of presence rather than loss. By examining these diverse texts that span the nineteenth and twentieth century, my research reveals how Islamic styles of expression are a constituent feature of racially-inflected diasporic expressions in American literature and culture.

Although the scope of my dissertation is broad—I analyze texts from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—my thesis does not intend to be comprehensive. Rather, I take this broad overview to show the range of ways that the figure of the African Muslim slave surfaces in American literary culture. Moreover, I draw attention to a constellation of diverse Muslim voices that are embedded within the American literary tradition.

In approaching Islam as one thread in the genealogy of American Studies, I also extract two themes that will be central to my dissertation: prayer and incomprehension. Pursuing those themes, which are crucial to Islam's primal moment, allows us to broaden

the assumption of Protestantism in American literature and literary reading practices. As Laura Levitt explains in her article on postsecularism from an American Jewish perspective, an “‘invisible hand’ of Protestantism” frames literary studies (107). She specifies that in “the dominant Protestant secular . . . what become invisible are notions of ritual practices, community, culture” of other traditions, including Judaism and Islam (108). Furthermore, documents by African Muslims pursue the topic of Islam in ways that are distinct from Anglo-American writers who drew on Islamic sources. For instance, Emerson was fascinated by the spiritual and intellectual ethos of Islam; yet he overlooked or perhaps dismissed its ritualistic aspects, specifically the embodied prayer and Qur’ānic recitations that are central tenets of Islamic belief and epistemology. In many ways, Emerson himself performs a symptomatic reading of Islam with the aim to unravel what he deemed as “the mysterious East” (*Journals* 381) that inspired in him, as Einboden noted, “a spiritual rise from physical fire” (124). Nonetheless, the manuscripts left behind by African Muslims throughout the Americas often cited or discussed Islamic rituals. Even early commentators made the link between prayer and Islam explicit. Commenting on “African Mohammedanism” in 1871, Tayler Lewis asserted that “Mohammedanism is eminently a religion of prayer” (37). Taking up Lewis’s observation, I suggest that the focus on ritual calls for interpretative practices that recognize the importance of embodied ritual, including embodied recitations. As scholars Renee Harrison and Diouf have established, prayer became a resilient trope and ritual of resistance among the enslaved during the antebellum period. The interviews conducted by Work Projects Administration (WPA) illuminated the prayerful resilience of former slaves as recollected by inhabitants of coastal Georgia recalling their ancestors’ prayerful postures. In one

interview, we are introduced to Hester, the daughter of the devout Muslim Bilali Muhammad of Sapelo Island and famed author of *The Ben Ali Diary*, who is remembered “pray[ing] on duh bead. Dey weah duh string uh beads on duh wais. Sometime duh string on duh neck. Dey pray at sun-up and face duh sun on duh knees an bow tuh it tree times, kneelin on a lill mat” (166). Although the descendants understand their ancestors’ prayerful postures as kneeling before the sun, for the Muslim observer these humble postures and patterns—of bowing or *rukūʿ* and prostration or *sujūd*—represent a Muslim’s spiritual expression when such expression was outlawed. Islamic prayer ritual, specifically its embodied aspects, will be a recurring theme in the works I examine, particularly in Bilali’s manuscript and Malcolm X’s writings.

This study concludes by examining the reappearance of the figure of the African Muslim slave in a twenty-first century work: Mohamedou Ould Slahi’s *Guantánamo Diary*. This reappearance, in a work by an African Muslim held captive by the government of the United States, raises an urgent question: what are the enduring ramifications of the transatlantic slave trade and implications of its invocation at the present moment of intensified Islamophobia? Attending to the stories of enslaved African Muslims, the reception of their stories, and to new formulations of Islam in the U.S., will help us to better understand and respond to current anti-Muslim and anti-black sentiment in the U.S.

## Chapter 1

### *Allahgraphy* and the Politics of Submission in ‘Umar ibn Sayyid’s Slave Autobiography

“[R]ecite the Qur’ān in slow, measured rhythmic tones.”  
---Qur’ān 73:4

“O, people of America; O, people of North Carolina: do you have, do you have, do you have, do you have such a good generation that fears Allah so much?”  
---‘Umar ibn Sayyid (translation by Ala A. Alryyes)<sup>26</sup>

In 1810, ‘Umar ibn Sayyid, a runaway slave “of a slender frame and delicate constitution,” scribbled Arabic inscriptions on the walls of the Cumberland county jail in Fayetteville, North Carolina where he was imprisoned (Austin, *AMAM* 460). Though his jailors were uncertain whether they were verses, pleas, or curses, these writings clearly perplexed them. By writing on the prison walls, ‘Umar inscribed another space onto the prison, which, in turn, opened up new horizons for him. His contemporaries, including Christian missionaries, residents of Fayetteville, and members of the American Colonization Society (an organization founded in 1816 that established the colony of Liberia to which it encouraged manumitted blacks to emigrate) wondered who ‘Umar ibn

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<sup>26</sup> All English translations from, as well as transcriptions of, ‘Umar’s *Life* used in this chapter are from Alryyes’s invaluable translation, found in *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar ibn Said*. An earlier translation by Alryyes was published in *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature* (2000).

Sayyid was. Moreover, they pondered the import of his writings. The American Colonization Society (ACS) was so intrigued that some members would go on to encourage ‘Umar to write his autobiography.<sup>27</sup>

What we do know is that, contrary to a romantic rhetoric that praised ‘Umar as a “Prince of Arabia,” he was in fact a religious teacher and tradesman born in the West African region of Futa Toro, in northern Senegal (Austin, *AMAA* 447). ‘Umar had also received education in Islamic studies in his homeland of Futa Toro and in Futa Bundu (Hunwick 64).<sup>28</sup> Beginning with writings on the wall, ‘Umar, by then reduced to the degraded position of a fugitive slave, astonished and puzzled his captors by challenging their assumptions about slave illiteracy. In so doing, he garnered the attention of General James (or “Jim”) Owen, who became his new master in 1810. ‘Umar’s prison wall writing, scrawled as they were in a language his jailers could not decipher, not only sparked bafflement but also praise by the same slave-owning class that prohibited slave literacy. In 1831, a year after Governor John Owen, the brother of ‘Umar’s owner, aided in the passing and creation of legislation that outlawed slave literacy, ‘Umar began crafting his autobiography at the age of 61.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> For more on the American Colonization Society (ACS) and its role in commissioning ‘Umar’s autobiography, see Alryyes, ““Arabic Work,’ Islam, and American Literature,” in *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar ibn Said*, 14-17.

<sup>28</sup> Hunwick, however, questions whether ‘Umar did in fact spend twenty-five years pursuing Islamic studies given his poor command of Arabic (64).

<sup>29</sup> ‘Umar ibn Sayyid was a fairly prolific writer, leaving behind at least sixteen extant manuscripts. In 1997, Allan Austin noted that fourteen of ‘Umar’s manuscripts were extant (*Transatlantic Stories* 24). More manuscripts have surfaced since Austin’s statement. In 2011, Jeffrey Einboden found another manuscript by ‘Umar, which is currently at the Spartanburg Country Historical Association. More recently, in 2016, David Babaian discovered a new manuscript by ‘Umar that is currently housed in Harvard University’s Houghton Library.

He apparently did so at the behest of a certain Sheik Hunter.<sup>30</sup> 1831 was also a turning point in the debate over slavery in the United States, beginning on January 1<sup>st</sup> when the American abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, founded the abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*. Garrison was a staunch advocate for the immediate emancipation of slaves. In August of the same year, the devout Christian Nat Turner led a slave uprising in Southampton County, Virginia, which prompted the Virginia slavery debate in the House of Delegates. At a time when Americans were engaged in vigorous debates over the abolition of or defense of slavery, ‘Umar began to write his slave narrative. We must account for these debates when we read ‘Umar’s narrative, for this is the atmosphere in which he was writing, even if he was not directly responding to these debates or to specific events. However, the question of abolition for ‘Umar, might extend beyond an American or European-inspired perspective. Instead, he might have been familiar with the treatise on slavery titled *Mi’raj al-Su’ud* penned by Aḥmad Bābā, the sixteenth and seventeenth century Muslim scholar and jurist from Timbuktu.<sup>31</sup> Bābā had offered a limited abolition perspective that restricted the enslavement of Muslims, but not of non-Muslims (Lovejoy, *Jihād in West Africa* 212).<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Alryyes surmises that Sheik Hunter is likely to have been a member of the American Colonization Society.

<sup>31</sup> See John Hunwick’s and Fatima Harrak’s translation of Aḥmad Bābā “Mi’rāj al-Ṣu’ūd.”

<sup>32</sup> In *Jihād in West Africa during the Age of Revolutions*, Paul Lovejoy offers a fascinating study on the significance of West Africa, not only in the Transatlantic slave trade, but also during the age of revolutions, which commonly refers to the French and American revolutions. He also expands scholarship on abolitionism by broadening the framework of abolition beyond Europe and “Enlightenment thinking” (210). In fact, he argues that “the discourse on slavery in Muslim societies was a motivating factor in attempting to restrict the slave trade and thereby helped shape attitudes toward a limited abolition” (211).



‘Umar’s autobiography tells of his enslavement, life in the American South, and the kindness of his current owners. It begins with the common Islamic invocation of God’s name: “In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate,” and proceeds with a chapter from the Qur’ān, *Surah al-Mulk*, or “The Sovereignty” (Alryyes 50-51). ‘Umar tames the radical rhetoric of this Qur’ānic chapter by expressing a sadness for “forg[etting] much of [his] talk as well as the talk of the Arabs” (61). Before briefly reflecting on his life in Futa Toro, and his participation in Qur’ānic studies for approximately twenty-five years, he repeats his regret for forgetting his language. In 1807, a “big army,” likely from the Bambara state of Karta,<sup>33</sup> interrupted his life and he was captured in Kaba and transported to Charleston, South Carolina (61). Later in the narrative he lists Islamic catechisms, following them with an overview of the Owens, the family that owns him (69). The penultimate page consists of the Qur’ānic chapter *al-Fātiha* (“The Opening”) and the Lord’s Prayer (75). He ends the autobiography in an unorthodox fashion by repeatedly thanking the Owens for their benevolence. ‘Umar’s reliance on an Islamic style of expression, on direct and indirect reference to Muslim scripture, is balanced by a curious acknowledgment of the Christian benevolence that likely summoned this autobiography into being.

Despite the ACS’s Christian mission to proselytize to Africans as part of its Liberian enterprise, ‘Umar’s autobiography is replete with Islamic references that are

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<sup>33</sup> For more on the conditions and events that led to ‘Umar’s enslavement, see Sylviane Diouf’s contextual essay, “‘God does not Allow Kings to Enslave their People’: Islamic Reformists and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.”

explicit rather than submerged in the text. Although historians<sup>34</sup> have made significant strides in piecing together the remnants of ‘Umar’s life, literary scholars are now starting to take seriously the significance of the autobiography’s narration, in particular the implications and importance of ‘Umar’s Arabic literacy and the place of his autobiography in the canon of African American literature.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the very fact that he wrote at all—and that he wrote in Arabic—is remarkable, particularly since this autobiography is of an enslaved African who was never freed. As Allan Austin, Ala Alryyes, Sylviane Diouf, Ghada Osman and Camille Forbes, and Richard Brent Turner, point out, this Arabic literacy distinguishes ‘Umar’s narrative from other slave autobiographies, and for this reason deserves special attention.<sup>36</sup> Expanding on what Alryyes, Osman and Forbes have termed the subversive subtext of the autobiography, especially as evoked in ‘Umar’s Qur’ānic citations, I consider the visual and aural complexities of ‘Umar’s holograph manuscript and suggest that his manuscript requires a reading practice that accounts for the surface of the text. While I build on Alryyes’s compelling reading that “the surface of Omar’s autobiography [appears] as a ‘safe’ pro-

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<sup>34</sup> This pioneering work has been led by Allan Austin (*AMAA*), Sylviane Diouf (*Servants of Allah*), Michael Gomez (*Black Crescent* and *Exchanging our Country Marks*), John Hunwick (“I wish to be Seen”), Paul Lovejoy (“The Central Sudan and the Atlantic Slave Trade”), and Philip Curtin (*Africa Remembered*).

<sup>35</sup> In *The Slave’s Narrative*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Charles T. Davis began this move to situate Arabic slave narratives written in the United States in African American literary studies by including an anonymous review of Thomas Bluett’s memoir on the life of the African Muslim Slave, Ayuba Suleiman Diallo, also known as Job Ben Solomon (5).

<sup>36</sup> See Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles* (129-130); Alryyes, “‘Arabic Work’,” (14); Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Americans Enslaved in the Americas* (141-144); Ghada Osman and Camille Forbes, “Representing the West in the Arabic Language: The Slave Narrative of Omar ibn Said” (182-184); and Richard Brent Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience* (39-40).

slavery story . . . [whereas the autobiography] is replete with concealed utterances,” I argue that the surface of the manuscript reveals as much about ‘Umar’s resistance and his faith as do his “concealed utterances” (Alryyes 17). In this chapter, I combine insights from the Zāhirite tradition and “post-critique” scholars to analyze the visual registers of the manuscript, including ‘Umar’s marginalia. I also attend to the auditory dimension of the manuscript because the surface, according to Marcus and Best, also comprises “the sound of words read aloud” (9). Additionally, the Qur’ānic passages are meant to be read aloud since the Arabic word Qur’ān means “oral recitation,” and comes “from the verb *qara’a*, ‘to read aloud, recite’” (Graham and Kermani 115).

Paying attention to the manuscript as a written document is crucial as it illustrates how ‘Umar’s distinct long strokes of the *Maghribi* script, a calligraphic script developed in North Africa and Spain, conveys Islamic meaning, for in the Islamic tradition Arabic letters and symbols carry spiritual meaning. Taking inspiration from the manuscript as a holograph—“a . . . document written wholly by the person in whose name it appears” (*OED* “holograph”)—and the place of Allah in ‘Umar’s autobiography, I draw on *Allahgraphy* as a hermeneutical practice that is entwined with Islamic studies. Despite his enslavement and despite being compelled to proselytize on behalf of his Christian “benefactors,” the manuscript conveys an Islamic sensibility that is evident in the first line of the manuscript.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Despite my focus on ‘Umar’s Islamic faith, Austin indicates that ‘Umar is recorded as converting to Christianity in 1821. However, recent scholarship, Austin adds, has “examined [‘Umar] as a closet Muslim, religiously conservative as his people, the Fulbe . . .” (*Transatlantic Stories* 129). This chapter is not concerned with proving or refuting ‘Umar’s adherence to a specific faith. I acknowledge that ‘Umar likely held conflicting and competing worldviews without minimizing his beliefs. What this chapter is concerned

While ‘Umar’s narrative is a written inscription, I invoke the term Allahgraphy instead of Qur’ānography (after all, the Qur’ān is believed to be the inscribed word of God) because of the centrality of *Allah* in the manuscript—indeed, the word *Allah* is repeated approximately eighteen times. Furthermore, the written form of Allahgraphy/اللهgraphy captures the visual and aural registers of the term. I use this term for two reasons. First, a textual reading of Qur’ānic scripture does not fully explain the visual and auditory components of ‘Umar’s autobiography. Second, an Allahgraphic, rather than a Qur’ānographic, reading suggests that ‘Umar does not merely echo the Qur’ānic scripture, but actively uses scripture to illuminate his life experiences and exile in the United States.

## Navigating the Surface

. . . I shall use great plainness of speech—believing that truth can never conduce to mischief, and is best discovered by plain words. I shall assume, as self-evident truths, that the liberty of a people is the gift of God and nature . . . That by the name of slave, we understand a man who can neither dispose of his person or goods, but enjoys all at the will of his master: —That no man can have a right over others, unless it be by them granted to him . . . That the creature having nothing, and being nothing but what the Creator makes him, must owe all to him, and nothing to any one from whom he has received nothing.

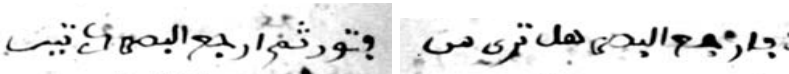
---William Lloyd Garrison, “Proposal”

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with, however, is the document itself and the story it tells. This story, moreover, is patently framed by Qur’ānic scripture.

When it comes to decrying the institution of slavery, William Lloyd Garrison opts for plain, transparent language. In his proposal for the abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*, Garrison offered a critique of enslavement that would be echoed in ‘Umar’s manuscript approximately a year later. Both ‘Umar and Garrison contend that humans can only submit to God. ‘Umar pronounces this edict, as critics have noted,<sup>38</sup> in his decision to quote *Surah al-Mulk* or “The Sovereignty.” This Qur’ānic chapter recognizes God, and not any human, as the supreme sovereign. Although ‘Umar and Garrison offer similar refutations of slavery, I want to consider ‘Umar’s insights in an Islamic context as distinct from Garrison’s invocation of Christian morality.

While *Surah al-Mulk* does not focus on emancipation, it asks readers to attend to the manifest and apparent in order to comprehend Allah’s sovereignty. One of the verses that ‘Umar cites implores readers to “Turn up your eyes: can you detect a single crack? Then look once more and yet again” (51).


  
 .(50)

Instead of looking to secret or hidden meanings, these verses ask readers to look to meaning that should be immediately apprehensible, even if easy to miss. Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Purloined Letter,” as Marcus and Best note, is instructive here as it teaches us that “what lies in plain sight is worthy of attention but often eludes observation” (18). Taking cue from this Qur’ānic verse that asks us to attune ourselves to the phenomenal

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<sup>38</sup> For more on ‘Umar’s decision to quote *Surah al Mulk*, see Alryyes, “‘Arabic Work’,” 19; Curtis, *Muslims in America*, 23; and Osman and Forbes, “Representing the West,” 187.

and manifest, I look to the surface of ‘Umar’s manuscript that reflects a deep spirituality and offers a visible critique of his enslavement.

Situating ‘Umar’s autobiography in an Islamic tradition discloses that ‘Umar both retains and upends Islamic and Arabic autobiographical conventions. The earliest extensive autobiographical text in the Islamic world belongs to the ninth-century Islamic mystic Ḥakīm Tirmidhī (d. 898) in his book *Kitāb Khatam al-Awliyā’* (*The Book of the Seal of Sanctity*). Influenced by Prophet Muhammad’s biography, known as *sīra*, Tirmidhī narrates his theory of *wilayā*, friendship with God, through dream sequences in which Muhammad guides him. ‘Umar’s narrative can be said to fall within the tradition of Islamic autobiographies as it deploys some of the recognizable classifications of Arabic and Islamic autobiographies (Alryyes 26). For example, ‘Umar draws on Islamic inscriptions by quoting the Qur’ān, and he lists the names of his Muslim teachers: Sheikh Mohammad Said, his brother, Sheikh Suleiman Kimba, and Sheikh Jebril Abdal (61). He also departs from other classical conventions, such as by omitting a dream narrative and by not including his own poetry.<sup>39</sup> Instead, he focuses on his life in the United States. In this way, we can consider ‘Umar’s narrative as a Muslim-American autobiography. It is American because it details his enslavement in the American south, and Islamic because it adheres to Islamic conventions. In effect, as Alryyes has maintained, ‘Umar’s *Life* rests on incorporating his American experience in a longer tradition of Islamic writing, and not

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<sup>39</sup> For more on autobiographical conventions in Arabic and Islamic writing, see Dwight Reynolds *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition*, 94.

in the lineage of African American slave narratives that expound on triumphant literacy and racial uplift (Alryyes 36-37).<sup>40</sup>

Nonetheless, scholars of African American slave narratives, like John Ernest, Teresa Goddu, and Eric Gardener, have “complicate[d] the slave narrative’s standardization” (Goddu 150). In nuancing this genre, these critics challenge James Olney’s emphasis on the “overwhelming *sameness*” of slave narratives (Goddu 150).<sup>41</sup> To account for the diversity and complexity of African American slave narratives, Goddu considers slave narratives as material objects.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, in a special issue of *MELUS*, guest editors Joycelyn Moody and Howard Rambsy II call on black literary and cultural studies scholars to attend to black print cultures.<sup>43</sup> My chapter takes up this call through a focused analysis on the materiality of ‘Umar’s narrative, specifically his handwriting and the symbols he incorporated into his manuscript. It is crucial to read ‘Umar’s holograph especially when these symbols are absent from the English translations of his narrative.

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<sup>40</sup> Although in his introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative*, John Ernest questions this set of generic conventions— such as a preface written by a white amanuensis or “an engraved portrait” or the theme of literacy (Olney 152, Ernest 6).

<sup>41</sup> In *Chaotic Justice*, John Ernest elucidates that James Olney’s account of slave narratives fails to consider “the geographical diversity of the accounts . . . the local contexts . . . the multiplicity of authors and voices that sometimes commingle in a single text . . . the publication of successive, overlapping, or contradictory versions of the same life story . . .” (80).

<sup>42</sup> See Teresa Goddu’s “The Slave Narrative as Material Text” and Eric Gardener’s “Slave Narratives and Archival Research.” In his essay, Gardener calls on critics to analyze slave narratives within the framework of textual studies.

<sup>43</sup> Moody and Rambsy II

define *black print culture* and *African American print culture* as descriptors of a broad, diverse range of transactions and products concerning the contributions of black people across the range of proficiencies and expertise needed for the composition, illustration, publishing, printing, binding, typesetting, pricing, distribution, circulation, promotion, consumption, and reception of texts—and *black print culture studies* refers to primarily academic scholarship devoted to these matters. (2)

‘Umar’s text, then, must be read both within the context of the black American literary tradition, and is therefore part of the lineage of African American slave narratives, and within the broader context of the Muslim Atlantic.

‘Umar’s confession of faith materializes through the art of writing: the Arabic letters, diacritical markers, and Qur’ānic inscriptions assume distinct significance for the Muslim reciter or a reciter invested in the echolalia of the Qur’ān. My reading of ‘Umar’s holograph also takes inspiration from Ronald A. Judy’s analysis of the *taṣhīf*, linguistic anomalies, of Bilali Muhammad’s nineteenth-century African Arabic manuscript, known as *The Ben Ali Diary*. In his important study, *(Dis)forming the American Canon*, Judy argues that Bilali’s manuscript rejects Enlightenment paradigms of subjectivity and thereby “refuses to be comprehended by Western literary criticism’s unadulterated paradigms” (277). In a similar, albeit less radical, manner, ‘Umar’s text is marked by heterography. But rather than defying signification or rejecting Enlightenment paradigms, ‘Umar’s holograph manuscript extends discussions on the disunity of the “I” and calls for a unique literary format with a literary sensibility extracted from Islamic studies.

Through an Allahgraphic reading I account for the visual shape of the Arabic script and the vital nature of ‘Umar’s faith as everyday resistance (inner *jihād*). To do so, I offer a close reading of varied Islamic techniques, specifically of three primary rhetorical and literary techniques or elements that I identify as central features of the Qur’ān: (i) *tajwīd*, the art of Qur’ānic recitation or cantillation; (ii) *dhikr* (ذکر) or the remembrance of God which also manifests as a meditation on walking and holy movements; and (iii) diacritical markers, *harakat* or “movements” (markers that correspond to vowels and indicate the correct pronunciation of words). Among the rules



of *tajwīd* for *Surah Al-Mulk* are the techniques of *waqf lazim* (وقف لازم), obligatory stops, and *al-waslu awla* (الوصل أولى), continuous recitation. I use the phrase holy movements because ‘Umar’s incantation of walking evokes the Hajj, a pilgrimage that is the duty of devout Muslims. But in placing walking in the context of Hajj and slavery, it becomes emblematic of transnational crossings.

The crossings are metaphorical. At the same time, they are visually rendered through recurring symbols. These symbols elucidate the visual complexity of ‘Umar’s holograph and enunciate a decentered self against a structure of oppression that demands his subjugation. However, I do not mean to suggest that ‘Umar’s obscured semantics and markers are necessarily intentional; they may, indeed, exceed authorial intention. Rather, I offer a formalist analysis by focusing on the aesthetics of the manuscript that gives way to epistemological and political concerns. The visual symbols that I focus on resemble the Arabic diacritical markers of *fathatain or kasratain*, *sukun*, and *dammatain*, symbols that mark spaces of opposition in the manuscript. These marks are also present in ‘Umar’s other extant manuscripts, as was the case in his earliest manuscript that he produced in 1819. ‘Umar’s diacritical inflections provide us with telling clues about the role of Islamic faith in sustaining his spirit in the face of slavery and, more generally, the presence of Islamic rhetorical conventions in American works. Read in the context of ‘Umar’s enslavement, these techniques amplify the tenaciousness of his faith. Given that ‘Umar never gained manumission, this faith lasts a lifetime.

By deploying Islamic modes of knowledge to analyze ‘Umar’s manuscript, I will show that the act of writing and the seemingly esoteric markers that ‘Umar includes offer a model of subversion that comes by way of submission to Allah.

## *Tajwīd* and Diacritics

Because of ‘Umar’s reliance on Qur’ānic passages, the narrative requires that we both read what is written and listen to how it is meant to be recited. In other words, we need to pay special attention to the document’s textual pauses. Just as the Qur’ān, according to the ethnomusicologist Kristina Nelson, “is not the Qur’ān unless it is heard” (xiv), the verses ‘Umar cites in his narrative are not limited to their textual inscription. Since the Qur’ān consists of marginal markings that indicate how a reader should control his/her breath—that is, whether to pause or make a mandatory stop—we can listen to the recitative possibilities of ‘Umar’s narrative. The autobiography captures in writing the sense of spoken prayer, with its invocations of praise and its pauses for breath.

‘Umar’s first mandatory stop (*waqf lazim*), where a reciter must pause on a certain word, falls on the word *sin* in the following phrase: “Thus shall they confess their sin. Far from God’s mercy are the heirs of the Fire,”

“[sic]فاعترفوا بذنبيهم فسحقا لأصحاب الشيعير” (52, 53). We understand that ‘Umar’s owners are implicated in this narrative, and so, this pause may reflect a contemplation of his and his owners’ sin. The next obligatory stop occurs in “Whether you speak in secret or aloud, He knows your innermost thoughts,” “وأسرو قولكم واجهرو [sic] أنه عليم بذات الصدور” (52, 53). In this verse, the pause falls on “knows.” These two pauses—one on “sin” and one on “knowing”—introduce the theme of divine knowledge, in this instance manifest as obscurity. I want to turn briefly to the eleventh-century Andalusian advocate of the Zāhiri school of interpretation, Ibn Ḥazm, to suggest that surface reading does not empty or deflate the spiritual significance of words. In his literalist reading of the nature of divine knowledge, Ibn Ḥazm interpreted the phrase “knowledge about Him” from *Surah Al-*

*Baqarah*, or “The Cow” (verse 255),<sup>44</sup> to mean that “man can know about and comprehend God’s nature only as much as God Himself permits for their comprehension” (qtd. in Goldziher 116). The unknowable, then, remains a critical aspect of reading God’s words and, therefore, an exoteric or *zāhirī* interpretation encourages *hayrah* or puzzlement in the reader or listener. Consequently, the pauses, simultaneously open and close off the narrative by suggesting that true knowledge is transparent only to the divine and to the faithful, that is, ‘Umar’s Muslim readers (rather than the other audiences who may have read his narrative). Accordingly, in the realm of scriptural reading the gaps in breath disentangle the divide between inner and outer life for the devout Muslim. These echoes are notable because the manuscript evinces a stubborn adherence to Muslim faith. The musicality of Umar’s narrative is also consonant with what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., calls “the talking book” trope. According to Gates, this trope is a recurring theme in slave narratives and manifests as “voice in the text” (142). Although voice is central to ‘Umar’s document, it differs from the talking book trope because the latter is concerned with “tension between the black vernacular and the literate white text . . .” (Gates 143), whereas the orality of ‘Umar’s manuscript discloses Muslim autonomy rather than racial tension.

The Qur’ān’s injunction to recite in “measured rhythmic tones” illuminates the centrality of *tajwīd*, or the rules of correctly rendering the Qur’ān. The rules of *tajwīd*,

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<sup>44</sup> Although Goldziher indicates that Ibn Ḥazm is responding to verse 256, it is, in fact, verse 255 of *Surah al-Baqarah*. Here is the full verse:

Allah, there is no god except He, the Living, the Everlasting. Neither dozing, nor sleep overtakes Him. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. Who is he that shall intercede with Him except by his permission! He knows what will be before their hands and what was behind them, and they do not comprehend anything of His knowledge except what He willed. His Seat embraces the heavens and the earth, and the preserving of them does not weary Him. He is the High, the Great. (Translated by Hasan Qaribullah in “Compared Translations”)

with which ‘Umar would have been familiar, require a melodious declamation of the Qur’ān. Kristina Nelson reminds us that the “*tajwīd* preserves the nature of a revelation whose meaning is expressed as much by its sound as by a comprehensive set of regulations which govern many of the parameters of the sound production” (14). Just as W.E.B Du Bois begins each chapter of his landmark study *The Souls of Black Folk* with a musical notation of a “sorrow song,” which emphasizes the weaving of the musical and discursive, the Qur’ānic chapter at the beginning of the narrative operates as an extended “musical” epigraph as it should be read with its own unique notations.

An Allahgraphic analysis also entails attending to recitation in continuity, that is, to the Islamic technique of *sall*. The intra-linear marking, *sall*, صل, an abbreviation of *al-waslu awla*, or to recite in continuity or without stopping, enables us to hear the sustaining of breath that emphasizes the relations between the words. The first *sall* marking unravels how this narrative strives against enslavement such as in the phrase: “arrayed one above the other. You will not see,” “طباقا ما ترى” (50-51). On the one hand, these layers refer to the seven heavens, the place where the real Qur’ān is thought to reside, and, on the other hand, to the narrative ‘Umar is constructing where his faith may seem either submerged or on the surface of the holograph. Even though he offers us a temperate, even placating, depiction of his state, the rest of the *sall* markings denote anger, rage, and a desire for divine justice and punishment. The following are some of the phrases to be connected or assimilated, or, more precisely, read in one breath: “devils with. We have prepared” “للشيطين [sic] واعطنا” (50-51); “scourge of hell,” “[sic] وبيئس” (50-51); “rage. And every time,” “الغيط كلما” (52-53); “His provisions. To him,” “رزقه [و] اليه” (52-53); “a sandy whirlwind. You shall before long know,” “حاصبا فستعلمون”

(54-55); and “hearts. You are seldom,” “والافئدة قليلا” (54-55). The non-stop of ‘Umar’s breathlessness moves from rage to a sandy whirlwind and provides insight on his condition of enslavement and the emotional range of the manuscript. Contained in the lines and in the junctures of breathlessness is a refusal of the master-slave dialectic, but a dialectic that is, again, religiously, rather than racially, coded.

‘Umar’s ability to recite Qur’ānic verses almost perfectly nearly twenty-four years after being captured, attests to the sustained survival of a faith that he maintained through rote memorization, and through his correspondence with Lamine Kebe, an African Muslim originally from Futa Jallon who had gained manumission in 1835. To foreground orality is to make the emotional states present in the document audible by exploring the shift in tone indicated by the Qur’ān’s marginal markings. It is through these shifts that we can detect expressions of lamentation, anger, and oscillation between hopefulness and hopelessness. A notational reading of the Qur’ānic verses merges the whisper and the shout, stillness and movement, secrecy and revelation, and disentangles, however fleetingly, the rhythms of inner and outer life. In short, the ciphers summon Allah to witness the author’s inner and outer turmoil as contained in the manuscript.








The manuscript draws on yet another technique, repetition. Since *Al-Mulk*, the title of the Qur’ānic chapter that ‘Umar cites, is also one of the 99 names of Allah, the verses, then, have an incantatory appeal and dhikr quality, as they constitute the repetition of God’s name. The Muslim theologian Manzooruddin Ahmed has noted that in the Qur’ān the word *Mulk*, dominion or ownership “has been exclusively used for God” (33). Beyond repetitions in the Qur’ānic citations, ‘Umar’s Arabic manuscript visually manipulates certain refrains to suggest changes in tone. For example, the phrase “do you

have” is not only repeated four times, but also the fourth refrain is elongated, moving

from , , to , as if to

suggest that any form of possession is incomparable to the essence of Allah who has ultimate *mulk* or ownership (70). These shifts, however minor, indicate that ‘Umar’s slave narrative is also a treatise against his enslavement in the United States. Whether this deviance in the refrains arises from an arbitrary slip of the ink or a conscious effort, it represents a maneuver, a gesture that suggests the rise of ‘Umar’s voice, emphasizing his frustration with the concept of possession. And, perhaps with each repetition, or each movement, the notion of possession, “to have,” loses meaning, and, like the following symbols that ‘Umar includes on almost every page of the manuscript except for four (62, 66, 74, and 76), becomes detached from the text. These markers, while seemingly innocuous, although present at the surface of the manuscript, draw attention to the art or aesthetics of Islamic writing.

The visual nature of ‘Umar’s writing needs to be accounted for to read the literal surface of the manuscript and to understand it as a composition of signs that defers the self to Allah. According to Elliot Wolfson, “[Kabbalists and Sufis] insist that the way beyond letters (scripted and/or voiced) is by way of letters, visual-auditory signs, semiotic ciphers at once visible and audible—seen as heard, heard as seen—signs that communicate the incommunicable not through an equational model of symbolic logic but through an implicational model of poetic allusion” (206). Similarly, Annemarie Schimmel draws attention to the prominence of Arabic letters in Islam, positing that “the highest revelation of God who revealed Himself once through Quranic word is possible not through a picture, but through the letter” (230). ‘Umar gestures to the power of the

letter through his careful reproduction of Allah’s words. Just as Bilali Muhammad’s manuscript, according to Ronald Judy, offers “discursive resistance,” so too does ‘Umar’s holograph (273). That is, when slavery makes the “I” intangible for African slaves, ‘Umar responds to this obfuscation by incorporating symbols, such as the following , as if to suggest, and to circumvent, the insufficiency of language for expression. These symbols are neither invisible nor latent. I propose to read the following symbols , which also appear in ‘Umar’s other extant manuscripts, as diacritics. Even though ‘Umar’s Arabic script often omits such diacritics, these markers are central to *tajwīd*, or the rules of reciting the Qur’ān, with which ‘Umar would have been familiar. These two symbols can be read as *sukun*  (literally meaning stillness or quiescence) and *fathatain*  (which doubles the vowel *fathah* —which means to open—and so I am reading *fathatain* as denoting a double opening). If this vowel  is located below consonants, it is known as *kasratain* (which doubles the vowel *kasra* , a term that denotes breaking; here it can be read as a double breaking). In a sense, the holograph’s double opening articulates an inner brokenness, a fallen spirit.

In turning to these symbols, we discover the ways they intensify the performative components of the verses ‘Umar quotes, such as, “Whether you speak in secret or aloud, He knows your innermost thoughts” (53). While the *sukun* or stillness may negate movement, the double opening reverses and counterbalances the elusive stillness or immobility of the narrative, and the double breaking suggests a defiance of tradition and expands approaches to self-representation. These markers are unique aspects of ‘Umar’s composition that also work to decentre the “I” of the narrative. Moreover, these markers

found through ‘Umar’s calligraphy also unsettle the erroneous and racist presumption of the ahistoricity, illiteracy, and non-subjectivity of slaves.

With few outlets for resistance, ‘Umar weaved the following symbols



into his narrative, assembling them in a row—



— at the end of his introductory paragraph to the

autobiography (58). Again, ‘Umar frequently repeats these symbols in his extant manuscripts. Although scholarship on this manuscript has disregarded these signs, I suggest that these signs are visible and audible Arabic vowels. Like the *sukun* and *fathatain*, these signs may be read as the vowel *dammah*, which literally means to enfold. Here, the *dammah* is doubled, also known as *dammatain*, which adds an “un” sound at the end of words. While these signs appear as ornamental markers, they also convey an openness that hinges on Qur’ānic scripture and Arabic script, for the ornamental also signifies meaning in the Islamic tradition. For an English reader, these symbols may appear as a succession of the letter “I,” as if ‘Umar is enunciating the “I” to the point of obscuring it. Whether the symbols correspond to a personal pronoun, a diacritical marker, or an ornamental symbol, it is this space of the potentially indeterminate sign that worship is intensified.

Even though the status of the sacred as exclusive disallows any attribution of non-secular composition, such as musical notation since the Qur’ān represents God’s speech, Kristina Nelson observes that “rules governing pronunciation, timber, and meter have been carefully delineated” in Qur’ānic readings (xix). The “musical recitations” inevitably influence, and even shape, our hearing, such that they expose alternate



readings of ‘Umar’s document. As I outlined earlier, Qur’ānic verses are meant to be read aloud for the text’s full meaning to emerge. The Qur’ānic verses that ‘Umar cited create a continuum of sound by repeating the rhymes of *ir* and *un* throughout the verses— incidentally, the latter rhyme, *un*, is consistent with the *dammatain* sound. The rhymes mimic the sound of ringing, akin to an urgent call. By coalescing the sound of these rhymes, we get the root word رننا (*run*), which means ringing, resounding, sonorous, etc. The two other Qur’ānic chapters that share the same main rhymes as “*Al Mulk*” are “*Luqman*” and “*Al-Ankabut*” (“The Spider”). Significantly, both chapters begin with the ambiguous three-syllable sequence “Alif, Lam, Mim,” highlighting the oral tradition and vocal aspects of reciting the Qur’ān. The meaning of these three letters is unknown, but they are largely understood “as allusions to the Qur’ān or the Heavenly book,” even when the specificity of these letters escapes meaning (Leaman 374). Curiously, Luqman ibn ‘Anqa’ ibn Sadun, also known as Luqman the Wise, was a prominent black figure, believed to have been a Prophet, and is revered in the Qur’ān. For the attuned listener, then, the sounds evoke other black figures from the Qur’ān. Reminiscent of ‘Umar’s act of picking up coal to inscribe the walls with what was seen as appeals for freedom, these symbols, like the lost inscriptions, are potentially semantically empty. Nevertheless, they gained recognition and perhaps meaning for ‘Umar.

Although ‘Umar’s markers have been overlooked by critics largely due to their obscurity, a closer examination suggests that they convey an embodied resistance to enslavement. This resistance, inextricably entwined with Islamic scripture, requires readers to navigate the text by reading it aloud. ‘Umar’s resistance through scripture can also be seen in ‘Umar’s earliest extant manuscript written in 1819. As the historian John

Hunwick observes in his reading of ‘Umar’s earliest text, “the religo-magical efficacy of the words themselves was significant,” even if the audience was unequipped to read them (78). To oppose his radical displacement, ‘Umar wrote in a manner that attested to his faith by quoting Qur’ānic scripture, which he had used to make a case for his repatriation. As noted in the introduction to this dissertation, in this earlier manuscript, ‘Umar articulated the following desire: “Indeed, I wish to be seen in our land called Āfrikā” (73). This desire to return home would take an inward and spiritual significance in his autobiography, as his old age and frailty made the idea of travel unbearable.

While the authors of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American slave narratives contested their oppression, and strove for freedom by assuming an autonomous and liberated consciousness, ‘Umar subordinates the self to Allah.<sup>45</sup> That is, rather than reveal an autonomous subjectivity, Umar’s African Arabic slave narrative decentres the self visually via symbols or markers embedded within the narrative that signal ‘Umar’s illegibility. With this subordination of the self and the material remnants of otherness in mind, I suggest that the concept of Allahgraphy as an interpretive method also re-orient critical notions of subjectivity in its substitution of the auto (*nafs*) and bio (*hayat*) in autobiography with *Allah*. That is, ‘Umar’s self-writing, his autobiography, in Arabic and through Qur’ānic inscriptions, reverses the effacement of self under enslavement by, paradoxically, submitting the self to divine ownership. Accordingly, not only do we need to understand Islam in order to read the document, but an understanding of Islam will

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<sup>45</sup> See Osman and Forbes’s insightful essay “Representing the West,” which addresses the ways ‘Umar’s narrative complicates Robert Stepto’s claim that the “pre-generic” myth for African Americans is “the quest for freedom and literacy” (182-194).

also help us to explore the pivotal role Islam played in 'Umar's struggle with the notion of selfhood in relationship to slavery.

The visual aesthetics of the manuscript immersed in Qur'ānic scripture suggest a textual-jihād that contributed to 'Umar's continued devotion to Allah. Another clue to the import of textual jihād is found in the much-reproduced portrait of 'Umar (fig. 2). As Shawn Michelle Smith and other scholars of visual culture have argued in *Pictures and Progress*, the self-portraits that illustrate slave autobiographies are not merely adornments, but also compelling evidence of autonomous self-possession. Significantly, in this daguerreotype of 'Umar, taken circa 1850, 'Umar wears a distinctive *taqiyah* or kufi cap, a rounded cap worn by Muslims, which signals his religion. Even more importantly, the *taqiyah* marks a resistance to the erasure of identity. These symbols, whether on 'Umar's body or inscribed on his manuscript, denote an Islamic faith and create spaces of self-fashioning and political negotiation of slave subjectification. While formerly enslaved subjects of means turned to photography as an important way of documenting and projecting the image of a reclaimed and freed self in opposition to their previous captured status, 'Umar's text, strained by the author's continued slave status, marks movement textually as well as visually.



**Figure 2: Portrait of ‘Umar ibn Sayyid, from The DeRosset Papers, P-214. Courtesy of Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.<sup>46</sup>**

<sup>46</sup> This ambrotype includes a handwritten biographical portrait of ‘Umar on the back, signed by A.M. Waddell.

## Holy Movements: ‘Umar’s Transnational Walking

If ‘Umar harnesses the visual-auditory sign to articulate his communication with Allah where he temporarily gives up the self, he moves beyond the personal to the transnational through the concept of walking. In this section, I turn to ‘Umar’s dhikr-like incantation on walking as an aurally punctuated means of capturing transnational (Islamic) movements. Walking, I suggest, shares elements with *tajwīd* and diacritical markers by conjuring stops, pauses, and continuity. When situated in an Islamic context it becomes suggestive of Hajj, specifically the ritual of *tawāf*, which consists of circling the holy *Ka’ba* in Mecca seven times in a counterclockwise direction.<sup>47</sup> In this respect, walking moves the reader’s focus from the textual body to the enslaved body, which emphasizes the lived experience of a body in motion. It is not surprising, then, that “walk” appears among ‘Umar’s most frequently used verbs. The frequency of “مشية” or walk, repeated sixteen times in his Arabic manuscript, stands to externalize ‘Umar’s internal state and, as we shall see, to globalize his inner strivings. Since a critical aspect of being a Muslim involves bodily practices, the body for the pious Muslim can transform into an embodiment of the Qur’ān; Prophet Mohammed himself was referred to as the “Walking Qur’ān.”

Many pivotal moments in ‘Umar’s life involve walking: his enslavement, “[the army] took me, and walked me to the big Sea” (61); his escape from his first owner, “I

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<sup>47</sup> While in *Wanderlust* cultural historian Rebecca Solnit offers an insightful study on the complex and discursive measures of walking, her perspective, as she admits, is a “First World, after-the-industrial-revolution history” (267); my approach departs from hers in terms of historical and religious context—slavery in the United States and the aural and sacred resonances of the walks of enslaved African Muslims.

walked to a place called Faydel” (63); his involvement in a jihādīst movement in Futa Toro before captivity, “I used to [walk to] the Jihād” (56); his desire to perform pilgrimage in Mecca and Medina, “I used to walk to Mecca and Medinah” (69); his reminder that “I used to walk to the mosque [*masjid*] before dawn, and to wash my face, head, hands, feet” (67). It follows that each pace constitutes a different trace. For instance, although Alryyes translates “نيمشي إلى الجهاد” to “I used to join the Jihād,” ‘Umar uses the word walk rather than join; jihād is here transformed into a strut. While ‘Umar’s preference for the verb “to walk” likely arises from his limited Arabic diction, it also helps to preserve his image as a calm, reverent, and composed figure that he seems keen to project in his manuscript. Furthermore, ‘Umar could have borrowed from the incendiary language of the Qur’ānic passage he quotes to describe his jihādīst involvement, but that would have contradicted his stately African pose by undermining his dignified demeanor. Furthermore, ‘Umar’s self-presentation as an elderly, frail, and honourable man likely prevents him from fully disclosing the horrors of slavery and to discuss the brutality of the Middle Passage.

Nonetheless walking is doubly charged. While it signifies literal walking, it also serves as a trope emblematic of transitional and transatlantic crossings. In captivity, ‘Umar walks along a path of shared footprints, the spectre of others who were captured before him. He writes, “[the army] took me, and walked me to the big Sea, and sold me into the hands of a Christian Man who bought me and walked me to the big ship in the big Sea” (61). Enslavement sometimes occurred suddenly while the victim was innocently walking and the slaver would force kidnapped victims to walk to European coastal forts, though ‘Umar was most likely kidnapped while in battle. As Christian

Oldendorp, a Moravian missionary in the Danish West Indies, demonstrated in his interviews of victims of the slave trade, captivity occurred between paces. One of his interviewees, a man enslaved in the Caribbean, noted that, “Amina [Elmina] negroes were walking about and robbing humans. . . . They would put gags into their mouths, so that they would not be able to scream” (483). As this testimony reveals, walking leads to spatial transformation as well as spatial deformation as, in this case, kidnapped Ghanaians were forced to ships and into tiny compartments. Somewhat unexpectedly, ‘Umar offers only a subtle reference to the Middle Passage, merely stating “[w]e [walked] in the big Sea for a month and a half until we came to a place called Charleston” (63). By using “walked” to denote “sailed” when referring to the Middle Passage, ‘Umar further presents walking as a mode of experience that carries the history of enslaved others. ‘Umar’s silence, bred by political and social barriers, is deceptive. Rather than eliding the violence of the passage, silence calls attention to the unrecorded deaths of slaves. Indeed, the silence or meditative pause is akin to a *waqf lazim* (وقف لازم), an obligatory stop or pause, that temporarily interrupts ‘Umar’s walking. That is, his silence—a break from sound that is as powerful as the Qur’ānic prayers that appears elsewhere in his narrative—invites us to think of the tragic and horrific events of transatlantic crossings.

Walking also embodies new valences; the new steps, however, do not erase the trace of the nightmarish crossing. Each step returns to that which cannot be recovered—the homeland, freedom, and the geography of loss. The spacing between ‘Umar’s steps undergo a modulation, moving from freedom to sudden enslavement to transcendence. Despite ‘Umar’s silence looming on the Middle Passage, by listening to ‘Umar’s

footsteps we can discern how he gestures to the traumatic experience, and his transformation of the experience through holy movements. Because walking in an Islamic frame is reminiscent of Hajj,<sup>48</sup> the invocation of this activity operates on multiple levels, conveying the slave's terrifying history, rebellious spirit, and the silent and solitary trail of worship. If we regard walking as a trope, 'Umar performs a form of the Islamic *tawāf*. Since 'Umar's reference to the Hajj evokes a transnational space for the Muslim *umma* (community of believers), where Muslims identify with fellow Muslims across the globe, the narrative's holy movements gesture toward a religious imagination that links 'Umar with other Muslims. As mentioned earlier, the narrative's introduction exposes the solidarity and interconnections forged among slaves as it names 'Umar's correspondence with the African Muslim Lamine Kebe. The communication between 'Umar and Lamine, as well as a letter 'Umar received from Yang, a Muslim in Canton, China, replicate the community of faith—a community comprising different races, languages, nationalities, and sects—that the Muslim encounters during Hajj.

What makes 'Umar's slave autobiography so significant and what differentiates it from other autobiographies is not only that he is “already literate and learned” as Osman and Forbes point out (191), but also that the autobiography calls upon other literate Muslim slaves to recite and intensify the manuscript's signs of resistance. The recitation of the verses further animates 'Umar's agency, as *tajwīd* is recognized as “potentially an actualization of the revelatory act itself, and thus how the Qur'ān is vocally rendered not

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<sup>48</sup> Although during the nineteenth century a number of Muslims from Senegal did go on pilgrimages to Mecca, 'Umar's claim cannot be verified, but his assertion is still significant as it signifies his desire to complete this religious obligation (Austin, *Transatlantic Stories* 133).



only matters, but matters ultimately” (William and Kermani 118). Qur’ānic recitations and chants, like the slave spirituals that became precursors to the blues, potentially also contribute to slave endurance and overcoming.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, in the context of the ACS that required ‘Umar’s words to be crafted to suit their aim, ‘Umar ultimately manages to address other African Muslims, as clearly reflected in his correspondence with Lamine Kebe.<sup>50</sup> In another context that speaks to ‘Umar’s wide readership, ‘Umar had received an Arabic letter from Yang in response to an epistle ‘Umar authored that was sent to the Christian missionary Reverend Ball in Canton.<sup>51</sup> As transcribed by Reverend Mathew B. Grier, Yang wrote: “. . . he and I are separated so many thousand miles from each other that we are not able to meet each other, and speak face to face; but we may hope for the returning favors of the true Lord. This will be most fortunate!” (qtd. in Austin, *AMAA* 480). Yang’s letter shows that ‘Umar’s writings cannot be solely mediated by the ACS and offers commentary on the ways their Muslim faith breaches the distance between them and reveals the extent to which ‘Umar’s work travelled.

## Submission to Allah

In this chapter, Instead of interrogating whether ‘Umar “sincerely” adopted Christianity, I have examined how his manuscript inscribes the retention of a different faith, and not an

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<sup>49</sup> See Diouf’s *Servants of Allah* for a discussion on African Islamic traces in the music of the Americas (195-196).

<sup>50</sup> For more on Lamine Kebe and ‘Umar, see Alryyes, “‘Arabic Works’,” 14-15; Austin, *AMAA*, 411, 447-452; Austin, *Transatlantic Stories*, 115–26; and Diouf, *Servants of Allah*, 139.

<sup>51</sup> For more details on the letter sent by Yang, see John W. Blassingame’s *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, 470; and Turner’s *Islam in the African American Experience*, 40.

overt profession of conversion of faith. Nonetheless this expression of faith is on the surface of the text and exists alongside, even as it remains in tension with, overt expressions of Christian conversion. This is a paradox for critics who have long held that conversion is a defining feature of slave narratives. How does 'Umar's autobiography address this tension?

As noted above, and as Alryyes and Austin have shown, a Christian context governed not only the production but also the circulation of 'Umar's manuscripts. The title page of the manuscript names Theodore Dwight, a member of the ACS, which suggests that 'Umar's submission to God is strained by the deployment of his autobiography toward the end of Christian conversion.<sup>52</sup> Most crucially, the title page reveals the centrality of the ACS, a society that sought to expand its proselytizing mission in Africa, in the circulation of the autobiography. That the manuscript was circulated among Christian missionaries speaks to the dominance of biblical scripture in the antebellum period, as can be detected in the autobiography's title page:

Life of 'Omar ben Saeed, called Morro, a Fullah Slave, in Fayetteville, N.C.,  
Owned by Governor Owen. Written by himself in 1831 & sent to Old Paul, or  
Lahmen Kebby, in New York, in 1836, Presented to Theodore Dwight by Paul in  
1836, Translated by Hon. Cotheal, Esq., 1848. (49)

The commissioning and circulation of 'Umar's writing is closely enmeshed with the rhetoric of Christian conversion.

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<sup>52</sup> For more on the role of the ACS and Arabic works by Africans in the New World, see Alryyes, "Arabic Work," 13-15; and Austin, *AMAA*, 42-44, 123-136.

Antislavery discourses often relied on Christian faith to offer a sustained critique of slavery as evident in David Walker's pamphlet *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829) and Nat Turner's slave insurrection in 1831. Both Walker and Turner found their justification for rebellion in Christian discourse. As Cornel West puts it, "[t]he prophetic Christian view [was] unequivocally opposed to slavery" (*Prophesy Delieverance!* 102). West is not alone in addressing the importance of Christian faith in critiquing slavery and for emboldening African American communities. Albert Raboteau's *Slave Religion* (1978) views black Christian worship, particularly the centrality of prayer, as a mode of resistance (290-318). The collection of essays *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord* (1988) analyze the creative adaptations of Christianity among slaves, and Dorothy S. Ruiz's *Amazing Grace* (2004) traces Christianity's role among elderly slave women in sustaining a sense of community. Islam, like Christianity, offered a mode of expression in an era when such expression was forbidden, given that enslaved Africans were not regarded as intelligent enough to have thoughts worthy of expression. Yet, Islam complicated and, at times, even contested, the Christianity that had driven British and American abolitionist movements. 'Umar deploys Arabic to retain his faith while also, as Alryyes maintains, superficially conforming to the Christian narrative that has heavily shaped other slave narratives (26). His Arabic text reminds us of the importance of Islam for him, especially since Arabic is the language of Muslim prayer.

'Umar's submission to Allah provides an alternative, though long forgotten, model of slave consciousness. Indeed, 'Umar's narrative does not recognize the master-slave dialectic solely in terms of a racial struggle as was illustrated in Frederick

Douglass's writings, the quintessential African American slave narrative (Sundquist 124). Instead, 'Umar's manuscript highlights a struggle between Muslim autonomy and Christian hegemony. As Osman and Forbes have shown, chief among 'Umar's strategies is his refusal of Christianity, because he asserts that the Christian tongue interpolated him into slavery (26). As he puts it, "in a Christian language, they sold me" (63). Because 'Umar closely aligns language with religion, the sadness he voices for forgetting his language "as well as the talk of the Maghreb" (59), marks grief for and grievance over his Muslim faith. Alryyes similarly notes that the Christian utterance marks 'Umar's "linguistic alienation" (6), but it also suggests 'Umar's acceptance of his alterity and evokes the remainders of his Muslim faith. Furthermore, the Qur'ānic passages, when considered alongside the markers, reveal details of 'Umar's Muslim identity and cleverly craft a subversive attempt to reject his slave-status.

Nonetheless, 'Umar implicitly critiques the American form of slavery as opposed to the African form—where in the former the struggle for liberation is often lifelong with little chance for integration into society.<sup>53</sup> Of course, there were multiple and differing

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<sup>53</sup> Paul Lovejoy argues that slavery continued to change and develop over time both in Africa and in the Americas. Although in the nineteenth century slavery was tethered to the expansion of global markets, Lovejoy identifies several differences between these slave trades:

1. The Americas depended on the "importation of slaves," and slavers were European (285).
2. "In Africa, slavery evolved from indigenous institutions, and . . . slave owners were also Africans" (285).
3. "In Africa, a "social formation always included . . . [a] regional orientation" (285).
4. "...the Americas were more closely related with the world market" (285).
5. The Americas also relied on race for "social control" (285).

There were also differences in the modes of production; some parts of Africa focused on regional economics, while others were invested in exporting goods (*Transformations in Slavery* 285).

In places like Algeria, where racial stratification existed, many other factors contributed to the enslavement of individuals, such as "kinship relations, gender, language, political alliances (*Ṣaff*), religious affiliation (Muslims, Jews, Christians, polytheists), Sufi association, genealogy (*Shurfā*), age, and . . . economic differences" (Brower 155). Benjamin Brower also adds that "Islamic law's primacy of patrilineal descent ensured that many children of African slave mothers . . . followed their fathers into the ranks of the elite" (155).

systems of slavery in Africa. Moreover, we have to consider the fact that ‘Umar’s father, according to one account, owned seventy slaves (Austin, *Transatlantic Stories* 133).

While American slavery foments an erasure of the self that, for the Muslim slave, simultaneously effaces his religion, African slavery did not recognize an “absolute chasm . . . between slave and slaveholder,” (Diouf 10) though, of course, this was not always so in practice. Sylviane Diouf cites the Muslim jurist Aḥmad Bābā, who disavowed any correlation between race and servitude: “let it be known that infidelity, whether on the part of Christians, Jews, idolaters, Berbers, Arabs, or any other individual notoriously rebellious to Islam, is the only justification for slavery; there is no distinction to be made between miscreants, Sudanese [black] or not” (14). In short, African slavery was not, in theory, predicated on race. If we are to further consider Bābā’s treatise *Mi’rāj al-Ṣu’ūd*, we discover another critique of slavery, one that recognizes the arbitrariness of ownership. Bābā disclosed, “God caused you to own him, and had He wished, He would have caused him to own you” (35). This statement does not provide an overt condemnation of the slave trade. Rather, it asks the enslaver to position himself in the place of the enslaved subject. Nevertheless, the presence and involvement of Muslim slavers in West Africa cast a troubling shadow over the notion that ‘Umar offers a critique of the system of slavery. Instead, ‘Umar critiques Christianity and American slavery. Moreover, the visual-auditory signs enable ‘Umar to craft a Muslim identity that evades a racially divided consciousness or what Du Bois would theorize as “double consciousness” in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Rather than struggling between “two

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unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body,” ‘Umar’s Muslim identity takes precedence (Du Bois 3). Simply put, ‘Umar does not see himself from the eyes of the master.

Reading for ‘Umar’s auditory-visual signs, which requires us to engage in meditative pauses and breathless movements, illuminates ‘Umar’s imagined community of believers. Yet in a slave narrative in which we expect a discussion on racial identity, ‘Umar’s holograph is curiously silent on issues of race. In fact, ‘Umar invokes blackness only twice in his holograph. In the first instance, his reference signifies darkness as a spiritual state: “but when they see it drawing near, the unbelievers’ faces will turn black with gloom, and a voice will say: ‘This is the doom which you have challenged’,” “فلما رعه زلفة السست وجوه الذن كفروا وقل هذا كنتم به تدعون” (56,57). Although Alryyes translates “سيئت وجوه” as “faces will turn black,” translators of the Qur’ān have often avoided the term blackness to evoke spiritual affliction; for example, they have rendered the phrase “سيئت وجوه” as “the faces of the unbelievers will be vexed” (Arberry, trans.) or “grieved will be the faces of the unbelievers” (Ali, trans.). In fact, at no point in the holograph manuscript does ‘Umar use the Arabic word for blackness “*aswad*.” In his second reference to blackness, ‘Umar narrates that a young man that caught him praying in a house referred to him as “Sudanese” (63). As Alryyes details in a footnote, “[i]t was, and is, common to refer to black people in Arabic as ‘Sudanese’ even if they did not hail from the Sudan” (63). However, this “black” metaphor is uttered not by ‘Umar, but by a white slave owner. Rather than challenging the invisibility and dehumanization to which black life was subjected, ‘Umar seems to evade discussions or references to his own blackness. That is, although ‘Umar draws on an alternative language and discourse to address his

enslavement, he does not reflect on blackness. Instead, he distances himself from racial representation.

Given the Christian context that called forth this Islamic profession of faith, the conclusion of the narrative is especially unusual: ‘Umar ends his autobiography with a note of thanks to his owners. At first glance, this expression of gratitude seems to undermine the subtle resistances of the rest of the narrative. ‘Umar writes, “I continue in the hands of Jim Owen who does not beat me, nor calls me bad names, nor subjects me to hunger, nakedness, or hard work. . . . During the last twenty years I have not seen any harm at the hands of Jim Owen” (79). However, if we consider ‘Umar’s extended epigraph, the nature of this thanks—whether or not it is genuine, and regardless of the extent to which it indicates submission—is uncertain. Indeed, the thanks of the ending is qualified by the tone of the beginning, which is remarkably different. In the beginning ‘Umar emphatically declares his submission to God, and no one else, and reserves *Mulk* or ownership to God. Given this beginning, the thanks of the ending is not necessarily a submission to slavery. Considering that the two other “hands” that ‘Umar references in the narrative belong to his enslaver and the hands of his second master, the “weak, small, evil man called Johnson” (63), ‘Umar makes clear that Owen’s hands, despite clothing and feeding him, extend the economy of exchange that cemented his unjust fate.

‘Umar’s remarkable narrative is part of a number of African-Arabic manuscripts composed in the United States and the Americas in which critics are starting to recognize for the pivotal role played by Muslim spirituality for the construction of a transnational

slave community.<sup>54</sup> This chapter expands on this important critical work by showing the importance of form, specifically of Arabic script and Islamic scripture, in opening the narrative to an incessant calling of readers. At the same time, this call that transcends national borders gestures toward an ambivalence in inhabiting the black “I,” especially as ‘Umar distances himself from any discussion of blackness. Nonetheless, ‘Umar’s faith persists, despite his failed flight from enslavement, as evident in the aural and visual dimension of his *Maghribi* script. More broadly, this chapter has attempted to show that Islamic hermeneutics has a bearing on American literary works and culture. It remains for us to recognize these expressions and to listen to Islamic echoes that have grown fainter over time. Doing so requires attuning ourselves to the faithful murmurs of the enslaved African Muslim.

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<sup>54</sup> For more on trans-Atlantic slave communities, see Michael Gomez’s *Exchanging our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South*.



## Chapter 2

### Comprehension and the Muslim Slave in Bilali Muhammad's

#### *Diary* and Joel Chandler Harris's Stories

Americans held differing and conflicting views about Islam during the nineteenth century, views that oscillated between fascination and revulsion. *The Land and the Book*, one of the most widely read texts in the U.S. during the nineteenth century, offered a portrait of Islam that would leave a lasting impression. In this book, the Presbyterian Missionary William Thomson, citing the Orientalist William Muir, warned that the “sword of Mahomet and the Coran are the most fatal enemies of civilization, liberty, and truth which the world has yet known” (qtd. in Kidd 56). In contrast to this perspective, key American writers, like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edgar Allan Poe, Lydia Marie Child, and Herman Melville, turned to Islamic ideas, themes, and terms for inspiration.<sup>55</sup> For all the range of Muslim types and Islamic ideas, these writers completely neglected one important figure who played a small but intriguing part in nineteenth-century American culture: the African Muslim slave.

As noted in the introduction, because enslaved African Muslims left behind only a small number of manuscripts, the task of tracing their presence is challenging. This task is all the more difficult because what writings have been preserved or found are

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<sup>55</sup> For other Americans, ideas on Islam and Muslims emerged from Barbary captivity narratives, which were historical and fictional tales that dramatized the experiences of White Americans enslaved by North African privateers.

sometimes hard to read, especially for white slave owners, who were unable to understand Arabic (the language that African Muslim slaves used to write their narratives) and some were themselves illiterate. Even the ethnographers and American colonizationists<sup>56</sup> who could read Arabic found themselves confused by some of these documents whose strange transliteration of West African languages, such as Soninke or Foulah, into Arabic letters occasioned puzzlement.<sup>57</sup> Yet the ethnographers and members of the American Colonization Society who showed an interest in the Arabic manuscripts, were more concerned by the prospect of tapping into this literacy to spread Christianity, specifically to disseminate Arabic bibles in Africa. One of the most enigmatic records left behind is a diary penned by Bilali Muhammad, a document that is fascinating not only because it perplexed critics, but also because Joel Chandler Harris—undeterred by the fact that he did not understand the text—used it as source material for his stories, namely *The Story of Aaron (so Named)*, *The Son of Ben Ali* (1896) and *Aaron in the Wildwoods* (1897).

Even though Bilali was not well known in the nineteenth century and Harris is seldom read today, we nevertheless need to grapple with this material. Harris's stories

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<sup>56</sup> Most prominent among these ethnographers was the diplomat and member of the Ethnological Society, William B. Hodgson.

<sup>57</sup> For example, the enslaved African Muslim, Ibrahima Abd ar-Rahman of Natchez, Mississippi was in the habit of writing the "*Fatiha*," the first chapter of the Qur'ān, and successfully presenting it as the Christian prayer, "The Lord's Prayer" (Austin, *Transatlantic Stories* 73). As we saw in the introduction, 'Umar ibn Sayyid penned a two-page document in 1819 that consisted of a string of quotations from the Qur'ān, poetry verses from a work on Arabic grammar, and a few of his own phrases. In 1831, 'Umar had also penned his own autobiography, commissioned by the American Colonization Society, where he lamented that he has "forgotten much of [his] talk as well as the talk of the Arabs" (61), which is made evident through his irregular spelling. Despite the myriad factors that contributed to the difficulty of reading some of the African-Arabic manuscripts, the one consistent element in most of these manuscripts is the citation of Qur'ānic verses.

and Bilali's slave narrative can shed light on contemporary American constructions of Muslims as illegible outsiders. Returning to Bilali's slave narrative offers us a critical corrective to this longstanding representation of Muslims as outsiders by revealing that Muslims have long been an integral part of America's story<sup>58</sup> and, more importantly, by offering a method to read the purportedly "unreadable" Muslim. This chapter traces the figure of the African Muslim slave through a multilingual consideration of Bilali Muhammad's *The Ben Ali Diary* and its appropriation in the fiction of Joel Chandler Harris's *The Story of Aaron* and its prequel, *Aaron in the Wildwoods*.

Born in Timbo, Guinea, Bilali Muhammad, was captured at the age of fourteen and taken to Nassau, Bahamas, to work as a slave at the Middle Caicos plantation. Ten years later, he was sold to Thomas Spalding of Sapelo Island, Georgia, where he became head driver on the Spalding plantation. Although the date of the manuscript is uncertain, we know that Bilali, shortly before his death in 1859, gifted his manuscript to the Southern writer and Presbyterian minister, Francis Goulding. Goulding shared the document, which became known as *The Ben Ali Diary*, with his friend, Joel Chandler Harris, who was a native of Georgia.<sup>59</sup> The manuscript found a readership beyond Harris after Francis Goulding's son, Benjamin Goulding, donated the manuscript to the Georgia State Library in 1931.

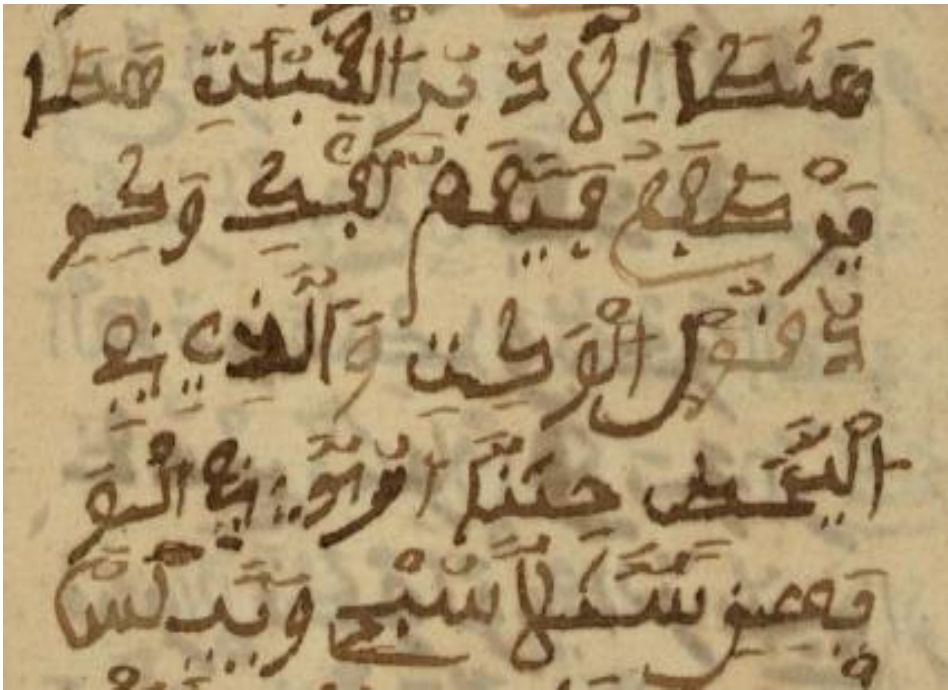
Soon after, the manuscript began to attract numerous scholars and critics, most notably the American linguist Joseph Greenberg, who would begin the long process of

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<sup>58</sup> A point that Precious Rasheeda Muhammad also puts forth in her important work, *Muslims and the Making of America*.

<sup>59</sup> Presently, the University of Georgia houses *The Ben Ali Diary* in its collection in the Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

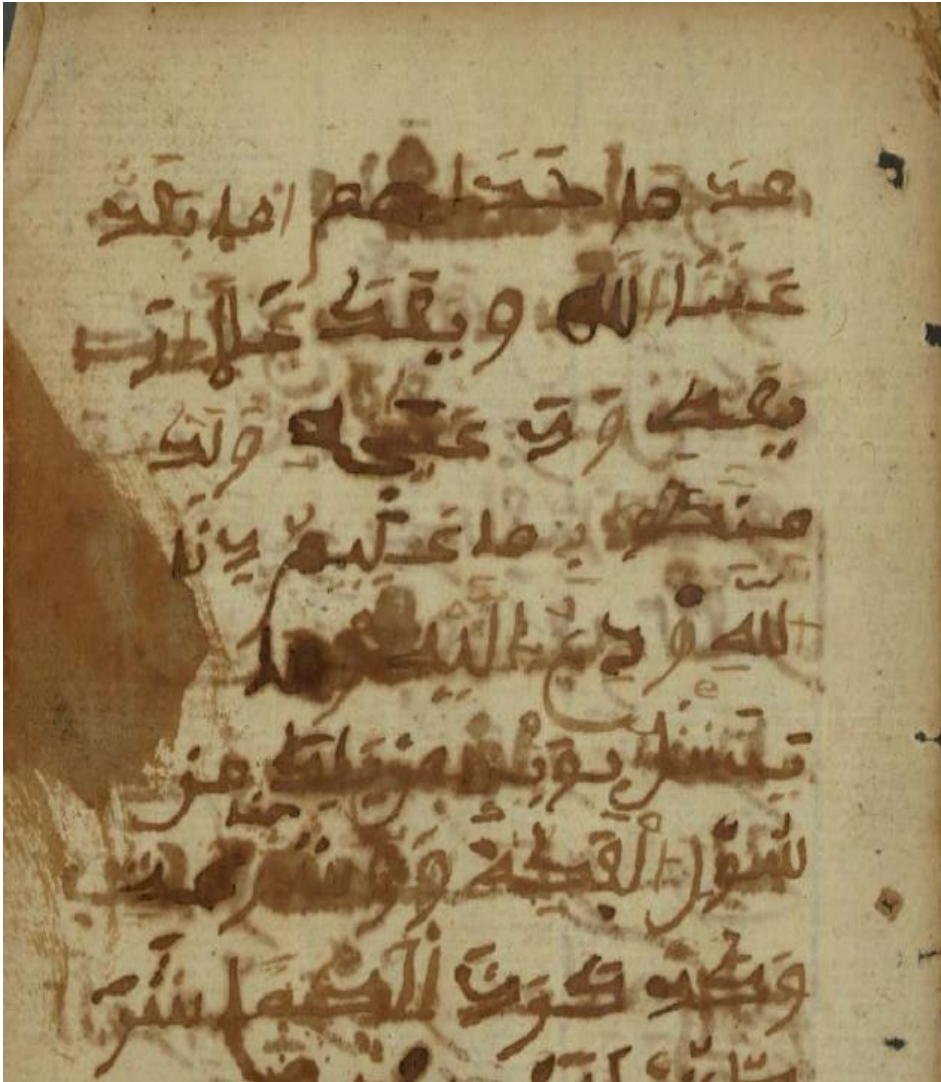
decipherment.<sup>60</sup> And yet, the *Diary* has confounded generations of scholars for numerous reasons. To begin with, the poor physical condition of the manuscript rendered aspects of it illegible, not least because the script was faint, and in sections, not even visible (see fig. 3 and fig. 4).



**Figure 3: Bilali Muhammad, The Ben Ali Diary, 11.2-6. Courtesy of Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries.**

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<sup>60</sup> Efforts at translating this document have been carried by Joseph Greenberg, “The Decipherment of the ‘Ben-Ali Diary,’ a Preliminary Statement”; Ronald Judy, *(Dis)forming the Nation*; Yusuf Proglar, “Ben Ali and his Arabic Diary”; and Muhammed Abdullah Al-Ahari, *Bilali Muhammad Muslim Jurisprudist in Antebellum Georgia*.



**Figure 4: Bilali Muhammad, The Ben Ali Diary, 3.1-8. Courtesy of Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries**

Beyond its deteriorated state, portions of the manuscript were generally unreadable: unusual orthography meant some of the words did not correspond to standard Arabic; for example, in some instances Bilali substituted the letter *lam* (ل) for *waw* (و), *tha* (ث) for *ta* (ت), and so on. He also used Arabic script to transliterate Fula words (Fulfulde, Pulaar), requiring readers to be proficient in both Arabic and Fula. Finally, the document's categorization as a diary was confusing because the manuscript does not

record Bilali's life, as one might expect, but rather Islamic ritual,<sup>61</sup> with a focus on prayer. Given the incomprehensibility of the manuscript, it is only fitting and perhaps inevitable that Harris's representation of the manuscript's content specifically, and of Islam more broadly, would also be incomprehensible.

Indeed, the incomprehensibility of this representation echoes the critical reception of Bilali's thirteen-page manuscript. Inspired by the *Diary*, Harris's *The Story of Aaron* stages the adventures of the eponymous character whom Harris imagined as the son of the historical Bilali Muhammad, whom he refers to in his fiction as Ben Ali.<sup>62</sup> Set during the years preceding the Civil War, the story features three children, Sweetest Susan, her brother Buster John, and their nursemaid Drusilla, who live on the Abercrombie plantation and seek out Aaron so that they might learn how to communicate with animals. Once they have attained this ability, they learn from various animals (the black Stallion Timoleon, Gristle the gray pony, Rambler the track dog, and Grunter the pig) about Aaron's escape from his cruel master, Mr. Gossett, and his eventual return to enslavement, where he becomes an overseer on the Abercrombie plantation. *Aaron in the Wildwoods* is set fifteen years earlier than *The Story of Aaron* and chronicles the adventures of Aaron, the fugitive slave, with fourteen-year-old Little Crotchet, the

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<sup>61</sup> In 1940, prominent linguist Greenberg offered the first major breakthrough in decoding the script. He concluded that the document consists of excerpts from *al-Risala al-Fiqhiya* (*Treatise on Jurisprudence*), a legal treatise on Islamic ritual written by the tenth-century Maliki scholar Abdullah ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawan of present day Tunisia (372–375). Although the manuscript was long thought to be a record of Bilali's life until Greenberg's decipherment, in 1859 William Brown Hodgson delivered a talk on an African-Arabic manuscript, penned by the African Muslim slave London, in which he recognized the religious import of Bilali's manuscript. In his talk, Hodgson concluded that Bilali "left behind various written papers, supposed to be ritual" (269). However, it remains unclear whether Hodgson did in fact have access to the manuscript.

<sup>62</sup> I will henceforth refer to the manuscript's author as Bilali and to Harris's character as Ben Ali.

handicapped uncle of Sweetest Susan and Buster John. Despite Harris's inability to read Arabic never mind understand *The Ben Ali Diary*, this document has a starring role in the chapter "The Language of Animals." Specifically, the document appears in an important moment when Aaron is seen reading from the book, which he refers to as "the talk of Ben Ali, my daddy. Every word here was put down by him" (12). Although this moment dramatizes a reading of the enslaved Muslim, it provokes rather than satisfies curiosity. In the story, the children gathered around him as he reads consider the recitation "jabber" or unintelligible speech. As a figure who seldom surfaces, the significance of the figure of the African Muslim slave is all the more challenging to grasp when his very speech is received as unintelligible. The figure of the African Muslim slave, then, occasions incomprehension among critics, who tend to consider this illegibility an epistemological problem to be overcome, especially when source documents are further appropriated and obscured by writers such as Harris. This chapter explores other ways of viewing incomprehensibility.

The issue of the illegible state of Bilali's manuscript—or for that matter, the garbled manner in which this manuscript was subsequently represented in Harris's stories—should not foreclose criticism; rather it provokes, indeed demands, further attention. I use the term "illegibility" to refer to the distorted condition of the manuscript that renders aspects of it indecipherable or unreadable. This illegible condition, then, gives rise to problems of incomprehensibility, a failure of cognition. Moreover, in a religious context, the incomprehensible is that which cannot be contained or circumscribed. Drawing on a post-secularist framework, which, as we recall, jettisons "certitudes about what counts as 'religious' and 'secular'" (Kaufmann, "Locating the

Postsecular” 69), I take religion as a viable resource for literary criticism. Faith, broadly conceived in a post-secularist sense, resists the presumption that the illegible and incomprehensible foreclose meaning. As I noted in my introduction, I find a model of reading in Islam’s primal moment that provides an epistemological frame that circumvents the logical or rational without losing meaning.

Questions of unreadability also connect with a longer American literary tradition that was influenced by the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphics in the nineteenth century. As John Irwin argues in his influential *American Hieroglyphics*, for American Renaissance writers the hieroglyph became a master symbol for language and self-consciousness. For writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, the hieroglyph, which they associated with cryptography and doubling, symbolized the indeterminacy and instability of signification (Irwin 239-41). The meanings that Harris attributes to the illegible are distinct from American Romantic writers, however. For Harris, the closest approximation to the hieroglyph is Arabic script. Rather than positing Arabic script as a sign of indeterminacy, Harris transforms its alterity into something functional, as I will show in the section “Turning Arab.”

This chapter examines the significance of the issue of incomprehensibility in two related texts, *The Ben Ali Diary*, written by Bilali Muhammad, and the distorted representation of this manuscript in Joel Chandler Harris’s stories. These texts are important because they thematize the very difficulty of this task of tracing the African Muslim slave. At the same time, the texts provide clues to interpretation by underscoring incomprehensibility as a critical theme. Instead of searching for hidden or ideological meanings, I suggest that the quality of *zāhir* or manifest incomprehensibility of both



texts, Bilali's manuscript and Harris's representation of this document in *The Story of Aaron*, directs us to its meaning. By taking the surface, here the illegible material condition of the source text, as a profound source of meaning, and not merely as a subversive tactic, I contend that the meaning of these texts is its incomprehensibility.

In order to read for what Harris obscured, I begin with a close analysis of Bilali's text to consider how it offers its own approach to unreadability. Equipped with this method, I turn to Harris's stories to suggest that, although Harris takes pains to mute the religion of Ben Ali (the character he models after Bilali, the elusive author of the *Diary*), Ben Ali's faith can be glossed in moments of unintelligible speech ("jabber") and indecipherable script ("pothooks") in Harris's stories. At the same time, the incomprehensibility of Aaron, as I will show in the final section, sets in motion a complex distinction between two racial subjects, the Arab and Black persons, whose subjectivities are formed on the crucible of slavery.

### Approaching Illegibility and Incomprehensibility

Bilali's manuscript is largely illegible and consequently unreadable, as the material surface of the text is distorted by a host of factors. First, ink mars some sections of the manuscript; then, there is the text's irregular spelling, and the transliteration of Fula (Fulfulde, Pulaar) words using Arabic script. This unreadability, then, is the result of both Bilali's writing, which would have made it difficult even for his contemporaries to read, and the physical state of the manuscript, which makes it further challenging for modern critics to interpret. Critics who have attempted to grapple with the illegibility of Bilali's manuscript have either dismissed the manuscript as gibberish (Nicholas N.

Martinovich),<sup>63</sup> or attempted to decipher its illegibility (Joseph Greenberg),<sup>64</sup> or suggested that the text is subversive because it evades meaning (Safet Dabovic and Ronald Judy).<sup>65</sup> Although these scholars have offered important and persuasive claims about the document's possible meanings, they all approach the unreadability of the *Diary* in a similar way: illegibility is either a challenge to be overcome by rendering a text legible or it is “a defiance of signification itself” (Judy 285).

Another approach to grasping the illegible, however, can be found in the very concept that Bilali's manuscript meditates upon: revelation. Bilali's use of the concept of *Katam* (concealment/preservation) and his rumination on revelation or *wahy*, foregrounds the vital role of illegibility and incomprehensibility in the Islamic intellectual tradition. As I outlined in my introduction, the concept of revelation, particularly in Islam's primal moment, offers a powerful analytical resource for approaching and grasping the significance of both the illegible surface of Bilali's *Diary* and the incomprehensibility that results from both this condition and the text's idiosyncratic mode of writing.

While the incomprehensible can gesture toward divine knowledge, it does not always signify meaning outside itself—it can take the form of a signifier without a


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<sup>63</sup> Yusuf Proglar rejects dismissive readings of Bilali's manuscript, such as Nicholas N. Martinovich's claim that Bilali “had only an imitative visual memory of Arabic” or Greenberg's assertion that Bilali was “unaware of the meaning of much of what he had written,” by arguing that Bilali's careful corrections of his errors, the thematic continuity between the Qur'anic verses he cites, and the organizing structure of the manuscript point to thoughtful, rather than imitative, expressions (25).

<sup>64</sup> Greenberg concludes that Bilali's manuscript is largely illogical “since no reports are available of any African language spoken by Mohammedanized natives which fits [Bilali's] pattern (375).

<sup>65</sup> According to Judy, for instance, “[t]he manuscript remains unreadable, a deflecting resistance, whose referential meaning is effectively lost” (224). Similarly, Dabovic “argue[s] that the document reveals novel ways of resisting western codification” (107).

signified—as is evident in the *fawātih* or “openers,” a combination of letters that appear at the beginning of a select number of Qur’ānic chapters, such as the letters *Alif Lām Mīm* (الم). These seemingly random letters have perplexed Muslim scholars for centuries. Islamic Studies scholars have since proposed an array of creative interpretations, ranging from deciphering them as “imitations of celestial letters,” to initials and rankings of the sources used to compile the Qur’ān (Massey 498). Irfan Shahid, however, argues that these mystery letters represent the sounds that Prophet Muhammad heard during Revelation, specifically “sounds of the Revelation that the Prophet did not hear distinctly because he was not ready or prepared to receive *wahy* [Revelation], and consequently they appear in this unintelligible form” (418). This account insists on preserving the quality of unreadability even in the act of interpretation, suggesting that the incomprehensible, or *hayrah* (puzzlement), is a vital component of attaining knowledge in Islam. Thus, this faithful transcription of letters without meaning calls on readers to be receptive to alterity and difference in particular, and to embody humility in the presence of the illegible or God. Within Islam, then, I would suggest, incomprehension can be regarded as the basis for knowledge and, in particular, for receptivity to newness.

Instead of changing the manuscript’s condition or arguing that its indeterminacy is a form of resistance, I examine the quality of material illegibility on its own terms and the condition of incomprehension that arises from its complex writing, with the aim of determining the extent to which the text offers a model for reading, through its invocation of figures of concealment, obfuscation, mistranslations, and revelation. One sense of incomprehension emerges from the different possible translations of Bilali’s words, specifically this word: . The manuscript, which is organized into three

chapters,<sup>66</sup> opens up the first chapter with the following statement: “concealment has led me to write brief books”

 (1:8-9).



has been translated by Ronald Judy as story (“القصة”) rather than concealment/katam (“الكتم”). Judy translates the line as follows, “Write me books that are a brief exposition” (“وقد قاد القصة اكتب لي كتب مختصرة”) (240). I suggest, however, that this phrase reads: “concealment has led me to write brief books”

(“وقد قاد الکتّم إلى تبلي كتب مختصرة”). Tellingly, the term *katam* (“الکتّم”) or concealment carries two ideas: writing under constraint and preservation. Essentially, Bilali makes his concealment manifest and, thereby, simultaneously locates and deflates the urge here to unveil or engage in close reading at the surface. Significantly, *katam* also refers to a plant used to make dye and ink, usually of a reddish-blackish tinge, which is the colour of the ink Bilali uses. *Katam*, then, refers to the writing of the manuscript, a reference that points inwardly only to reveal the surface—the colour of the ink—that is visible to the naked eye. As I show in the next section, when Harris invokes the manuscript in his stories, he picks up on the notion of concealment, though toward the end of preserving white stability, as a means to ‘unread’ the Muslim slave. Yet the concept of *katam*—a concept that resonates in Harris’s work, as I explain in the following section—ironically undermines this second sense of concealment.

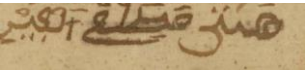
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<sup>66</sup> Scholars, like Judy and al-Ahari, suggest that there may have been more chapters as the manuscript is missing pages.

Bilali's injunction to write evokes the Qur'ānic call to recite or read. Just as importantly, this injunction signals the critical role of writing for the enslaved African Muslim. This writing in the language of the slave's religion (Arabic), signals more than just the enslaved subject's faith. As Judy observes, Bilali writes in an African-Arabic script known as *al-khaṭṭ at-takrurī* (266). That the writing announces itself as an African-Arabic script is significant because it contradicts Harris's Arabization of Ben Ali. But the etymology of *al-khaṭṭ*, as Judy astutely points out, is also multifaceted and assumes a concern with space, property, and storytelling: "[f]rom the *khaṭṭ* derives *khuffa*, which is a piece of real estate, a space mapped out according to a plan, a line of action. By this same lexicographic token, the *khaṭṭa* is a state of affairs, a story (*qiṣa*), and playfulness among the bedouin (*al-a 'arāb*)" (266). This mode of writing, which maintains the sense of private property, and while seemingly irreducible in its playfulness, offers a strategy of preservation or *katam* via amorphous writing. Bilali commences his concern with writing by playing with the notion of brevity. While he acknowledges that his condition requires that he write "brief" books, he uses the space of the paper to repeat "brief" three times. The extension of brevity through repetition offers readers a temporary reprieve, a brief regulation of breath, from the strain required to read the rest of the manuscript.

Bilali's reflections on reading and writing, underscored in his Qur'ānic citations on books, invite readers to consider multiple approaches to reading. As Yusuf Proglar shows, Bilali's concern with reading is evident in his citations of the Qur'ānic chapters "The Reality" (*Al-haqq*) and "The Sundering" (*Al-'inshiqāq*), where he amalgamates verses from these chapters to express that "for he who is given his book in his right hand [Q 69:19 and 84:7], he shall be reckoned with by an easy reckoning [Q 84:8]. And as for

he who is given his book in his left hand [Q 69:25] and behind his back [Q 84:10], he shall be committed to the flaming fire [Q 84:12]” (25-6). Ostensibly a means of validating Bilali’s adherence to Islam, the verses also point to the key role of positionality, for both reader and writer, in interpreting the text. That is, his concern with reading exceeds the book of deeds and the kind of reading that takes place in the hereafter or in a purely mystical realm. At the same time that the verses provide insight into Bilali’s preoccupation with his own spiritual record, they shed light on his anticipation of the narrative’s circulation, since the subsequent movement of the manuscript between hands made its survival possible. This preoccupation with reading returns us to Islam’s primal moment, specifically to the moment of unreadability and revelation.

The manuscript anticipates the convergence of knowledge and incomprehension with the arrival of dawn. After a section of vanishing lucidity, Bilali introduces the phrase: “until the emergence of dawn,” or “,” a verse found in the Qur’ānic chapter *al-Qadr*, “The Power” or “The Night of Decree” (11:1; 13:9). This line, extracted from a chapter on the first Revelation of the Qur’ān sent to Muhammad in the cave of Hira, gestures to the interplay between revelation and incomprehension, since a discussion of Revelation is deeply connected to an encounter with illegibility. This interplay between revelation and illegibility in Bilali’s manuscript is not merely thematic, however. Bilali follows this verse with five lines that appear indecipherable (see fig. 4). These lines seem to flow under the emergence of dawn without meaning or clear direction. This gesture draws our attention, albeit in an elliptical manner, to the significance of the incomprehensible. That is, in glossing the unreadable, these lines seem to operate as internal acknowledgements of indecipherability. The murky surface recalls

Abdelkebir Khatibi's point that "[a]s soon as there was writing [in Islam], there was the illegible" (692). Perhaps in this state of incomprehension, the reader prepares herself to receive knowledge or revelation. As it turns out, Bilali prepares his readers for prayer, the ultimate ritual of submission, as the indecipherable lines are followed by the Islamic call to prayer. Although discussions of incomprehensibility in the Islamic tradition revolve around the inimitability (*i'jaz*) of the Qur'ān (since the Qur'ān is considered to comprise God's speech) and to the incomprehensible nature of God, Bilali's manuscript enables us to consider illegibility in the context of prayer.

Indeed, the phrase "until the emergence of dawn," refers to the time of the first prayer. The reference to dawn or *fajr* also serves to intensify the reading process since, as Michael Sells contends, *fajr* also carries the idea "of a violent transformation" (253). As such, this revelatory verse gives the term concealment or *katam* a secondary meaning: transformation. This transformation happens beyond or outside language. The transformed reader, the manuscript suggests, would take up the call to prayer. With the reference to the emerging dawn, the seepage of Bilali's reddish brown ink from the previous page resembles a faint shadow, as if the sun has risen and cast its light on the sleeping Muslim. But more than conjuring an image of repose, this phrase is rooted in discourse around Muhammad's first Revelation and his submission to Islam with the help of Khadija's critical interpretation. The manuscript's illegible condition, which opens it to new interpretations, and its reference to Revelation, preserves an Islamic epistemology.

Bilali's most visible commitment to preserving both his writing and religion is the leather pouch that protects his manuscript. The pouch, which calls to mind the image of the "lost Book" or Qur'ān as wrapped in "brocade," reveals Bilali's attention and care to

his writing and faith. In an attempt to unweave the manuscript's mystery, Kambiz GhaneaBassiri compellingly suggests that the manuscript is a "talismanic text" precisely because Bilali kept it in a leather pouch, a practice consistent with traditional preservation of talismanic objects in West Africa (77). The concern to preserve also spotlights the notion of writing as *khuffa* or strategy, but Bilali does not hide his intention, which is both to preserve Islamic ritual and to refuse his master's religion. For in his address to God, he states, "I seek refuge in You . . . from the temptation of the disbeliever and from the temptation of the Christian" (trans. Progler 20). Bilali refrains from the temptation to become Christian through his writing, and, in his writing, he retains his faith by documenting the rituals of Islamic prayer. As we will see in the next section, Harris, despite himself and wholly unwittingly, maintains aspects of Bilali's faith by preserving the incomprehensibility of the manuscript through the invocation of Aaron's "jabber." Incomprehensibility, then, is not just the response that the *Diary* occasions among those who seek to read it, but given that Harris shared this response, it is also fundamental to and embedded in the stories.

### Islam between Jabber and Incomprehension

Joel Chandler Harris was perplexed by Bilali's writing. His inability to read the document, however, did not stop him from drawing on it as a source for his stories. At a key moment in *The Story of Aaron*, the eponymous character reads from Ben Ali's manuscript (Harris's fictional representation of Bilali's *Diary*). Listening to his prayer, the children refer to Aaron's speech as "jabber," a term often used derisively to describe unintelligible speech. In the children's ear, Aaron's speech is reduced to a form of



dialect. Harris's representation of Arabic speech as "jabber" is an extreme rendering of his notoriously offensive folksy rendering of black dialect: Aaron's "dialect" represents both the foreignness of his ancestral tongue and the primordial speech of animals, seeming to align him with abjected features, including blackness and animality. Readers attuned to Harris's sinking fortunes in American literary history, understandably, might be inclined to dismiss these stories as further evidence of his racism. If we approach jabber, however, through the interpretive framework offered by the concepts of concealment and revelation as unpacked by Khadija, we can be attuned to openness, and capable of grasping the nuances in Harris's unwitting representation of the incomprehensible and the indecipherable.

By situating Harris's stories in relation to his source text, specifically to Bilali's articulation of prayer, objects within Harris's stories can be seen to convey traces of Islamic influence. Near the opening scene of *The Story of Aaron*, the eponymous character gifts the language of animals to Drusilla, Buster John, and Sweetest Susan by "[throwing a] red cloth over his head and over the children's heads" (10). But the magical cloth, which functions as a kind of veil, hides or covers, only to reveal a new way of knowing as it enables the children to understand the language of animals.<sup>67</sup> As Elliot Wolfson notes in his discussion of the veil in Islamic and Judaic traditions, "[t]he

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<sup>67</sup> Because the enslaved African Muslim's identity is central to our notion of the cloth as religiously- and spiritually-inflected, we must also consider its resonance for the slave trade. African American folk tradition reveals the red cloth's alternate, more sinister, meaning. In this tradition, this object is associated with European manipulation. African American folk tradition holds that Europeans used red cloth to entice Africans into slave ships. Phoebe Gilbert remembers that her Grandfather Bilali Smith was captured by first being lured with a red cloth:

he say he playin on beach in Africa, an big boat neah duh beach. He say, duh mens on boat take down flag, an put up big piece uh red flannel, an all chillun dey git close tuh watuh edge tuh see flannel an see wut doing . . . duh mens comes off boat an ketch um. (*Drums and Shadows* 164)

metaphor of the veil is instructive, as the function of the veil is to disclose but at the same time to hide, indeed it discloses by hiding, hides by disclosing” (206). Aaron can only maintain, retain, and pass on his linguistic alterity to the children through literal veiling.

Although the transition to animal speech generates a moment of interracial harmony among the slave and the white children, this intimacy with otherness can only happen in private and below the surface—to be precise, underneath a cloth. Appropriately, onlookers find this ceremony incomprehensible. The narrator cautions that any passerby would have been bewildered by this scene, as “[h]e would have seen the red cloth bobbing up and down as if those underneath were bowing their heads back and forth, and he would have heard muffled exclamations of wonder” (10). Akin to the manuscript’s reception by Harris, the children, and critics, the narrator imagines that the passerby will be baffled by this spectacle, specifically his inability to interpret the scene before him. Here, again, recognizing Islam is premised on privileging form or ritual over content or faith.

Indeed, the children’s act of “bowing their heads back and forth” as part of a ritual that introduces them to the language of animals, correlates to Bilali’s careful preservation of Islamic prayer. This bowing aligns with Bilali’s articulation of *rukū* (bowing) and *sujūd* (prostration) (12: 9). As if defying Harris’s obscuring of Islam, in this important scene of magical transference, Aaron appears to offer prayer. That is, in keeping with Bilali’s insistence, in his *Diary*, on proper prayer, the children in Harris’s stories likewise bow their heads, following Aaron’s lead, to learn how to converse with animals. Rather than merely serving as a means to communicate with animals, Aaron’s recitation links his

submission in prayerful postures to his capacity to acquire and to pass on knowledge, despite the uncomprehending state of the children.

In another striking moment (see fig. 5), as though responding to the call to prayer, Aaron, as illustrated by Oliver Herford in *Aaron in the Wildwoods*, appears caught in the midst of *sujūd*, with his hands firmly planted in the ground. Although this illustration was not created by Harris, it warrants consideration as it shows how the story of the African Muslim slave is preserved within American culture. In this important illustration, Aaron's humble gesture, an approximation of ritual prayer, corresponds to Bilali's instructions. Indeed, this image suggests the pillar of *tuma 'nīnā*, or a moment of stillness, that precedes *sujūd* (prostration) in prayer.<sup>68</sup> These resonances of the key gesture of *rukū* (bowing) here subtly testify to the enduring image of Muslim prayer and remind us of the place of Islam in the cultural imaginary of American writers and, for that matter, illustrators—even if they do not recognize it as such.<sup>69</sup> In fact, the *posture* of prayer proves more lasting than the *articulation* of prayer since it is Aaron's prayerful movement, and not his recitation, that is represented and is, therefore, representable in Harris's stories. By foregrounding ritual, specifically the act of prayer, Islam in Harris's story as epitomized by Herford's illustration manifests as form rather than merely content. Ultimately, Herford and Harris show that the remainder of Islam is preserved in

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<sup>68</sup> Given that Harris links Aaron to animals, it is possible to approach Herford's illustration as presenting an image of a man crawling toward water as an animal might.

<sup>69</sup> Appropriately, the context of the historical Bilali's life helps to validate Aaron's prayerful poses. In turning to accounts of Bilali's life particularly as remembered by his great grandchildren, we come across the image of Bilali and his wife Phoebe praying in *Drums and Shadows*. Bilali's great grandchildren recollect, "[Bilali and his wife] bow tuh duh sun an hab lill mat tuh kneel on. Duh beads is on a long string. Belali he pull bead an he say, 'Belambi, Hakabara, Mahamadu'" (*Drums* 161).

American works beyond authorial intention. In Islamic terms, the image could also be read as Isma‘ail or Ishmael —the son of Hagar and Ibrahim —being guided to the *Zamzam* spring, a well located in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, near the Ka‘ba.<sup>70</sup>

The story of the Zamzam well is a narrative of divine grace (*barakat*) bestowed on the family of Ibrahim, the ultimate patriarch of the monotheistic religions (Islam, Judaism, and Christianity). In the Islamic tradition, Hagar was abandoned by Ibrahim in the desert with her infant son, Isma‘ail. Alone and desperate for water, Hagar began her search for water by walking seven times between the hills of Safa and Marwa. Her prayers were eventually answered when the archangel Gabriel appeared. He informed her of the significance of Isma‘ail, and then he struck the earth until water emerged from the spring of Zamzam. This well would thereby transform the barren desert into a livable space. This is a vital event for Muslims, and is re-enacted during the Hajj, one of the five pillars of Islam. Significantly, Isma‘ail would become known as the father of Arabs and the ancestor of Muhammad, and, by extension, of Muslims. It is possible, therefore, that Arabness in the American imaginary may conjure the image of Isma‘ail or Ishmael. Indeed, Harris’s obscuring of Islam is intimately connected to the U.S. racial imagination as Timothy Marr argues in his article “‘Out of this World.’” In the following section, I

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<sup>70</sup> The link between Isma‘ail and Arabness was apparent in the cultural imagination of the U.S. in the nineteenth century. For example, in 1848, the governor of Michigan Lewis Cass made this link explicit in a statement to the New England Society of Michigan, observing that “I have seen the wandering Arab, the descendant of Ishmael, sitting upon the ruins of Baalbeck, himself a ruin” (qtd. in Rogin’s *Subversive Genealogy* 40). In this comparison, Cass presents the Arab as a static and unchanging entity, who symbolizes history, but ultimately lacks futurity.

analyze the intersections between race and religion in the literary construction of an enigmatic African Muslim slave.



THE SPRING OF COOL REFRESHING WATER

**Figure 5: Illustration by Oliver Herford in *Aaron in the Wildwoods* (81).**

### Turning Arab<sup>71</sup>

Aaron uses *The Ben Ali Diary*, Harris's fictional evocation of the source document, to emphatically repudiate his blackness. Although the slave community does not recognize Aaron as black, the children at first do. Aaron rejects what the children see as blackness

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<sup>71</sup> "Turning Arab" alludes to the expression "Turning Turk," a common phrase used in early modern England to mean converting to Islam or to commit moral transgression.

early in the narrative when the three children living on the plantation in Middle Georgia—Buster John, Sweetest Susan, and Drusilla—seek him out to listen to his fantastical adventures and learn from him the language of animals. During the encounter, Aaron offers a surprising denunciation of his blackness by first asking the children, “You think I’m a nigger, don’t you?” Buster John responds, “Of course. . . What else are you?” (11). Aaron begins his renunciation by stating that “[his father Ben Ali] was no nigger,” but an “Arab” (12). He then goes on to prove his Arab identity by first uncovering a book: “[f]rom his pocket. . . something wrapped in soft leather and securely tied. It was a memorandum book” (12). Somewhat paradoxically, Aaron turns to his father’s manuscript, *The Ben Ali Diary*, to demonstrate that the Arabic writing and his reading of this writing shapes his identity. This spectacle of Aaron reading enables him to dis-identify with the black community, which leads the children to misrecognize him, not merely due to the foreign script in his hands, but also to what they discern to be his “strange tongue” (12). To further stress the otherness of this Arabic speech, the narrator observes that “the tone of [Aaron’s] voice [took] on modulations the children had never heard before” (12). Having delineated his capacity to speak in tongues, Aaron’s presence confounds other blacks in the slave community not only because “he ain’t got the right color,” but also because “he ain’t got the right king [sic] of twang to his tongue” (*Wildwoods* 198). Though this jabber, when construed as an extreme form of dialect—might seem to align Aaron with blackness in the ways explained above, Harris’s depiction of foreignness ends up underscoring the character’s Arabness and repudiation of blackness.

Harris's preoccupation with the "illegible" literacy of the "Arab" slave anticipates debates that occurred at the turn of the twentieth century about the naturalization of Arab immigrants. Significantly, these references to Arabness emerge around a time of mass immigration of Syrians from the Ottoman province of Syria, which includes present-day Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine, to the United States starting in the 1880s.<sup>72</sup>

Around the turn of the century, Syrian immigrants began petitioning for American citizenship. Eventually, in 1915, Syrian immigrants managed to claim legal whiteness in U.S. immigration courts in the famous case of *Dow vs. the United States*. In this case, the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals accepted that "Physically the modern Syrians are of mixed Syrian, Arabian, and even Jewish blood. They belong to the Semitic branch of the Caucasian race, thus widely differing from their rulers, the Turks" (Joseph Ferris, qtd. in Naff 257). Because Syrian immigrants at the time were primarily Christian, their religious identity was key to their attainment of whiteness. In an atmosphere when Americans were witnessing an influx of immigrants from the Holy Land, when racial segregation was legalized in Jim Crow states, and when definitions of American citizenship were changing, Harris offered the Arab as an elusive figure that renounced blackness as a way to separate himself from the black community. In reading the Arab as

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<sup>72</sup> For a compelling reading of Arab American citizenship and U.S. racial nationalism, see Keith Feldman's "The (Il)legible Arab Body and the Fantasy of National Democracy." Feldman powerfully interrogates and historicizes the category "Arab American" and shows how it "has been implicated historically in the maintenance of exclusionary practices of US racial nationalism, even as it has revealed the contradictions of such practices" (33). My analysis of the fluctuating category of "Arab American" is indebted to the work of Keith Feldman, Jacob Berman, and Sarah Gualtieri. In her foundational text, *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora*, Gualtieri offers a comprehensive study of Syrian immigration to the United States and the changing racial categorization of Arab American.

an elusive figure, I rely on Jacob Berman's argument that in nineteenth-century American literature, Arabness was used conceptually to negotiate and stabilize American national identity. Berman contends that "the interpretive slip that marks black Muslims on the plantation as Arabs creates 'a concept metaphor without an adequate referent'" (66). The Arab as a predetermined, yet empty vessel, as Berman posits, produces "a new position of subjective enunciation" (66-67). I also build on Marr's analysis of Aaron as a figure Harris uses "to negotiate the ambivalence of racial identity by exoticizing its difference as a resource for social stability" ("Out of this World" 533-34). Yet, as I will show, Harris's efforts to negotiate racial and religious difference, by projecting nostalgia for an imaginary Arab whose illegible writing and incomprehensible speech can be domesticated, ultimately fails. Instead, the figure of Aaron expresses and sheds light on America's racial and religious anxiety.

Indeed, in deploying the figure of the Arab, Harris's stories offer a response to the social and racial anxieties animating the American South during the post-Reconstruction era. Harris was writing at a time of intense racial strife and violence, when blackness was being re-segregated after decades of emancipation. In the 1890s, Georgia passed a number of Jim Crow laws that mandated segregation, and the state would continue to pass such discriminatory laws for much of the first half of the twentieth century. This decade also saw the adoption of voter literacy tests in the Southern United States, which constrained African Americans' participation in American politics. This racial anxiety manifests in Harris's stories, particularly through questions of literacy and, as I will show, a haunted history of cross-racial affiliations.



Syrian immigrants' eventual access to U.S. citizenship was predicated on the notion of legibility, specifically on reading whiteness on the bodies of these Arab immigrants. One component that made this claim to whiteness possible for Syrian immigrants, however, was their Christian faith. Aware of the centrality of faith in bestowing American citizenship, Harris stealthily Christianizes the "Arab" Aaron early on in the narrative. Before setting out to find Aaron, the children learn that Aaron will only become receptive to their thirst for animal language when they sign the cross—the most significant symbol of the Christian faith—on Aaron's thumb (*Story of Aaron* 4). While "pretend[ing] to be playing with Aaron's left hand. . . . [Buster John] seized the thumb, bent it back as far as it would go, and made a cross-mark on it" (8). This episode reveals that linguistic crossing, between animal and human language, hinges on marking Aaron's flesh with the cross, which, thereby, makes him legible, even if he is not intelligible. Now that the unsuspecting Aaron has been signed with the invisible symbol of Christianity, he is safe to express his Arabness. Nonetheless, Aaron retains his Muslim faith when he prays or reads from Ben Ali's manuscript.

However, his speech remains incoherent, as does the manuscript's writing, which appears to the children as "pothooks" (8). This conflation between pothooks—the tools on which cooking pots are hung—and Arabic letters is not new. As early as the seventeenth century, John Fletcher and Philip Massinger's play, *The Elder Brother*, compares unreadable Arabic scribbles to pothooks: "What have we heere? Pothookes and Andirons! *And*. I much pitie you, It is the Syrian Character, or the Arabicke" (qtd. in

“pot-hook,” n. *OED*).<sup>73</sup> Harris replaces the hieroglyphics that captivated such American Renaissance writers as Melville and Emerson with pothooks. Whereas Emerson, for example, deciphers the hieroglyph in order to reveal an inner meaning, such as a human emotion or virtue (Irwin 13), Harris empties the unknowable sign of any inner complexity. That is, Harris takes up signs that he does not understand and, rather than view these signs as indeterminate vessels for transcendent meaning, the children transform them into innocuous culinary objects. However, more than simply highlighting Aaron’s foreignness, Buster John’s rendering of the Arabic letters as “pothooks” domesticates Ben Ali’s writing and Aaron’s otherness. In so doing, Buster John shifts the conversation from an abstract, foreign otherness to a domestic sphere, specifically to a concrete, tangible object found in kitchens or over fireplaces. Replacing the illegible writing with an image of curved hooks that anchor pots at once suspends and transforms the writing into a functional item. In interpreting Aaron’s speech as jabber and the manuscript as unintelligible scrawls, the children attempt to tame, rather than confront, Aaron’s inscrutability, even as they actively seek to learn from him animal speech.

The suspension of the inscrutable other serves a more insidious function when we account for the use of pothooks in antebellum America. According to the *OED*, this term stood for “[a] pair of iron hooks made into a collar and used as an instrument of punishment, esp. for slaves.” By transforming the Arabic script to pothooks that have the potential to encircle an unruly slave’s neck, Harris dramatizes a shunning and rejection of

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<sup>73</sup> See John Fletcher and Philip Massinger, *The Elder Brother a Comedie: Acted at the Blacke Friers*.

the incomprehensible other and converts seemingly indistinct scrawls into an instrument for inflicting pain.

These pothooks or the scrawls of the manuscript find a counterpart in the unwieldy swamp, a refuge when, as a fugitive, Aaron flees from Mr. Gossett. An exotic, yet forbidding, landscape, the swamp is significant as a spatial parallel for the mystification of “Arabic” speech. Here, I draw on Marr’s observation that the swamp “posit[s] temporary spaces of marronage that create imaginative alternatives for African freedom in the late nineteenth century” (538). The signs of mystery that filter the swamp extend and externalize the manuscript’s pothooks since the swamp, too, can only be read and navigated by Aaron. The swamp, like the manuscript, embodies a space beyond the white Southern imagination, which only Aaron can read, but it also reminds us of Aaron’s access to the language of animals. Conversely, this access perpetuates the idea that blackness and Arabness are closer to animal nature. Because white ethnographers, fiction writers, and philosophers conventionally signified blackness through animal otherness, as encapsulated by G.W.F. Hegel’s labeling of the African as an “animal man” (qtd. in Tibebe 179), Harris’s use of dialect remains racially coded, but also comes to represent the utter unknowability of Aaron’s talk. However, because it is Aaron’s Arab identity that activates his linguistic capacity to speak to animals and read what appears as “pothooks,” his linguistic abilities give him a “great advantage over all the slaves who went to and fro between the plantations after nightfall” (*Wildowoods* 131). The talismanic properties of the manuscript are transplanted onto the swamp, a space of “treacherous quagmires,” that shelters Aaron from his cruel master (6). Harris, however, tames the swamp’s imaginative possibilities such that although Aaron appears to have the key to

both the manuscript and quagmire, these two things have access to Aaron's race: they both insist on making Aaron's blackness illegible and Arabness legible, even when this legibility hinges on his indecipherable speech and writing.

Just as the manuscript attests to Aaron's Arabness by allowing him to declare that "[h]e was no nigger," the swamp plot reminds us that Aaron "was not a negro, but an Arab, and that is different" (*Story of Aaron* 13; *Wildwoods* 48). In turning Aaron into an Arab, Harris constructs race from religion.<sup>74</sup> The Islamic faith of the African slave, Harris suggests, transforms the African into an Arab. We find that even before his publication of these stories on Aaron, Harris had already begun his disavowal of Bilali's blackness in his article, "The Sea Island's Hurricanes," where he emphasized what he presumed to be Bilali's race:

In Georgia the prevailing type—not the most numerous, but the most noticeable—is the Arabian. Old Ben Ali (pronounced by the negroes Benally), who left a "Diary" in one of the desert dialects of Arabic, was blessed with astonishing prepotency, and his descendants after him, so that it is always easy to discover the 'favor' of the old Arab in a Georgia negro who is especially intelligent or enterprising. Old Ben Ali—his "Diary" is in the hands of a son of the author of 'The Young Marooners'—never was a slave in the ordinary meaning of the term.

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<sup>74</sup> Harris's racist assumptions are most heightened when he juxtaposes Aaron with the black community. For more on Harris's racist portrayal of African American slaves in *The Story of Harris* and *Aaron in the Wildwoods*, see Donnaræ MacCann's *White Supremacy in Children's Literature*. Harris's deprecating depiction of blackness is most evident in his portraiture of Drusilla. As MacCann puts it, "we are reminded repeatedly of the intellectual distance between Drusilla on the one hand, and Aaron and the White children on the other" (86-87).

He was foreman of his owner's plantation, and as fierce a task-master as a negro ever had. ("Sea Island Hurricanes" 274)<sup>75</sup>

While Harris dabbles with orientalism by illuminating the desert dialect of the *Diary*, a dialect that authenticates and secures Bilali's Arabness and perceived superiority, he dismisses Bilali's African heritage, Fulani ethnicity, and Islamic religion. This repudiation is also consistent with nineteenth-century American Orientalism,<sup>76</sup> which conflated Muslim, Moor, and Arab identities (Berman 10; Marr 525). However, in rejecting Aaron's blackness, Harris constructs Aaron's speech as transcending black dialect, for Aaron speaks in a slightly elevated speech, except when he reads from his father's Arabic manuscript.<sup>77</sup> Nonetheless, Aaron the son of Ben Ali as conjuror, animal whisperer, runaway slave, and full-blooded Arab carries the fading traces of his Muslim subjectivity. Harris, however, evacuates Ben Ali's religion and, instead, uses the antebellum Muslim slave to mediate the intersection of blackness and Arabness. Although this mediation threatens to obscure and make blackness illegible, it illuminates the intricate coupling of race and religion, specifically of Islam and Arabness during the antebellum period.

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<sup>75</sup> This passage is also quoted in Marr's "Out of this World" (536).

<sup>76</sup> Although Edward Said argued that U.S. orientalism did not emerge until the post-World War II era, scholars in the field of American Studies have argued that Islam has always been a part of the American imagination. See also Fuad Sha'ban, *Islam and Arabs in Early American Thought* and Thomas Kidd's *American Christians and Islam*. For more on American orientalism, see Wail Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature*; Marr, *Cultural Roots of American Islamicism*; Berman, *American Arabesque*; and Malini Johar Schueller, *U.S. Orientalisms*.

<sup>77</sup> A precedent for Harris's black disavowal can be found in William Brown Hodgson's assertion that "[t]he Foulahs are *not* negroes. They differ essentially from the negro race, in all characteristics which are marked by physical anthropology" ("The Gospels" 49).

Ultimately, Harris's deployment of the swamp and manuscript as ciphers for racial stability proves unsustainable. Indeed, the manuscript confronts the U.S.'s vexed history of enslavement. Moreover, the swamp obliquely references the U.S.'s unjust treatment of its indigenous population. Even if the latter confrontation in Harris's fiction is only marginal, it draws our attention to a question that Wai Chee Dimock poses: "In what sense are Native Americans like Arabs?" (41). Dimock responds that the likeness of Native Americans and Arabs emerged in the year 1492 when "[e]ach was confronted by Christian Europe, of course, and bruised by that encounter" (41). Harris, via Aaron, considers how Arabs are unlike Native Americans. That is, Aaron subverts the ruinous end that indigenous people and Spaniards, specifically the sixteenth-century conquistador Hernando de Soto and his company, were dealt in the swamp. Whereas they had emerged "more bedraggled than ever," Aaron finds itinerant freedom in the "dark and silent swamp" (*Wildwoods* 13). At the same time, the reference to de Soto is significant as it punctures Harris's fantasy of racial harmony. It reminds us of a history of relentless violence against the indigenous peoples of the Americas and Africans at the hands of de Soto's expedition, which had enslaved Native Americans and Africans (Smith, *Discovery* 61). Rather than disentangle these ruinous ends, Harris collapses difference—colonizer and colonized—into the wilderness.

With the disappearance of the Natives, Spaniards, and African Americans, the swamp becomes an innocuous landscape of fantasy for the Arab and not a land that can be cultivated.<sup>78</sup> It is a space that can only be occupied by an apparition or in a dream.

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<sup>78</sup> The backdrop of the dismal swamp also evokes the Great Dismal Swamp, which spans the North Carolina-Virginia border—a 2000 square mile area—a site where slaves and freed blacks escaped, and where some even built settlements. The attempts to erase blackness from the swamp extend back to George

Because the logic of American cultivation requires the absenting of the indigenous population, the swamp remains a space where “mysteries . . . vanish into mystery,” such that Aaron—who is aligned with the swamp—must also remain steeped in mystery, eventually vanishing from sight. Harris’s mystical register of the Arab slave lingers in his next book *Wally Wanderoon* (1903), which continues to chronicle the adventures of the children of Middle Georgia. In this book, the children surmise that their adventures with Aaron must have been “either a dream, or something very like a dream,” and they finally conclude that “Aaron is a dream” (14). It seems, then, that the Muslim slave can only be comprehended when he becomes a subject of the unconscious. The perception of Aaron as a hallucination, a dissipating self, deflates the transgressive freedom associated with the swamp. In relegating Aaron to a dreamscape, Harris seems to deflect the threat of a divided national imaginary, as Marr suggests (534). The antebellum Muslim slave who can read the unreadable can also keep difference at bay. Nonetheless, Aaron’s rendering of the unintelligible as meaningful and as a basis of knowledge—both the manuscript and swamp—deflates Harris’s fantasy of national cohesiveness.

The illegibility of the Arab merges with the illegibility of the Native. As Dimock shows, the Arab and Native have been conflated since the Spanish conquests of the Americas beginning in 1492, a conflation that guarantees the presence, rather than erasure, of the other. As early as the colonial period, American writers gauged the indigenous inhabitants of the “new world” through their understanding of the Muslim Moorish enemy and, as Dimock shows “[in] the Spanish archives, Moors and Indians

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Washington’s Great Dismal Company, founded in 1762, whose main aim was to drain the swamps to create farmland (Waverley).

were routinely mentioned together—as heathens and idolaters jointly brought under the Christian yoke” (“Hemispheric Islam” 41). Similarly, Berman adds that nineteenth-century Near Eastern travel narratives used the Bedouin figure as an analogy for Native Americans (73). While Harris does not use the term Bedouin, he situates Ben Ali in terms used to describe Bedouins, mainly stating that he is a “man of the desert” who wrote in “one of the desert dialects,” and the Arabic term Bedouin means desert dweller (“Sea Islands” 273). Harris refuses this conflation; instead, he reconstructs the Bedouin Arab as distinct from the Native American. In dramatizing the swamp as a space that the racial other passes through, Harris inadvertently unearths episodes of cross-racial and cross-cultural affiliations.

Harris’s attempt to contain racial otherness to the margins of unreadable and impenetrable spaces fails; instead, he opens up the racial anxiety of the post-Reconstruction era. With this spilling of anxiety, Aaron’s encounter with the footsteps of Native Americans and Spaniards gestures toward histories of collaboration between indigenous communities and enslaved Muslims. As Michael A. Gomez illuminates, “De Soto’s 1539 expedition through the southeast, includ[ed] ‘sub-Saharan and Moorish slaves’ who absconded and joined Native American communities”; together, they worked to subvert settler colonialism (*Black Crescent* 191). Just as the children marked Aaron with a cross to make him legible, de Soto built a cross near the Mississippi River to enable a Christian reading of the land (Bagnall 9). Racial anxiety, accompanied with religious anxiety, overwhelms the American landscape, such that we can gloss historical facts of the land that disrupt Harris’s attempts to relegate racial and religious otherness to a dreamscape.



## Illegibility, Incomprehensibility, and Literacy

Tracing the outlines of an African Muslim slave that fluctuate between the swamp and the plantation, the periphery and the centre, the sacred and the secular, enables us to read a tradition or heritage of effacement of the incomprehensible other that can be disrupted by recognizing incomprehensibility as a condition of knowledge. Bilali's manuscript helps to animate and extract spiritual reminders of enslaved African Muslims that echo in American literature. Even though Harris did not comprehend the significance of this manuscript, his representation of the *Diary*, in effect, preserves these reminders.

Although freedom and literacy, as encapsulated in slave narratives, have been established as the “pregeneric myth” for African American literature (Step 9-x)—as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Charles T. Davis put it, “the slave narrative represents blacks’ attempt to *write themselves into being*”—Aaron’s literacy writes him out of being (xxiii). As the narrative progresses, Aaron’s subjectivity recedes into the background as his mystical associations and his servitude to his little master Crotchet are sharpened. Judy echoes Gates and Davis by arguing that “[t]he Negro who was literate in Arabic . . . flew in the face of the received conception of the Negro of Africa as a subhuman brute, or subspecies of human, and laid claim to a degree of culture thought to be the privileged property of modern Europe” (160). However, privileging literacy precludes a large segment of enslaved persons for whom literacy was unavailable or outlawed. Reading for illegibility in an Islamic context, however, returns us to the scene of the Prophet’s first Revelation, specifically when Muhammad is asked to Read/Recite. This injunction to read/recite is important for two reasons: first, it establishes the possibility of knowledge production that is not predicated on literacy since the Prophet was considered illiterate;

second, it spotlights the crucial role of the critic's receptiveness to otherness. Indeed, according to the *hadith* the Prophet is quoted as saying, "[t]he Qur'ān was sent down in seven modes [*ahruf*] of reading, so recite according to what comes most easily" (Denny 115). Recognizing illegibility, incomprehensibility, and the Prophet's illiteracy as enabling knowledge and not only belief, in turn, challenges the assumption that the slave's quest for freedom centred primarily on literacy. Bilali's manuscript, more than simply resisting the master's gaze or analysis, equips readers with a method to read, rather than resist, incomprehension. As more black Americans embraced Islam at the turn of the twentieth century, a method of interpretation that takes seriously Islamic tropes and *hadith* can illuminate new epistemologies for reading inscrutability and for understanding Islam and the traces of the African Muslim slave in the American literary tradition.

## Chapter 3

### “The Key to a Muslim is Submission”: The Politics of Malcolm X’s Itinerant Prayers

On September 12, 1964, a photograph of Malcolm X appeared in the U.S. magazine *The Saturday Evening Post* with the title “I’m Talking to You, White Man,” and a fourteen-page excerpt from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.<sup>79</sup> Taken by John Launois, it features Malcolm X participating in the Islamic ritual of prayer at the Great Mosque of Mohammed Ali in Cairo, Egypt (by then, Malcolm X had renounced the Nation of Islam [NOI]). In contrast to the image of quiet prayer, the title invokes the more familiar image of Malcolm X as a direct, confrontational, and angry orator. Indeed, during his tenure as NOI minister, Malcolm X was known for his fiery and prophetic speeches. At the time that this photograph was taken, Malcolm X was in the midst of his international travels, an undertaking that promised to solidify his conversion to orthodox Islam and Islam’s connection to a global politics.

As Sacvan Bercovitch has shown, the American understanding of prophecy has come to undergird the American protest tradition. African Americans revised this American form of the jeremiad—a rhetorical tradition of social criticism—in order to

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<sup>79</sup> For copyright reasons, I am not reproducing the photograph of Malcolm X that was taken by John Launois. Nonetheless, this well-known photograph of Malcolm X is widely reproduced online.

critique America's failure toward her black subjects.<sup>80</sup> In this spirit, the NOI drew on and adapted two key forms of prophecy from this Judeo-Christian tradition that Robert Terrill identifies as the apocalyptic and the jeremiad (27).<sup>81</sup> Critics including Terrill and David Howard-Pitney connect Malcolm X's oppositional politics to his prophetic oratory. However, their analysis seems at odds with the calm and submissive demeanour of the Malcolm X captured in Launois's photograph as he bows with hands on knees. While Terrill notes that Malcolm X's rhetoric shifts after he leaves the NOI from prophecy to a discourse of oppositional prudence—a rhetorical style that requires that the “audience . . . become active critics of the dominant culture, [and] able to make independent judgments regarding their relationship to it”—Malcolm X continues to be remembered for his “radical rhetoric” and fiery speeches (Terrill 26; Marable 12). Even in the aftermath of his assassination, he was labelled as “the apostle of violence” (*The Guardian*).

Contemporary scholars, such as Cornel West and Michael Eric Dyson, tend to focus more on Malcolm X's prophetic oratory. West calls him, “the prophet of black rage—then and now” (*Race Matters* 95), emphasizing Malcolm X's role and influence on radical activism. Dyson, too, describes Malcolm X “as a prophetic orator and fearless spokesman” (172). While conventional critical approaches to Malcolm X's political rhetoric often situate him within a tradition of American prophecy, I suggest that Malcolm X's approach to activism encompassed a broader range of forms than has been

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<sup>80</sup> In his book *The Afro-American Jeremiad*, David Howard-Pitney argues that works by David Walker, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B DuBois, among others, conform to the African American Jeremiad.

<sup>81</sup> This is not to deny the prophetic strand in Islam, but rather to suggest that Malcolm X is speaking back to a specifically American tradition. For more on Islamic prophecy, see Fazlur Rahman's *Prophecy in Islam*.

recognized. Most notably, his activism included the seemingly restrained and reflective stance of prayer.

Taking inspiration from the powerful image of prayer depicted in Launois's photograph, this chapter explores the implications of prayer for Malcolm X, from the moment of his conversion to Islam in prison to his experience in the Hajj. His conversion culminates, I argue, in his submission to Allah, a stance that he politicized. Specifically, I focus on Malcolm X's embodiment of submission, evident not only in his *Autobiography*, but also in his speeches and other writings, with the aim of illustrating the affinity between protest and faith and the ways Malcolm X negotiates the contradiction of submission as he is aiming to empower himself. This submission eventually leads Malcolm X to unify struggles for freedom in the U.S. with African and Middle Eastern liberation movements.

Before connecting defiance with submission, in the first part of this chapter, I examine the postsecular implications of Malcolm X's prayers, or what I am calling postsecular Allahgraphy. That is, rather than analyze Malcolm X's prayers through traditional forms of theology or specific theological doctrines, I align Malcolm X's diverse iterations of embodied prayer with some of the key ideas espoused by postsecular scholars. As explained in the introduction, a postsecular framework challenges the triumphant narrative of secularization and takes seriously religion as an analytical category. Through this framework, I investigate the complexity of Malcolm X's prayer and its relation to his evolving politics.<sup>82</sup> Malcolm X's prayers also fall within a longer

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<sup>82</sup> Scholar Sarah Revitt, for example, identifies three core ideas that constitute postsecular theory: we are no longer bound to a framework of secularization; postmodernism's critique of Enlightenment notions of privacy, rationality, and objectivity has made it possible to move past

history of Islamic prayer and resistance in the United States that stretches back to enslaved African Muslims in antebellum America. In my reading, the links between Malcolm X's prayers and the prayers of enslaved African Muslims are crucial to grasping the history of Islamic faith and protest in the United States, as expressed in its rhetorical tradition.

The second section of this chapter explores embodiment as a feature of Malcolm X's approach to prayer and politics. I turn my attention to the global sensibility of Malcolm X's prayers by examining the political implications of his hajj prayers through the concept of body memory. According to Sabina C. Koch, et al., body memory assumes that "memory is not a set of information stored somewhere in the brain, but the totality of the embodied subject's dispositions, which allow the person to react to present situations and requirements on the basis of past experience" (2). The concept of body memory enables us to grasp how Malcolm X's protest activities prior to his pilgrimage prefigure his experiences of brotherhood and global consciousness while circumambulating the Ka'ba, a cube-shaped building in Mecca. To fully appreciate Malcolm X's embodied prayers, I also read Malcolm X's performance of dhikr, a devotional activity in which, as we saw in the case of 'Umar ibn Sayyid, a believer rhythmically repeats God's names, in a full-throated performance emanating deep within the core of the body, while circling the Ka'ba. To further illustrate the subtle and intricate subversion of Malcolm X's prayers, I show how his prayerful mumblings and peregrinations amount to a rhetorical

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the values that were mobilized to dismiss religion, such that we no longer exist in such a staunchly oppositional world; and the binary oppositions between reason and revelation, matter and spirit, truth and belief no longer hold. (990)

performance that I call disarticulation—embodied prayers that exceed the denotational meaning of speech-acts. My use of the term “disarticulate” draws on two meanings: “to become disjointed; to separate at the joints” (*OED*)—and articulate — “to express distinctly” (*OED*). Here, “dis-articulation” is meant to capture Malcolm X’s experience of embodied prayer.

At the same time, my assessment of the political potential of Malcolm X’s prayer takes into account the impact of his masculinist approach. In the final section of this chapter, I shift to Malcolm X’s engendering of the performance of prayer. Despite Malcolm X’s liberatory vision, his submission neglects to consider how women might participate in subversion as prayerful submission. This omission is all the more glaring given the importance of the religious figure of Hagar in the origins of the Hajj, not to mention the fact that his sister’s savings funded his travels.<sup>83</sup> For Muslims, Hagar is the mother of Arabs and ancestor of Muslims. Yet Malcolm X’s narrative of political transformation overlooks the female foundations of the pilgrimage.<sup>84</sup>

To conclude, I turn to the prayers of another member of the NOI, Hinton Johnson X, to show the extent to which Islamic prayer is perceived as subversive in the U.S. In tracing these different manifestations of prayer, I suggest that submission through prayer is a subtle, yet powerful, component of Malcolm X’s political activism.

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<sup>83</sup> In the *Book of Genesis*, Hagar is the Egyptian slave girl of Ibrahim and his wife Sarah who is given by the infertile Sarah to Ibrahim. After Hagar gives birth to Ibrahim’s first son, Isma‘ail, Sarah becomes resentful of Hagar. Consequently, Hagar is abandoned with her son in the wilderness, a barren desert, when Isma‘ail was only an infant. Hagar then receives revelation from God that a great nation will be created from the descendants of her son. This wilderness, so the story goes, is present-day Mecca.

<sup>84</sup> African American feminists in the 1980s and 1990s wrote essays on Malcolm X that focused favourably on his political visions, while denouncing his misogynistic statements. See, for example, Angela Davis’s “Meditations on the Legacy of Malcolm X.”

## Prison Prayers

Malcolm X's prison conversion offers us an early glimpse of the link between prayer and his political objectives, which would culminate in his transformative experiences at the Hajj. The *Autobiography* enables us to grasp the importance of his turn to Islam as the critical step for this process of politicization. This account is significant for two reasons. First it draws on the conventions of conversion narratives. Second, the *Autobiography's* representation of conversion suggests that this religious process is a radically transformative act, affecting both Malcolm X's inner life and political outlook.<sup>85</sup>

Malcolm X identifies his turn to Islam in the moment when he was first moved to pray. While serving a prison sentence for armed robbery at a Massachusetts state prison facility, Malcolm X receives a letter from his brother Philbert, telling him to “pray to Allah for deliverance” (AMX 179). Later in the *Autobiography*, Malcolm X recalls that “[r]egularly my family wrote to me, ‘Turn to Allah . . . pray to the East’” (AMX 195). It is through prayer that Malcolm X begins to reverse his “antireligious attitude” (AMX 177). These injunctions to pray become a central fixture of Malcolm X's life and rhetoric. Malcolm X draws on the centrality of submission for a Muslim: “Over and over, I read, and heard, ‘The key to a Muslim is submission, the attunement of one toward Allah’” (AMX 187). But more than simply leading Malcolm X to embrace a hermetic lifestyle, his submission to Allah enables him to redefine his relationship to the United States. In so

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<sup>85</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson define conversion narrative as a narrative “structured around a radical transformation from a faulty ‘before’ self to an enlightened ‘after’ self” (266). For more on Malcolm X's *Autobiography* as a conversion narrative see Alex Gillespie's “Autobiography and Identity: Malcolm X as Author and Hero” and Paul John Eakin's “Malcolm X and the Limits of Autobiography.”



doing, Malcolm X accepts Elijah Muhammad's doctrine of segregation, which he embraced until his pilgrimage to Mecca in April 1964. But his submission also provokes feelings of pride and shame:

The hardest test I ever faced in my life was praying. . . . My comprehending, my believing the teachings of Mr. Muhammad had only required my mind's saying to me, 'That's right!' or 'I never thought of that.' But bending my knees to pray—that *act*—well that took me a week . . . I had to force myself to bend my knees. . . . For evil to bend its knees, admitting its guilt, to implore the forgiveness of God, is the hardest thing in the world. (195-6)

Within this recognizable convention in which his turn inward also manifests as a turn outward, Malcolm X foregrounds the pain involved in embracing a language of submission. Malcolm X's autobiography adheres to the conversion narrative insofar as it testifies to his spiritual conversion to Islam. Scholars, like David Leigh, have aligned the *Autobiography* with African American spiritual autobiographies since the narrative details Malcolm X's search for meaning and eventual turn to orthodox Islam.<sup>86</sup> According to Yolanda Pierce, the spiritual autobiography was adapted and included in the slave narrative tradition, such as Olaudah Equiano's *The African, Written by Himself*, in which "issues of theology coexist, and are fused, with various social and political messages" (92). Malcolm X merges these messages in his depiction of spiritual rebirth.

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<sup>86</sup> In *Circuitous Journeys*, David Leigh identifies three narrative patterns in spiritual autobiographies: "childhood events (stage one) raise questions that drive the author on a negative journey of wandering in a desert of illusory answers (stage two) before he or she discovers a transforming world in which the original questions can be resolved (stage three)" (5).

Ultimately, this rebirth reforms his behaviour, while it also helps to externalize his submission through the performance of prayer. Because Malcolm X's declaration of faith required that he reorient his body in ritual prayer, this embodied reorientation leads to his disavowal of what the NOI called the "white devil" of American values (*AMX* 192).

Malcolm X's prayer, moreover, exemplifies a postsecular posture of submission. That is, prayer is a malleable formula that enables Malcolm X to resist his confinement and isolation while in prison as much as it awakens his spiritualism. In a moving letter that melds the secular and the religious, Malcolm X implores:

I pray, Philbert, in the name of Allah and his Apostle, the Honorable Mr. Elijah Muhammad, that your letters continue to come. Each sentence, each little word, carries revelation, enlightenment and food for this journey . . . and as long as I see my brothers going ahead, I too must progress, for my love of All of you has that magnetic force that lifts me up too . . . to be with you. (11-28-48)<sup>87</sup>

Malcolm X finds spiritual solace and power in his brother's letters, savouring every word. Significantly, in the same breath that he invokes the philosophical and political movement known as the "Enlightenment," which ushered in an age of secularism, rationalism, and the death of God, he also invokes religious experience: "revelation." In this intimate moment, Malcolm X rejects the perception of the secular and religious as discrete domains. Instead, he deploys ostensibly religious language to describe filial, rather than divine, love.

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<sup>87</sup> Box 3, Folder 1. "Correspondence." The Malcolm X Collection: papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library.

Malcolm X also appeals to secular forms to fill spiritual gaps, as evident in the poetic excerpts he includes in his other letters to Philbert. In one letter, Malcolm X tellingly discloses, “I’m a bug for poetry. When you think back over all of our past lives, only poetry could best fit into the vast emptiness created by man” (02-04-1949).<sup>88</sup> These letters written at the time of his conversion to Islam describe Malcolm X filling this vast existential gap with poetry rather than sacred script. He goes on to fill some of his letters with fragments of poetry from famous Persian poets, such as Omar Khayyam and Hafiz Shirazi. For example, Malcolm X quotes the following from the fourteenth-century Persian mystic and Sufi poet, Hafiz:

The rosebud hides herself for shame of Thee!

Nor drowsed Narcissus dare to look on Thee:

How can the rose her sovereignty proclaim?

Her light is of the moon, the moon’s from thee. (02-04-1949)<sup>89</sup>

In his transitional phase, Malcolm X turns to poetry, and looks to the East to expand his imagination. In these lines, Malcolm X engages in a subtle reflection on earthly versus divine submission. Like ‘Umar ibn Sayyid, Malcolm X reserves ultimate sovereignty or “Mulk” to God. He also seems to align himself with the rosebud or the flower narcissus, and this tenderness animates his selection of poetry in his letters to Philbert. Hafiz, whose poetry straddles the sacred and the secular, and whose work is peppered with odes to

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<sup>88</sup> Box 3, Folder 1. “Correspondence.” The Malcolm X Collection: papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library.

<sup>89</sup> Box 3, Folder 1. “Correspondence.” The Malcolm X Collection: papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library.

wine and love, stands as a source of inspiration, even if a minor one, for Malcolm X during the early phases of his conversion to the NOI.

According to Annemarie Schimmel, Hafiz's writing has been divided into two camps, with some scholars treating it as "worldly" and others who approach it "mystically" (163). In a similar spirit, Malcolm X shuttles between the sacred and the profane in his private prison letters, highlighted in the image of a rosebud prostrating before God. The attempt to balance the two domains persisted throughout his life as evident in his admission to his followers during the final months of his life: "For the Muslims, I'm too worldly, for other groups, I'm too religious" (qtd. in DeCaro 236). We might note additional similarities between Malcolm X and Hafiz. Both, for example, were visited by apparitions when they were at their lowest. Khwaja Khizar appeared before Hafiz, "the most learned of the Prophets. . . . [and] blessed him with the gift of eloquence and poetry" (Mohammad 9). Similarly, "[a]fter pray[ing] for some kind of relief from [his] confusion," while in prison, a man appeared before Malcolm X and seemed to offer him the relief he was seeking and to validate his conversion (*AMX* 215). Malcolm X would later reflect, "my pre-vision was of Master W. D. Fard, the Messiah, the one whom Elijah Muhammad said had appointed him-Elijah Muhammad-as His Last Messenger to the black people of North America" (*AMX* 218). The visitation of a prophetic or divine figure animates Malcolm X's early experience of Islam. In the same way, the presence of Hafiz's poetry and influence reveals that Malcolm X's religious attitudes were flexible, so that he could appreciate an intoxicated narcissus while also praising divine light. This flexibility helps us to better understand the way his prayers straddle the worldly and mystical, and to recognize the expansiveness of his prayers. The

letters and the poetry also reveal a crucial aspect of Muslim prayer that Malcolm X puts into his approach to civil rights and politics: submission.

More than the poetry, Malcolm X was deeply influenced and horrified by his readings on the history of slavery in the Americas, particularly in the antebellum U.S. In his words, “I never will forget how shocked I was when I began reading about slavery’s total horror” (*AMX* 202). In attempts to proselytize to fellow prisoners, Malcolm X drew on this history, citing Nat Turner’s slave rebellion of 1831 and the works of the radical abolitionist, John Brown (*AMX* 203). Importantly, he would also turn to the history of African Muslims enslaved in the Americas in order to politicize his prayers. Malcolm X understood that there were African Muslims among the enslaved. Indeed, Islam has a long history in America, and attention to this representation of the prayers of a black Muslim reminds us of this history. Given this background, Malcolm X’s turn to Islamic prayer evokes the presence of enslaved African Muslims in colonial and antebellum America. In fact, Malcolm X spent his early days of proselytizing by recounting this history: “I told them that some slaves brought from Africa spoke Arabic, and were Islamic in their religion” (*AMX* 210).<sup>90</sup> Malcolm X’s prayer can be seen as extending the resistance and subversive actions of African Muslims in the Americas.

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<sup>90</sup> Although it is unlikely that Malcolm X knew this history in detail, his allusion to it gestures toward his awareness of a longer history and his keenness to situate himself in relationship to that history. As I have been suggesting, an important element in the representations of African Muslims is their prayers. The most famous of these enslaved Africans Muslims was Ayuba Suleiman Ibrahima Diallo (also known as Job ben Solomon), who was enslaved in Annapolis, Maryland around 1730. Despite his captivity, Diallo would sneak into the woods to offer his daily prayers (Curtis IV, *The Call of Bilal* 1). The furtive prayers of enslaved Muslims extend beyond the United States. Although Malcolm X did not allude to specific examples, historian João Reis has observed that, in Bahia, Brazil, enslaved Muslims engaged in collective prayer sessions. These Islamic prayers are important rituals because they mobilized dissent. As Muhammad Shareef notes, “*salaat* (congregational prayer) played a major role in galvanizing and inciting the Muslims to collective actions” (38). This performance of inward profession of faith propelled an outward political revolt against Bahian slave masters known as the 1835 Yoruba Muslim uprising, or the Revolt of the

The repetitiveness of his *salāt* — “[a]gain, again, I would force myself back down into the praying-to-Allah posture” (AMX 196)—leads him to not only make behavioural changes, but also to translate the submissive posture of prayer to empowerment for black Americans. In the final chapter of the *Autobiography* Malcolm X aligns Islam with change, asserting “[h]ere in race-torn America, I am convinced that the Islam religion is desperately needed, particularly by the American black man” (424). Placing Malcolm X within this lineage of oppressed African Muslims reveals continuities between the prayers of the enslaved African Muslims in the colonial and antebellum periods and prayers of the twentieth century. Malcolm X’s prayer becomes part of his critique of the U.S, one that he connects to the history of Islamic prayer in the so-called “New World.” The wide range of texts Malcolm X read while in prison, including Persian poetry, the history of slavery in the Americas, the works of Marcus Garvey, Frederick Douglass, and what he described as Oriental and Occidental philosophy, establish a link between imprisonment and his interest in travel and transnationalism.

For Malcolm X the form of prayer was more important than prayer alone. Even though his conversion to Islam was initially conversion to the NOI in the early parts of his *Autobiography*, a major turning point arrives when Malcolm X embarked on the Hajj, an experience that solidified the distinction between NOI doctrine and what he considered an authentically Muslim form of prayer. In his words, “the purpose for

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Malés. Despite its brevity, his reference to enslaved African Muslims demonstrates how profoundly inspired Malcolm X was by the knowledge that there were black Muslims who came before.

making the Hajj was to get an understanding of true Islam” (AMX 400).<sup>91</sup> This trip marked his rejection of NOI doctrine and, symbolically, a decisive, second Islamic conversion, which brought with it an intensified political commitment.<sup>92</sup> Malcolm X’s post-NOI prayers strove to advance human rights and therefore redirect submission more outwardly by establishing transnational ties between the United States, the Middle East, and Africa. Malcolm X performed an embodied religion through movement. Although at this point the doctrines of prayer were similar between the NOI and orthodox Islam, Malcolm X’s repudiation of the former and enthusiastic embrace of the latter mark an ideological break from the nationalism central to Elijah Muhammad’s teachings.<sup>93</sup> Rejecting NOI teachings, Malcolm X began to embrace the internationalism he associated with the human rights of Islamic globalism. In a speech Malcolm X gave while in Cairo in July of 1964, he averred that combating antiblackness “must also be the concern and the moral responsibility of the entire Muslim world—if you hope to make the principles of the Quran a *Living Reality*” (qtd. in DeCaro 239). It would be a mistake, however, to read Malcolm X’s Hajj prayer as a straightforward denunciation of NOI

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<sup>91</sup> Nonetheless, Malcolm X’s contact with Sunni doctrine and prayer preceded his pilgrimage. For more on orthodox Muslims’ criticism of the legitimacy of the NOI, see Herbert Berg’s *Elijah Muhammad and Islam*.

<sup>92</sup> Ironically, it is Elijah Muhammad’s and Malcolm X’s respective trips to Mecca, performed at different times, which alter their conception of prayer. As noted, Malcolm X’s Hajj experience leads him to embrace orthodox Islam, whereas Elijah Muhammad distances himself from orthodox Islam and more closely embraces the NOI’s unusual theology after completing the ‘*umra*, or lesser pilgrimage to Mecca, in 1959.

<sup>93</sup> The difference between NOI prayer and Sunni prayer is not significant. Evidence of the NOI’s orthodox prayers are found in Elijah Muhammad’s manual *Muslim Daily Prayer* (1957), although this manual was not available at the start of the NOI movement. The short manual contains descriptions of daily prayers, such as rules of ablution, the procedures of prayer, quotations from the Qur’ān, and a final comment by Elijah Muhammad. In this manual, the only difference between the prayers of orthodox Islam and that of the NOI is linguistic: NOI members would offer their prayers in English and Arabic prayers would be deferred to “[s]ome day in the near future” (1). For more on prayer and Elijah Muhammad, see Curtis IV’s *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam*.

doctrines or as a testament to his embrace of Sunni Islam. Indeed, there appears to be continuity in Malcolm X's religious transformations that, for DeCaro, are propelled by his "Garveyite core," especially since Malcolm X's parents were active members in Marcus Garvey's Pan-Africanist movement, the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (212). Garveyism's black nationalist ethos continued to influence Malcolm X's religious journey. The Hajj signalled a continuation in Malcolm X's politics and spirituality as much as it did a turning point. Significantly, however, at this juncture, his political views and feelings were channelled through his Hajj prayers.

Critics who have studied Malcolm X's pilgrimage to Mecca have noted the connection between his pilgrimage and his global turn. Sohail Daulatzai productively places Malcolm X's global commitments in what he calls the "Muslim International," a community and cultural space informed by black radical thought, black Islam, and the Muslim Third World and motivated by the politics of anti-colonialism and anti-racism (xv).<sup>94</sup> Zareena Grewal likewise contends that the Hajj marked Malcolm X's turn to "internationalism" (115).<sup>95</sup> If pilgrimage is merely seen as a steppingstone in Malcolm X's progress from NOI minister to human rights activist, we miss the ways his politics informs, as much as it is informed by, his religious stances. This connection between

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<sup>94</sup> Daulatzai designates Malcolm X as the ultimate representative of the Muslim International.

<sup>95</sup> Significantly, Grewal notes that the internationalism Malcolm X chooses is not coterminous with Saudi Arabia's "transnational pan-Islamist vision," but with "pan-Africanism, and the transnational moral geography of the Dark World" (115).



politics and religion can be seen most clearly when we consider the body memories manifest in Malcolm X's moving prayers.

## The Body Memory of Hajj and Dhikr

Memory is embodied, according to Thomas Fuchs, because “the body is not just a structure of limbs and organs, nor merely a realm of sensations and movements. It is also a historically formed body whose experiences have left their traces in its invisible dispositions” (20). In what follows, I examine how Malcolm X's prayers engaged him in a fundamentally embodied experience that linked him to other bodies likewise bound through their shared Islamic faith. This embodied experience, moreover, is manifestly moving, engaging thoughtful action through a form of prayer that, while occasionally sedentary, is also mobile. Travel, itself, in the form of the Hajj, might be seen as a form of prayer.

Feeling lost and unequipped to proceed with the Hajj rituals, Malcolm X reflected, “I wished that I could start walking. At least, I knew how to do that” (*AMX* 378). When he does walk and pray among the pilgrims, crucial aspects or traces of his famous “Ballot or the Bullet” speech reverberate in his experience of communal prayer. In this speech, which Malcolm X delivered on April 12th, 1964, a few weeks after officially leaving the NOI, he lambasted the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>96</sup> He argued that

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<sup>96</sup> Malcolm X delivered his “The Ballot or the Bullet” speech at King Solomon Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan on April 12th, 1964. He had given an earlier version of this speech on April 3rd, 1964, at Cory Methodist Church in Cleveland, Ohio.

this movement suffers from a *lack* of movement. In particular, Malcolm X identified sit-ins and sit-downs as emblematic of its misguidedness:

As long as you got a sit-down philosophy, you'll have a sit-down thought pattern. And as long as you think that old sit-down thought you'll be in some kind of sit-down action. They'll have you sitting in everywhere. It's not so good to refer to what you're going to do as a sit-in. That right there castrates you. Right there it brings you down. What goes with it? Think of the image of someone sitting. An old woman can sit. An old man can sit. A chump can sit. A coward can sit. Anything can sit. Well you and I been sitting long enough, and it's time today for us to start doing some standing, and some fighting to back that up. (Delivered on April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1964)

Though Malcolm X's statement on sitting is meant to be provocative, memorable, and even polemical, it is troubling for its pejorative equation of disability, old age, and castration with cowardice. Nonetheless, Malcolm X's purpose is to highlight that the strategies of the Civil Rights Movement produce inert bodies since he believed that the movement could only think in the confines of the nation state. As he tersely put it, the leaders of the civil rights movement are "house negroes" limited to the domestic space of the nation, unable to imagine themselves in solidarity with international struggle.

The movements that he imagined transcending a "sit-in philosophy" are literalized through his pilgrimage, specifically in his engagement with *tawāf*—the Islamic ritual of circling around the Ka'ba in a counter-clockwise direction. This ritual expands assumptions of prayer beyond sedentary reflection to include a walking form of

meditation.<sup>97</sup> On April 23rd, 1964, Malcolm X participated in *tawāf* alongside pilgrims from all over the world. This key ritual, I suggest, put into action Malcolm X's appeal in "The Ballot or the Bullet," mainly that his audience counter the insularity of the Civil Rights Movement. Thus, Malcolm X's embodied Hajj-prayers hearken back to earlier experiences in the U.S.

The second aspect of Muslim prayer that informs Malcolm X's approach to civil rights and politics is movement. Indeed, echoes of Malcolm X's famous speech can be found in reflections of his pilgrimage experience. His speech, then, opens the possibility of politicizing the repeated walks on paved paths around the Ka'ba, which are in themselves a kind of prayer. More specifically, these circumambulations model a transnational community, a global Muslim *umma*, as an alternative to the insularity of nation states. The pilgrims perceive themselves in relationship to one another despite their differences. It is in this experience that we begin to see how the power of *tawāf* mirrors his critique of the Civil Rights Movement.

While prayer requires the re-orientation of the body, for the most part it entails stationary postures. Malcolm X's participation in the Hajj ritual, however, taught him that the faithful are obliged to engage in movement, such as *tawāf* and *sa'i* (the passing between the hills of Safa and Marwa). Drawing attention to the movement of pilgrims, Malcolm X observes that "[the Ka'ba] was being circumambulated by thousands upon thousands of praying pilgrims, both sexes, and every size, shape, color, and race in the

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<sup>97</sup> In his essay "Malcolm X as Religious Peripatetic," William David Hart draws on the metaphor of walking to explore Malcolm X's movement between different religious traditions. Here, however, I explore walking as more than a metaphor.

world” (AMX 387). Besides describing walking as a form of holy movement, as ‘Umar ibn Sayyid does, walking here signifies a universal language that brings together a community. The Ka‘ba becomes the globe around which the pilgrims of varied races, classes, and nationalities circumnavigate. These movements enable Malcolm X not only to remake himself, but also to counter the barriers that constrain his movement within the United States and to advance a more expansive vision of belonging. In a letter from Mecca, Malcolm X explained how the Hajj has become a metaphor for global communion, writing:

I hope that once and for all my Hajj to the Holy City of Mecca has established our Muslim Mosque’s authentic religious affiliation with the 750 million Muslims of the orthodox Islamic World. And I *know* once and for all that the Black Africans look upon America’s 22 million blacks as long-lost *brothers*! They *love* us! They *study* our struggle for freedom! They were so *happy* to hear how we are awakening from our long sleep—after so-called ‘Christian’ white America had taught us to be *ashamed* of our African brothers and homeland! (AMX 416)

Here, Malcolm X expands the orientation of his political vision beyond the U.S. to Mecca. The religious ethos of submission, which propels Malcolm X’s conversion to Islam in the first place, represents more than just an inspiring devotion to Allah. Submission also offers a socio-political critique that extends civil rights struggles beyond the U.S.—a strategy that Malcolm X faults leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., for not adopting. Zareena Grewal compellingly writes that Malcolm X’s post-Hajj phase crystalizes his “emergent moral geography of the Dark World, which drew on the geography of the postcolonial Muslim Afro-Asia in order to remap America as a social

justice project” (112).<sup>98</sup> Through the agency of prayer, Malcolm X grasps that such African American struggles need to be connected to decolonization in Africa and the Middle East, and with global struggles for equality and justice, which become concretized during his subsequent trips to Africa. Adding a geographical dimension to prayer, Malcolm X enters the domain of what Daulatzai calls “the Muslim International.” In this international mode, Malcolm X surmises that black American leaders should circumnavigate the globe: “[i]t was there in the Holy Land, and later in Africa, that I formed a conviction which I have had ever since—that a topmost requisite for any Negro leader in America ought to be extensive traveling in the non-white lands on this earth . . .” (AMX 398). Malcolm X’s expansive prayers, which are mediated by racial politics, link efforts to resist white supremacy with decolonizing movements in the Middle East and North and West Africa.

Embodied prayer through walking is central to Malcolm X’s project of dismantling racism and imperialism because movement is profoundly tied to politics, especially to international crossings. Another important precedent for Malcolm X’s politicization of his Hajj experience is a demonstration that he led on February 13th, 1963, involving 230 Black Muslims. This demonstration was in protest of the exoneration of Los Angeles police officers who fatally shot a black Muslim at a mosque and permanently injured another NOI- member. To add insult to injury, the unarmed Muslims who defended themselves against police brutality were indicted and found guilty (DeCaro

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<sup>98</sup> For more on Malcolm X and the Middle East, see Alex Lubin’s important text *Geographies of Liberation: The Making of an Afro Arab Political Imaginary*. With a focus on international geopolitics, Lubin links black freedom struggles to the political struggles of Middle Easterners and Northern Africans.

184). Although demonstrations at Times Square were banned at the time, Malcolm X reasoned with the officers that “he was only going to exercise his rights as a citizen to *walk* at Times Square, and anyone who wanted to follow him had the same right” (DeCaro 185; emphasis added). This episode of Malcolm X’s protest of police brutality through the act of walking foreshadows his experience of brotherhood in Mecca, for “the body always carries its own past into the surroundings as a procedural field of possibility” (Fuchs 21). Indeed, Malcolm X’s progressive politics became the lens through which he understood his prayer in Mecca. His speech and demonstration complement his religious experience and from this perspective, prayer becomes antithetical to stillness. Through this episode, Malcolm X grasped that walking not only resisted insularity, but could also be transgressive. Malcolm X’s international walks, nonetheless, remind him of the domestic concerns of black Americans in the U.S. Embodied religion and political protest, then, became entangled; in short, submission and movement are integral to Malcolm X’s approach to civil rights and politics.

Although Malcolm X prayed in Mecca, an act that enabled him to connect to global struggles for human rights, he also remained deeply concerned with the plight of African Americans. That is, Malcolm X’s internationalism retained a focus on the need to challenge U.S. racism while connecting this challenge to global human rights. In a speech Malcolm X gave while in Cairo in 1964, it was clear that his concern with U.S. race relations continued to influence his new spiritual awakening in such a way that he connected his embrace of global brotherhood with his interest with race politics in the U.S., “[m]y fight is two-fold, my burden is double, my responsibilities multiple . . . material as well as spiritual, political as well as religious, racial as well as non-racial”

(qtd. in DeCaro 239). Amidst his prayers, Malcolm X clearly articulated scenes of racial oppression in the United States even to his fellow pilgrims when given the chance. In conjunction with pronouncing his awe at the scene of “people of all races, colors . . . coming together as *one*,” Malcolm X preached about American racism. In discussing this experience of racial unity, Malcolm X wrote that the Hajj “gave me an opportunity, and I used it, to preach them a quick little sermon on America’s racism, and its evils” (*AMX* 389). In these improvisatory sermons, Malcolm X connected faith and protest. Rather than warning against a cataclysmic end as Malcolm X might have done as NOI-minister, he engaged in collective prayer, which he followed with a political statement. By speaking to an international crowd about racism in the U.S., Malcolm X offered a model of transgression that hinges on submission, a kneeling before Allah as captured by the photograph taken by John Launois.

The religious and political converge most starkly during Malcolm X’s Hajj experience. In the context of the Hajj, Malcolm X participates in a form of Muslim prayer known as *dhikr*. The practice of *dhikr* is central to understanding the significance of Malcolm X’s subversion through prayerful submission because this embodied and communal practice reflects a particular political awakening. *Dhikr* is prayer that involves the believer repeating in a rhythmic manner *dhikr* formulas or verses from the Qur’ān. During Hajj, *dhikr* is performed by pilgrims invoking the names of Allah in unison as they circulate the Ka’ba. According to the medieval Islamic philosopher Ibn ‘Arabi, the Hajj and *dhikr* are inextricable (cited in Ayoub 207). *Dhikr* is not merely the repetition of God’s name but also, as Ibn ‘Arabi laid out, comprises a cumulative process that begins with the believer uttering formulas of remembrances, but becomes an inward

performance that draws the pilgrim closer to Allah (cited in Ayoub 207). The moment of *dhikr* where the recognition of divine essence is predicated on shedding worldly things, such as social and political constructions, serves as a model for understanding Malcolm X's call for human rights.

The Hajj is more than spiritual renewal for Malcolm X; its transgressive possibilities emerge when he is able to find himself geographically and politically untethered. He famously expressed this recognition in a letter he sent from Mecca to his followers in New York:

There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colors, from blue-eyed to black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and the non-white. (*AMX* 390-91)<sup>99</sup>

To pray means to participate in efforts to erase national and racial boundaries and markers, especially since Islam, in theory, overwrites one's nationality, culture, language, ethnicity, and class. The audibility of the recitations and the diversity of pilgrims enabled Malcolm X to imagine a transnational and global political vision of black liberation.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> During a trip to Egypt in 1886, Frederick Douglass made a similar observation on what appeared to him as racial inclusivity in Islam: "I do not know of what color and features the ancient Egyptians were, but the great mass of the people I have yet seen would in America be classed with mulattoes and negroes. This would not be a scientific description, but an American description. I can easily see why the Mohammedan religion commends itself to these people, for it does not make color the criterion of fellowship as some of our so called Christian nations do. All colors are welcomed to the faith of the Prophet" (*Frederick Douglass Diary*, "Tour of Europe and Africa" 40).

<sup>100</sup> It should be noted that despite Malcolm X's presentation of the Hajj and of Islam as racially egalitarian, he was critical of the Middle East for not taking up the plight of black Americans seriously. In a letter to Said Ramadan, a prominent member of the Muslim Brotherhood, Malcolm X lamented, "Much to my dismay, until now the Muslim World has seemed to ignore the problem of the Black American, and most



Upon his return from the Hajj and Africa, Malcolm X's vision of an international human rights movement culminated with his founding of the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) in June 1964. While the outward performance of Malcolm X's prayers had concrete political consequences, the private dimension of these utterances must also be considered to fully grasp how Malcolm X's work interweaves the private and public, the submissive and subversive.

The chants and recitations that match Malcolm X's footfalls around the Ka'ba are also informed by the domestic politics of the United States, as the sound of the pilgrims seem to quiet the din of American racism, which he represented as an abstract whiteness. He noted that, "[w]e were *truly* all the same (brothers)—because their belief in one God had removed the 'white' from their *minds*, the 'white' from their *behavior*, and the 'white' from their *attitude*" (AMX 391). These encounters undo Malcolm X's essentialist view of race, one shaped by American racial politics. In a post-Hajj speech, Malcolm X expanded on his understanding of whiteness, stating, "when you get the white man over here in America and he says he's white, he means something else. You can listen to the sound of his voice—when he says he's white, he means he's boss" (*Malcolm X Speaks* 163). The *dhikr* prayers during Hajj open Malcolm X to the notion of global citizenship, offering him a fresh perspective from which to express his critique of white privilege. These *dhikr* prayers that appear in the *Autobiography* dramatize the radical submission that mediates his politics. *Dhikr* is also an embodied experience, as it requires the believer to utter remembrances of God while circumambulating the Ka'ba. *Dhikr* takes

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Muslims who come here from the Muslim World have concentrated more effort in trying to convert white Americans than Black Americans" (qtd. in DeCaro 255).

on political meaning when this very movement enables Malcolm X to assume a universal brotherhood that transcends whiteness.

## Disarticulation and Malcolm X's Guarded Postures

More important than the chants, however, is embodied prayer, which, for Malcolm X, transgresses the standards of comprehensibility. Significantly, Malcolm X utters his refutation of NOI doctrines through Islamic prayers that are inarticulate. His Hajj rituals, made possible through a *mutawaf*, a person who guides pilgrim parties, consist of mimicry and confusion: "I followed [the *mutawaf*] down, and we passed pilgrims by the thousands, babbling languages, everything but English" (AMX 377). Although Malcolm X circumambulates the Ka'ba in hopes of joining a global community of Muslims, his reference to "babbling" suggests feelings of alienation and isolation. That is, the "babbling" is not only produced by the foreign tongues of the pilgrims, but also emerges from a feeling of loss at his own unfamiliarity with Islamic prayer and the Arabic language. His uncertainty is due, not to his wavering faith in orthodox Islam, but to his rejection of the NOI's orthodoxy, which now entered its final phase. The language of prayer intoned at the Hajj is incomprehensible to Malcolm X precisely because, he explained, "[i]n Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam, we hadn't prayed in Arabic" (AMX 377). Most revealing of all is Malcolm X's unintelligible prayer, which seemed to extend the purported babbling of the crowd and culminate in his own mumbling. During *salāt el-soboh*, or sunrise prayer, Malcolm X admitted, "I may not have been mumbling the right thing, but I was mumbling" (AMX 378). At this moment of submission, Malcolm X is

inarticulate; though it is the very area where he usually is most confident, speech fails him and he is humbled. Confronted by the limits of his theological understanding, Malcolm X embraced the non-linguistic aspects of prayer, while fearing that his incomprehension jeopardized his Sunni status. He lamented, “[i]magine, being a Muslim minister, a leader in Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam, and not knowing the prayer ritual postures” (AMX 375). In another important moment, Malcolm X realized his incorrect performance of *wudu* or ablutions: “[e]ven watching the *Mutawaf*’s helper, I didn’t get it right. There’s an exact way that an orthodox Muslim washes, and the exact way is very important” (AMX 378). On the one hand, his difficulty in comprehension validates his rejection of the NOI and, on the other hand, it reminded him of the variegated and heterogeneous voices necessary for an internationalist outlook and for cross-national alliances.

Although Malcolm X expressed his embarrassment by admitting, “I don’t mean to have any of this sound joking. It was far from a joke with me” (AMX 378), his prayers were accepted by the Muslim *umma* or community. More important, his inarticulateness did not negate his legacy as a powerful orator, and it is far from a posturing. This moment encapsulates “postsecular thinking,” insofar as, to draw on Everett Hamner’s definition, this mode of thinking “enables interpretive agility about traditional religions and spiritualities by complicating fixed meanings, embracing ambiguities and diverse subcategories” (418). Paradoxically, Malcolm X’s turn to orthodox Islam surpassed the doctrinal as the act of prayer supersedes the content of prayer. Instead, Malcolm X illustrates the primacy of *posture* in the form of ritual over the content of faith. The posture is what made Malcolm X’s Islam visible both to the U.S. and to the Arab World.

To contest the pervasive dismissal of blackness both in the U.S. and in parts of the Arab world, Malcolm X invests in making his body visible to suggest that his being revolves around physical embodiment rather than the abstract concepts. Implicit in his prayers are traces of his earlier prostrations in prison. In his *Autobiography*, Malcolm X addresses his difficulty with prayer: “Again, again, I would force myself back down into the praying-to-Allah posture. When finally I was able to make myself stay down, I didn’t know what to say to Allah” (AMX 196). Malcolm X’s private, quiet praying-to-Allah posture takes on a political dimension during Hajj as it physically connects him to a global Muslim community.

In the course of mumbling his prayers, Malcolm X does more than just draw attention to his incomprehension. He reworks the theme of incomprehension that the prayers of enslaved Muslims in the United States elicit. We can grasp that Malcolm X’s mumbling functions differently from the esotericism of Bilali and ‘Umar, explored in earlier chapters. Whereas Bilali and ‘Umar retained their Islamic faith despite the prohibition against its open articulation and despite readers’ initial incomprehension of their work, Malcolm X also declared his faith despite his inability to fully comprehend the Arabic prayers.

At the same time, Malcolm X’s remarks on the pilgrims’ babble and his own uncomprehending mumblings echoed the reception of the enslaved Aaron’s Arabic recitation in Joel Chandler Harris’s children’s story *The Story of Aaron*. As I explained in Chapter Two, the children of the Abercrombie Plantation in Middle Georgia interpret Aaron’s foreign recitations, as he reads from an Arabic manuscript, as “jabber” (12). Unlike these fictional children who dismiss any possibility that the sounds have

significance, however, Malcolm X ascribed spiritual meaning to the sounds he hears. Additionally, whereas Malcolm X's initial lack of understanding humbled him, the children in Harris's story derived a sense of supremacy or superiority despite their incomprehension. In Harris's story, the children believe the task of understanding to be beneath them. Malcolm X's mumblings, however, enabled him to pronounce publicly his submission to "true" Islam. He also recognized that not every Muslim adheres to "true" Islam. His humility, then, also results in feelings of spiritual superiority to adherents of the NOI, including Elijah Muhammad.

These mumblings thus suggest that prayer is a dis-articulating practice. The embodied nature of dis-articulation is evident when Malcolm X confesses that after "learn[ing] the prayers in Arabic . . . my biggest prayer difficulty was physical. The unaccustomed prayer posture had caused my big toe to swell, and it pained me" (*AMX* 394). Similarly, the scene of conversion in prison required that Malcolm X articulate his faith through bodily disarticulations. Notably, he admitted that, "I had to force myself to bend my knees" (*AMX* 196). In this case, disarticulation preceded Malcolm X's dis-articulation of faith. His mumblings capture a dis-articulating practice that amounts to a new rhetorical performance, an embodied speech.

The concept of dis-articulation is also important because it highlights the subversive potential of impenetrability, or inaccessibility, a quality that Malcolm X retained through his turn to mumbling as a means of improvising prayer. As mentioned earlier, this impenetrability marks a distinct departure from the articulacy for which he is widely celebrated. Indeed, so associated is Malcolm X with rhetorical virtuosity that these brief but telling moments of "jabber"—in which a dis-articulating practice

surfaces—are all but overlooked by critics. Additionally, I contend that his disarticulation during his Hajj works as a new kind of rhetorical performance, one that privileges the act of recitation over the specific denotative meaning of the speech-act, allowing Malcolm X to join a diverse, international Islamic community and then to perceive a unity between freedom movements in the U.S. and African countries. Just as Malcolm X admits he mumbles his prayers, he is quick to add that he mumbles in safety. “No one,” he writes, “who happened to be watching could tell that I wasn’t saying what the others said” (*AMX* 378). The meaning of the prayers becomes secondary to the act or ritual of prayer such that Malcolm X’s prayerful pose can be considered a rhetorical performance. In another instance, Malcolm X expresses admiration at the disarticulations of pilgrims as their kneeling and rising signifies “*true* brotherhood! In unity! Living as one! Worshipping as one! No segregationists—no Liberals,” but he adds “[the pilgrims] would not have known how to interpret the meaning of those words” (*AMX* 416). In assuming the pilgrims’ unfamiliarity with notions of segregation and liberalism, Malcolm X again recognizes, albeit in a somewhat dismissive manner, the power of bodily articulations over speech-acts. Simultaneously, Malcolm X’s experience of “disarticulation” does not negate the possibilities of articulation; rather, it fuels him to continue to express and publicize “the hell my people suffer from America’s deceit.”

Malcolm X’s embodied rhetoric depended on publicizing the black body—the condition of black life—as evident in his preoccupation with seeing or being seen. We can discern this demand to be seen by attending to how Malcolm X framed his departure from the NOI. In an interview with Mike Wallace on June 8, 1964, Malcolm X averred that leaving the organization “broadened my scope,” continuing, “[f]ormerly I spoke for

Elijah Muhammad. And everything I said was, ‘Elijah Muhammad teaches us thus and so’. I’m speaking now from what I think, from what I have seen, from what I have analyzed, and the conclusions that I have reached” (qtd. in DeCaro 251). Malcolm X’s movement away from the NOI hinges on a new way of seeing, expanding his vision to perceive and receive otherness. Seeing or witnessing is pivotal in initiating Malcolm X’s spiritual transition at the Hajj. In his *Autobiography*, he reflected that, “I stood at the railing, watching. . . . [as] [t]housands upon thousands of people from all over the world made colorful patterns of movement” (*AMX* 378). In this moment, Malcolm X witnesses a colourful scene of people in their native dress arriving in Saudi Arabia. Joining this diverse group of people in prayer led him to re-evaluate his political and religious perspective and link this movement of people to “the overwhelming spirit of true brotherhood” (*AMX* 390). Indeed, Malcolm X connected his disavowal of a racialized world with his rejection of a monochromatic brotherhood. Instead, a multichromatic realm with diverse groups of people simultaneously submitting to Allah inspired Malcolm X to adopt a global vision that he insisted was necessary to subvert American racism.

Just as the “colorful patterns” gesture toward Malcolm X’s preoccupation with seeing and visibility, the aesthetics of embodied prayer amplify Malcolm X’s expression and performance of visibility. To address this performance, I want to return to Launois’s photograph of Malcolm X referenced in this chapter’s opening. The photograph evinces painterly qualities: numerous globe lamps hanging by chains from the ceiling hover over Malcolm X, halo-like; his black-and-white suit contrasts with the regal gold and red tones of the Persian carpet that blankets the interior of the mosque; windows above and below

semicircular arches brim with light; honey-coloured alabaster walls fill the background. This visual representation, which transplants a black American into a distant and ostensibly exotic scene, invokes the aesthetics of the mosque. As Malcolm X noted in his travel diary entry, he “posed,” rather than “prayed,” at the Muhammad Ali Mosque (15-08-1964).<sup>101</sup> In considering the aesthetic dimension of Malcolm X’s prayer, I suggest that aesthetic principles are an extension of what I have described as Malcolm X’s dis-articulating practices as it sheds light on his embodied prayer. That is, Malcolm X is very much concerned with visibility, specifically the visibility of the black body. The photograph preserves the black body in prayer and draws our attention to the relationship between blackness and Islam, linking black American Muslims to Egypt. In establishing this link, the photograph also conjures the long history of Egypt as a site of mythic origins, especially of an ancient African civilization, in the African American imagination. Even more subtly, the image reminds us of a statement Malcolm X made during a meeting with international dignitaries held by the NOI, “Islam is the greatest unifying force in the Dark World today” (qtd. in DeCaro 124). The quiet prayer offers a glimpse of Malcolm X’s spiritual adherence while, at the same time, globalizing black American Muslim identity.

Although the opening image represents a moment of stillness, meditation, and introspection, rather than movement, it captures prayer as a dis-articulating practice, an embodied speech-act that, in this photograph, merges aesthetics and faith or art and

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<sup>101</sup> Box 9. “Writings-Diaries.” The Malcolm X Collection: papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library.



religion. Nonetheless, the meditative posture of Malcolm X transcends what can be articulated or said about politics. Rather, it foregrounds Malcolm X's religion, calling on viewers to witness Malcolm X in the midst of Islamic prayer. The scene frames private faith, which becomes public, or emerges from the private domain, as soon as the illustration of Malcolm X praying is published in *The Saturday Evening Post*. Nonetheless, this image of Malcolm X challenges the perception of Malcolm X as "an apostle of violence."

Malcolm X was no stranger to depictions of prayer in art. On March 28th, 1963, Malcolm X received a postcard (figs. 6 and 7) from Elijah Muhammad's youngest son, Akbar Muhammad, who was studying at Al-Azhar University in Egypt, the preeminent Islamic University.<sup>102</sup> In the postcard (fig. 7), Akbar congratulated Malcolm X on a "successful celebration," most likely the celebration of the Nation of Islam's annual "Saviour's Day."<sup>103</sup> The postcard image is of the painting *Prayer* or *Salāt* by the Egyptian artist Mahmoud Said (fig. 6). What is striking about this painting is how closely it resembles the photograph of Malcolm X at the Mosque of Mohammad Ali. Both John Launois's photograph of Malcolm X and Said's painting show a Muslim man in the midst of contemplative prayer inside a mosque in Egypt with his hands resting on his knees, his head slightly bowed, and his right ring-finger adorned with a ring. It is tempting to imagine that Malcolm X was inspired by this image when he posed for John Launois.

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<sup>102</sup> It may be interesting to note that Akbar sent this postcard at a time when he was transitioning to orthodox Islam and rejecting the Nation's theology, especially since Akbar Muhammad along with his brother Wallace Muhammad were among the individuals that influenced Malcolm X to pursue Sunni Islam.

<sup>103</sup> I am grateful to Louis DeCaro for helping me contextualize this postcard.

Indeed, Malcolm X jotted the name “Mahmoud Said” while in Egypt, and during his stay there, the Fine Arts Museum held an exhibit of Mahmoud Said’s artwork, suggesting, perhaps, Malcolm X was inspired by this image when he posed for John Launois.<sup>104</sup> Although we can only speculate about the connection—there is no evidence that Malcolm X visited the museum while he was in Alexandria—these two images nevertheless leave a deep impression of devout worship. They signal the primacy of art as a conduit for faith.

This postcard is important, then, not merely because it evokes the photograph that Launois took of Malcolm X, but also because its depiction of the embodied performance of prayer in art converts religious experience into stylistic form, so that the spiritual and aesthetic become coextensive with the political. This conversion, in turn, broadened the conventions of faith and corresponds to postsecular values as it yokes together aesthetics and religion.

Malcolm X also received this postcard at a sensitive time as he was beginning to grow disenchanted with the NOI’s lack of political action, especially after the attack on members of the Nation during service in a mosque in Los Angeles. Elijah Muhammad’s response to this incident of police brutality was to “Hold fast to Islam” (qtd. in DeCaro 184). This was a troubling statement for Malcolm X, who protested to his followers in New York that: “We spout militant revolutionary rhetoric and we preach Armageddon . . . but when our own brothers are brutalized and killed, we do nothing. . . . We just sit on

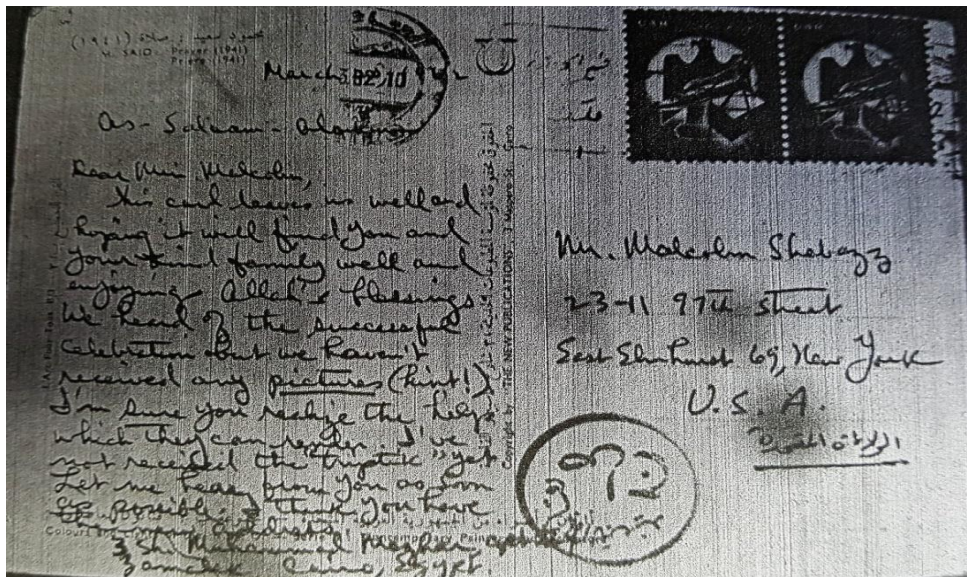
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<sup>104</sup> It is interesting to note that Mahmoud Said’s career as an artist coincided with Egypt’s Democratic Movement for National Liberation. He is often considered to be a key figure in the Modern Arab Art movement (Hess and Rashwan).

our hands” (qtd. in DeCaro 184). Malcolm X chose movement over sitting. He transgressed Elijah Muhammad’s decree by circumambulating around Times Square with his followers to protest police brutality. In choosing walking and visibility over talking and invisibility, Malcolm X demonstrated that resistance, for him, eclipsed mere speech. Here, embodied rhetoric takes precedence over prophetic or apocalyptic rhetoric. The visual representations of prayer also heighten Malcolm X’s preoccupation with visibility and of being seen, which stand against the condition of blackness in the United States. These visual representations of prayer, then, coincided with Malcolm X’s attempts to negotiate and self-fashion an image distinct from the Nation. In self-fashioning a new image, however, Malcolm X drew on an idealized brotherhood that threatened to displace, indeed erase, key female figures of, and pilgrims in, the Hajj.



**Figure 6: Image of the postcard Malcolm X received from Akbar Muhammad. Box 3, Folder 7. "Correspondence." The Malcolm X Collection: papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library.**



**Figure 7: Akbar Muhammad's postcard to Malcolm X. Box 3, Folder 7. "Correspondence." The Malcolm X Collection: papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library.**

## Engendering Hajj

No account of the Hajj is complete without considering the role of Hagar in Islam. Although Hagar is absent from the Qur'ān, she figures prominently in the Islamic tradition. For Muslims, Hagar is “a God-appointed messenger” (Abudgideiri 85) and the mother of Ibrahim’s oldest son, Ishmael or Isma‘ail, who would later become the father of the Islamic civilization. Hagar, too, would become known as “the mother of Arabs.” But Hagar’s story is also one of exile. As noted in Chapter Two, after Hagar gave birth to Isma‘ail, she is abandoned in the desert with her son, specifically to the site that would eventually become the Ka‘ba. Not surprisingly, Hajj rituals symbolize Hagar’s search for help, as pilgrims must perform *sa’i*, a rite that involves running seven times back and forth between the two hills of Safa and Marwa. The Iranian sociologist Ali Shariati interpreted the ritual of Hajj as memorializing Hagar since, in addition to re-enacting Hagar’s frantic search, there is a crescent wall, a symbol of Islam, dedicated to Hagar adjacent to the Ka‘ba. Shariati offers a compelling reading of this wall that, to him, “resembles a skirt,” as inscribing the oppressed Hagar, a “black African maid,” into the Ka‘ba (18). The wall, then, is a symbol for women and their struggles. The Islamic tradition gives Hagar a privileged position in the house of Allah by preserving her experience of submission and anguish in key structures at the Hajj. In fact, when pilgrims circumambulate the Ka‘ba, they also walk around Hagar’s wall or “skirt.” Hagar’s exceptional status, given that she is engraved in one of the pillars of Islam, highlights the pivotal role of women in the Hajj.

That Hagar’s story receives short shrift in Malcolm X’s writings speaks volumes on the gendered ways that he represented Islamic prayer. Indeed, critics rightly critique

Malcolm X's political vision as distinctly masculine. As Ossie Davis asserted in his eulogy, "Malcolm X was our manhood, our living, black manhood!" (121). Malcolm X's Hajj journey reveals how closely aligned the politics of visibility is to his masculinity when it comes to Islamic prayer. This very visibility, however, relies on making invisible the role and presence of women, despite, as I discuss below, the fact that Malcolm X owed the transformative experience of pilgrimage to his wife and sister, Ella Collins, who gave him the money she had been saving to go on the Hajj herself.

Although Malcolm X referenced the figure of Hagar in his *Autobiography*, he mentioned her only briefly: "Then we ran between the two hills, Safa and Marwa, where Hagar wandered over the same earth searching for water for her child Ishmael" (*AMX* 387). Malcolm X's passing remark discloses the gendered portrayal of the politics of prayer. Instead of hearing the echoes and anguish of Hagar's pain, Malcolm X elided the private yet subversive submission of women. For Muslim feminists, Hagar became a powerful symbol for "female struggle and liberation" and for "wom[en] seeking reform in a patriarchal society" (Abugidieri 83). Given the increasing recognition of Hagar's significance for the Hajj, Malcolm X's elision, then, effaces the oppressed black women symbolized through this figure. Instead, he repeated Hagar's wandering without fully acknowledging her sacrifices. By recuperating the confrontation between Malcolm X and Hagar's "skirt," we can uncover the subtleties of how gender operates in Malcolm X's politicized religious turn.

Malcolm X implicitly acknowledged Hagar on several levels: by moving between the hills of Safa and Marwa; by drinking from the spring of *Zamzam*; and by circumambulating her "skirt." The babbling and the cries, which simultaneously move

and confuse Malcolm X, gesture toward Hagar's suffering and perseverance. The emotional depth of these women must be acknowledged to fully appreciate the possibility of subversion in submission, especially considering the Orientalist portrayals of Muslim women as submissive subjects without agency. Yet female piety and submission, as Saba Mahmood has argued, can also be deployed as an expression of freedom and agency.<sup>105</sup> Hagar's submission offers a model through which we might challenge western liberalism or normative accounts of agency.

The Islamic tradition, however, has largely left out women from discussions of prophecy and prayer. Recognizing this neglect, scholar Amina Wadud introduces a hermeneutical approach to the Qur'ān that includes women.<sup>106</sup> Critics have likewise attempted to uncover a latent feminism in Malcolm X's trajectory of his work or to denounce his misogyny. In her assessment of gender in Malcolm X's life and work, Sheila Radford-Hill insists that Malcolm X must be considered in the context of his relationships with women. She contends that despite his masculinist and sexist rhetoric, we must account for Malcolm X's experiences with women, particularly activists such as Yuri Kochiyama and Patricia Robinson, and his post-NOI perspective on human rights.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> See Saba Mahmood's study of the women's mosque movement in Egypt, *Politics of Piety*.

<sup>106</sup> In *Qur'an and Woman*, Amina Wadud broadens Qur'ānic exegesis by first noting the elision of women "during critical periods of development in Qur'anic interpretation" since "'traditional' *tafsir* . . . were exclusively written by males" (2). In her re-reading of the Qur'ān from a woman's perspective and by focusing on key female figures in Islam, she takes into account context, "grammatical composition," and "the whole text" (3).

<sup>107</sup> See also Erik S. McDuffie and Komozi Woodard's essay, "'If you're in a country that's progressive, the woman is progressive': Black Women Radicals and the Making of the Politics and Legacy of Malcolm X."

In the process of retrieving female figures in Malcolm X's life, we are called upon to remember not only Hagar, but also Ella, his older half-sister—even if he does not consciously do so himself. In fact, Malcolm X's Hajj journey, as noted above, is made possible by Ella. This fact is not lost on Malcolm X who described Ella as “[a] *strong woman*” and expressed admiration at her strength:

She had broken the spirits of three husbands, more driving and dynamic than all of them combined. She had played a very significant role in my life. No other woman ever was strong enough to point me in directions; I pointed women in directions. I had brought Ella into Islam, and now she was financing me to Mecca.  
(AMX 367)

Although Malcolm X must be taken to task for asserting Ella as an exception here, he also recognized a reversal of gender roles. Indeed, Ella makes his mobility possible. However, just as female piety is relegated to the private sphere in early NOI accounts (the NOI's origin myth absents women), Malcolm X, too, relegates the sacrifices and submission of these women to the private sphere and to the intimate space of his diary. Even though Malcolm X acknowledges the sacrifices of his wife and sister in his diary entry—“Thank Allah for my wife, her many sacrifices (my absence), [and] my sister Ella” (*Diary* 4)—he maintains a binary view of private and public submission. Whereas Malcolm X embraces a submission that sacralized his internationalist vision, he distanced his submission from that of key female figures in his life.

At the same time, Malcolm X revised his position on black women's rights after his return from the Middle East and Africa, as critics including Radford-Hill, McDuffie and Woodard, have shown. During an interview in Paris in 1964, Malcolm X disclosed:



One thing that I became aware of in my traveling recently through Africa and the Middle East, in every country you go to, usually the degree of progress can never be separated from the woman. If you're in a country that's progressive, the woman is progressive. . . . So one of the things I became thoroughly convinced of in my recent travels is the importance of giving freedom to the woman. . . . And I am frankly proud of the contributions our women have made in the struggle for freedom . . . . (*By Any Means* 179)

This shift in perspective, critics have noted, must be read in conjunction with Malcolm X's encounters with women.<sup>108</sup> I would add "the God-appointed messenger" Hagar to the list of female influences on Malcolm X. However, notwithstanding Malcolm X's call for female liberation in his post-Nation speeches, he framed his Hajj experience solely in terms of brotherhood. In so doing, the resonances of Hagar's oppression with that of African American women escape him, as does the fact that he is following and retracing her footpaths. Nevertheless, recovering Hagar's story adds another dimension to Malcolm X's soft—but by no means disempowered—resistance through prayer. Accounting for the landscape of the Hajj, then, brings to light "the wall of Hagar" that is at the centre of Islam. This wall enables us to see and imagine the possibility of sisterhood in Malcolm X's experience of brotherhood, even if he did not recognize or acknowledge this possibility himself.

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<sup>108</sup> See Sheila Radford-Hill's "Womanizing Malcolm X."

## Protest and Prayer

Although praying in the Hajj among people of “all races, all colors—blue-eyed blonds to black-skinned Africans” inspired Malcolm X’s global reach and, indeed, his revolutionary commitment to black liberation, prayer outside the context of the Hajj and in an American jail cell in Harlem, New York provoked a radically different response (AMX 416). While walking down 125<sup>th</sup> street in Harlem on April 14, 1957, Hinton Johnson X, a member of the NOI, witnessed two police officers violently clubbing a black man. Enraged by this scene, Hinton called out to the officers: “You’re not in Alabama—this is New York!” The police responded with more violence, beating Hinton along with two other NOI members with nightsticks. The officers left Hinton badly wounded and placed him in Harlem’s 28<sup>th</sup> precinct. Despite his injuries, Hinton began to pray in his jail cell. Perhaps provoked by the sight of Hinton’s Muslim iterations, his body facing East, his forehead touching the floor, the officers beat him again, leaving him with multiple skull lacerations and a brain contusion (DeCaro 111-112). In response to this incident, members of Temple No.7 and the Harlem community surrounded the precinct, demanding that Hinton receive medical treatment. Concerned by the growing crowd, which consisted of over 2000 people by evening, the New York Police Department called upon Malcolm X to mediate between them and the community. Malcolm X declared that the crowd, now consisting of over 4000 people, would disperse as soon as Hinton received medical treatment. True to his word, once the police department complied, as James Hicks recollected, “Malcolm X stood up and waved his hand, and all those people just disappeared. Disappeared” (qtd. in Goldman 59). The thickening crowd and the quick dispersal at Malcolm X’s command thrust him and the

NOI into national prominence. According to historian Peter Goldman, Malcolm X's actions demonstrated that while "[n]obody got down on his knees. . . . They [the police officers] bowed" (58).

While Goldman recognized the police's reluctant submission to Malcolm X—indeed the chief inspector observed, "This is too much power for one man to have"—the officers reacted aggressively to Hinton's submission to Allah (59). Although Hinton prayed as a member of the NOI, Malcolm X recognized the power of silent prayer and pointed out that the officers' prejudice against both Hinton's religion and race motivated their violence against him. In a telegram sent to the police commissioner in Harlem, Malcolm X asserted that Hinton was beaten "not only for his dark skin but also for his God and the religion of Islam" (qtd. in DeCaro 114)—referencing Islamophobia as a factor in the use of excessive force. In the same telegram, Malcolm X reinforced the significance of Hinton's religion as one that unites Muslims across the globe in protest against the assault: "[t]his outrageously inhuman act incenses not only our fellow citizens of the Harlem area, but also ignites great concern in the hearts of 600 million sons and daughters of Allah throughout the Moslem world, which stretches from the China Seas [sic] to the shores of West Africa" (114).

This episode powerfully encapsulates Malcolm X's recognition of the potential of prayer to transgress national borders by creating international alliances. But more than binding prayer to a transnational network, the response to Hinton also illuminates the potential violence enacted on persons partaking in Islamic prayer. Hinton's spiritual exercise of facing Mecca while in a jail cell reminds us that violence can be the consequence of subversive submission. Violence continues to be wrought upon the

praying body in the United States and elsewhere.<sup>109</sup> Nonetheless, Malcolm X and Hinton find the potential for subversion in their prayers. Specifically, Malcolm X offered transgressive narratives of belonging through submission to Allah, a submission that relied on rejecting submission to American national ideals. Malcolm X's Islamic prayers offer a critique of the United States that departs from the American tradition of prophecy by resisting a nostalgic turn to the cultural myth of America. Just as importantly, it does so by deploying submission as protest. Malcolm X's faith-based protest via submission provides us with an alternative paradigm by which black protestors articulate religious revolt. The next chapter turns to the ways gendered labour goes into preserving and remembering this faith in resistant submission by exploring Toni Morrison's invocation of a Muslim slave's lament in *Song of Solomon*.

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<sup>109</sup> More recently, on August 14th, 2016 in New York, an Imam and his assistant were fatally shot after leaving the mosque. Some of the attacks range from people throwing oranges and shooting bb guns at worshipers at a mosque in Hayward, California, to arson attacks on a mosque in Joplin, Missouri, to burning a mosque in Glendale, Arizona, to acid-filled bottles thrown at a mosque in Lombard, Illinois during *Taraweh* prayers (Sheila Musaji). Research conducted at California State University has found that in 2015 hate crimes against Muslims had increased by 78% (Special Status Report).

## Chapter 4

### Ryna's Disembodied Wail in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

O Sugarman done fly away

Sugarman done gone

Sugarman cut across the sky

Sugarman gone home

--Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 6

Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* begins with this lament for Sugarman, which reoccurs at several occasions in the novel. The song, we learn near the end of the novel, belongs in part to a character named Ryna,<sup>110</sup> whose husband flew away, abandoning her and their children. This song also marks the occasion of a death (the suicide of Robert Smith, an insurance agent) and a birth (of protagonist Macon Dead III, or Milkman). As Ruth, Milkman's mother, goes into labour, she hears her sister-in-law, Pilate, sing the litany that is this chapter's epigraph. Not only does this song reference the novel's title, but in its appearance during five moments—the death of an insurance agent, the birth of Milkman, an intimate scene of bonding between Pilate and her family, a children's game, and Pilate's death—it also introduces the central themes of flight, abandonment, and

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<sup>110</sup> The song also belongs to members of the Shalimar community, the community to which Ryna and her husband, Solomon, belonged. The song is also traced to enslaved women, more generally, who lament their unjust fate.

bereavement. Before Milkman realizes the full meaning of this song, however, he must first undertake a series of quests in search of his freedom and independence. As he embarks on this journey, he abandons everyone important to him, including his cousin and lover, Hagar; his two sisters, First Corinthians and Magdalene (or Lena); his best friend Guitar Baines, who betrays and eventually tries to kill him; and his mother, Ruth Foster. Though Milkman is initially so driven by his father's belief that "money is freedom" (163) that he steals from Pilate, his quest eventually leads him to Shalimar, Virginia, where he discovers a place haunted by the history of slavery. While piecing together the jagged fragments of his family, Milkman discovers children singing a song, parts of which he had heard his aunt Pilate sing. The children sing a longer version of the song, which he eventually learns chronicles his heritage. Even when Milkman manages to piece together his legacy, the story is never complete because key lines in the song remain untranslated. Pilate's litany is so central to the narrative that it recurs at key moments in the novel. Pilate's song, then, is the novel's overarching symbol for losing—and finding—the heritage of slavery. Morrison's novel asks a core question: How do we trace the figure of the female Muslim slave, who has been so obscured by history and underrepresented in official archives, as to be rendered barely intelligible? Pilate's song, I contend, provides a key to unlocking this question.

This chapter builds on the interpretive method of Allahgraphic reading by considering the sonic registers invoked in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. By focusing on the litany at the heart of *Song of Solomon*, I reveal the moments when the figure of the black female slave as well as the black female Muslim slave emerges, and consider the roles that black women bear in mourning her loss, through singing, and the roles that

black men take up in remembering this history, through listening. For this reason, although my concern is with unpacking the “Song of Solomon” so as to consider the story of enslaved African Muslim women as preserved in literature, my discussion returns to the novel’s protagonist, Milkman. (As the novel’s protagonist, it would be remiss of me to ignore his significance.) In Morrison’s novel, while the memory of women is preserved through song, men also bear the responsibility of remembrance. To explore the litany that begins the novel, I consider the multiple variations of the song, which appear in three different forms: as a wail that the community mishears as the blowing of the wind; as a blues rendering; and as a children’s chant. I propose that these three forms of song are linked through the figure of Ryna, a slave woman and Milkman’s great-grandmother. Although Ryna is a minor character in Morrison’s novel, she is named in the children’s chant, is gestured to in Pilate’s blues litany, and is the source of the wail that is also confused for the wind. The expression of loss at the centre of these sonic registers also belongs to her. To illustrate this absence, Morrison presents Ryna as a disembodied wail.<sup>111</sup> To trace this disembodied wail, I draw on the concept of melancholy because, in Morrison’s novel, song expresses melancholic longing. Additionally, Ryna is introduced as a deeply melancholic figure who continues to grieve the loss of her husband and family. Melancholy offers a useful conceptual framework for understanding the absent appearance of the black female slave. Indeed, critics in affect

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<sup>111</sup> See also Avery Gordon’s provocative text, *Ghostly Matters*. In this text, Gordon suggests that, “haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities” (8). For Morrison and Gordon, the past lingers and, more importantly, disrupts dominant narratives and forms of being and knowing. The enslaved Muslim woman, who appears as a disembodied ghostly voice, disrupts the official narratives that insist on her absence.

studies, such as David Eng and David Kazanjian, have shown melancholy to be productive when it comes to constructing racialized subject positions.<sup>112</sup> In broadening the concept of melancholia, Eng and Kazanjian nuance Sigmund Freud's critical concepts of mourning, melancholia, and, in particular, loss. In their reevaluation, they shift their focus from loss to remains, where the remains become a creative, productive, and active force, rather than a regressive, pathological, solipsistic attachment to lost objects. I extend their theory of racialized melancholia by putting it in conversation with Sufi traditions, which offers the concept of *huzn* or *ghamm* as an Islamic framework for attending to the spatial and temporal dimensions of negotiating the loss of a beloved. By considering these two strands of melancholy offered by affect studies and Islamic epistemology, I argue that the melancholy of the enslaved African woman is so deeply embedded in the American landscape that it surfaces as a wail audible to passersby. It is important to note that I am not suggesting that the resistance associated with the wail is an overt, conscious act. Rather, I show that fragmented immaterial resonances—that is, song—enables us to discern presence as, itself, agential. The three forms of song are also significant because they contest the idea of written inscriptions as privileged sites of knowledge and, thereby, provide insights on the figure of the enslaved African Muslim in American literary history.

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<sup>112</sup> Notably, in their introduction to *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, co-editors David L. Eng and David Kazanjian offer a fascinating formula of melancholia—one that owes much to a medieval European and psychoanalytic framework—as “an ongoing and open relationship with the past—bringing its ghosts and specters, its flaring and fleeting images, into the present” (4). This productivity “becomes possible through melancholia’s continued engagement with the various and ongoing forms of loss” (5). To pursue this “continued engagement” is to foreground remains. As Eng and Kazanjian powerfully put it, “what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read, and sustained” (2).



## The Enslaved African Muslim Woman

Toni Morrison's representation of Ryna is inspired by an African Muslim slave also named Ryna, who is a woman invoked in the oral histories collected by the Works Project Administration (WPA). This collection of interviews of former slaves and descendants of slaves from Coastal Georgia was commissioned by the Savannah Unit of the Georgia Writers Project of the Works Projects Administration (WPA), which were then published in *Drums and Shadows* (1940).<sup>113</sup> Morrison, as Allan Austin has noted, mutes any Islamic sensibility in her characterization of the African slave, Ryna. For Austin, "Morrison is . . . curiously coy in this regard" (*Amaa* 61). Nonetheless, both Rynas, the fictional character and the figure who appears in the oral history, share similarities that extend beyond their name. Both the historical and fictional Ryna endured the brutality of chattel-slavery and are figures that do not appear directly in the oral history and novel, respectively, but are instead invoked through remembrances by either their progeny or community members. Additionally, both Rynas, the fictional one and the figure invoked in the oral history, witnessed the flight of a loved one. Flight here refers to the African American folklore of "Flying Africans," in which escape from slavery and a return home was possible for the gifted few whose supernatural powers enabled them to fly on their own or to transform into birds. Morrison's Ryna must grapple with the devastating loss occasioned by the flight of her husband, Solomon, while the Ryna

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<sup>113</sup> Scholars Allan Austin, Keith Cartwright, Nada Elia, and Susan Blake have noted that the WPA was a source of inspiration for the litany at the core of Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. In the WPA oral histories, a participant named Rosa Grant remembers Ryna, her grandmother, who was enslaved on the Sapelo Island off the Georgia seacoast. Grant paints a portrait of Ryna as an observant Muslim: Ryna was steadfast in her prayer and always concluded her prayers with the words "ameen, ameen, ameen" (145).

represented in the WPA oral history, experienced the flight of her mother, Theresa. Although few details are provided in the interviews about Theresa, we know that her decision to fly off, and to abandon Ryna, was motivated by the extreme turmoil and pain she experienced from working in the field. In the WPA interviews, her granddaughter recalls that Ryna desired to follow her mother and “*she try and try doin duh same way but she ain nebuh fly*” (*Drums* 145; emphasis added). An intense loss, therefore, permeates the representation of both Rynas.<sup>114</sup> Morrison’s Ryna symbolizes the absent black female Muslim slave, who can be discerned through her barely perceptible aural trace.

Despite the brief and indirect reference to the enslaved African Muslim woman in *Song of Solomon*, the novel’s references to other enslaved African Muslims, which Morrison also borrows from the WPA interviews, makes it possible to analyze in an oblique way the figure of the enslaved African Muslim woman. Indeed, Morrison’s folksong includes names of enslaved African Muslims—Ryna, Belali, Shalut, Yaruba, Medina, and Muhammet—cited in the WPA interviews.<sup>115</sup> Significantly, Morrison names Bilali Muhammad, also known as Ben Ali, the very figure, as we saw in Chapter Two of this dissertation, that inspired Joel Chandler Harris’s *The Story of Aaron (so named), the Son of Ben Ali*. In addition, the song names a few of Bilali’s daughters, including Shalut, Yaruba, and Medina. These names are significant because they are the progeny of the

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<sup>114</sup> In the WPA interviews, Rosa Grant, the granddaughter of Ryna, retells the story of flight as follows: One day in the field, Ryna’s mother: “stretch[ed] uh ahms out—so—an rise right up an fly right back tuh Africa” (145).

<sup>115</sup> Nonetheless, for critics like Gay Wilentz, the novel’s connection to an Islamic heritage is unconvincing. Wilentz dismisses Cartwright’s contention that *Song of Solomon* contains references to Senegambian Muslims. Instead, Wilentz claims that “[n]othing in the novel suggests that the family’s ancestry is connected to Muslims” (645).

African Muslim slave family. Medina, moreover, references one of the holiest cities in Islam.

Following Austin's observation that Morrison drew on enslaved African Muslim figures from *Drums and Shadows*, scholars Nada Elia and Keith Cartwright have begun to chart the Islamic legacy of enslaved African Muslim figures in American literature. Elia "foreground[s] the preservation of Islam among Afrodiasporan slaves" (184) and contends that *Song of Solomon*, among other works, illustrates the "confluence of 'African' and 'Muslim' folklores'" (189). By focusing on the contributions of the Senegambia region to American literature, Cartwright persuasively argues that *Song of Solomon* offers a womanist revision of a West African patrimony (*fadenya*) through African American song (81). To build on Cartwright's observation, I argue that a consideration of the song in multiple modes is necessary to understand how it connects women across space and time.

While Austin, Elia, and Cartwright point to the African Islamic confluences in *Song of Solomon*, other critics, notably Joyce Wegs and Vikki Visvis, have analyzed the role of song and music in *Song of Solomon*. Wegs and Visvis draw on the blues as testimony to African American history, despair, and healing. This chapter follows these critics' insights on the blues as a form of storytelling that unravels critical aspects of the past. I extend these insights, however, by focusing on the figure of Ryna and the purportedly untranslatable lines in "Song of Solomon." On the one hand, critics like La Vinia Delois Jennings and Susan Blake acknowledge that the untranslatable lines in the song come from an African language, they claim that the language is "unknown" (Jennings 118) or comprises "nonsense' words" (Blake 80). Keith Cartwright, on the

other hand, suggests that the children's chant is an "uncanny testimony to [the] gateway power" of an African dirge that has inspired Morrison's "Song of Solomon" (59).<sup>116</sup> I build on Cartwright's work by considering bereavement as a central component to this "uncanny testimony." Although critics have overlooked the figure of Ryna because of her minor role in the novel, Ryna is actually integral to the narrative, for she is a catalyst for bereavement and, in this way, unifies the three forms of song. Indeed, the song's uncanny testimony takes the form of a wail belonging to Ryna.

Partial though this glimpse of the enslaved African Muslim woman is in Morrison's novel, it is nevertheless important to consider its significance, given how seldom this figure appears in archives and, for that matter, in African American literature. The archives disclose little about this figure in part because African men were a prominent part of the Black Atlantic, while there were significantly fewer enslaved women. A few of the enslaved African Muslim men, such as 'Umar ibn Sayyid and Bilali Muhammad as we saw in Chapters One and Two, were recognized for their African-Arabic writings. While enslaved African Muslim men left behind tangible and recognizable traces, most notably in the form of manuscripts, enslaved African women left little that can be preserved in archives. In the absence of material traces, enslaved African Muslim women can only be glimpsed through oral testimony. Morrison's representation of Ryna through song suggests that the figure of the African Muslim slave woman, unlike the African Muslim slave man, can be recollected through the realm of

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<sup>116</sup> In *Sacral Grooves*, Keith Cartwright explains how a Mende funeral song has inspired Morrison's litany in *Song of Solomon* (43, 87, 89). I build on Cartwright's observation by connecting the dirge to Ryna's wail and by examining what the melancholy of the song reveals about the figure of the enslaved African (Muslim) woman.

song or, at least, the literary representation of sound. Locating the song becomes a crucial part in the story of recovery, a responsibility that Milkman must bear.

### Ryna's Gulch

During a late-night hunting trip that would mark his entry into a southern community in Shalimar, Virginia, Milkman hears a haunting sound that he describes as “sound[ing] like a woman’s voice, sobbing, and mingling with the dogs’ yelps and the men’s shouts” (273). Even when the cry subsides and “only the soughing wind” is left, Milkman intuits that it was “the sound of [a] . . . sobbing woman” (273; 274). This incident suggests that those who can distinguish the wail from the wind can discern traces of the lingering past and, more importantly, perceive a human voice. Tellingly, however, one cannot record the wind. Without an official record, the history and melancholy of the enslaved black woman is easy to miss. Although the cry itself cannot be easily deciphered because Ryna remains absent from the narrative—indeed, she never appears—her cry captivates Milkman who, in listening intently, becomes so “deep in thought about Ryna” that he “bump[s]” into his hunting partner, Calvin (274). After Calvin reveals that, according to folklore, the voice belongs to a woman named Ryna, Milkman resolves to seek out its history. The sonorous cry, then, awakens Milkman from his spiritual slumber and leads him to Susan Byrd, a Cherokee woman living in Shalimar and who is also Milkman’s grandmother’s niece. Byrd explains the history of Ryna’s wail to Milkman: “there’s a ravine near here they call Ryna’s Gulch, and sometimes you can hear this funny sound by it that the wind makes. People say it’s the wife, Solomon’s wife, crying” (323). Susan’s account also confirms the hearer’s potential to misrecognize the cry and, thereby, to

overlook the history encrypted within it, a misrecognition that could reduce Ryna's grief to nothing more than the sound of nature. The sound, then, is so naturalized that it is perceived as part of the landscape, and is, therefore, easy to ignore. Nonetheless, by identifying the sound as a woman's wail, Milkman accepts that Ryna's shattered subjectivity or, more precisely, the acoustic remnants of her subjectivity, are located in a gulch. The location is important as it offers a concrete space to preserve a disembodied and forgotten cry.

Ryna's wail is most audible in a particular space: the gulch that is named after her. By definition, a gulch is a valley. More precisely, a gulch is "a narrow and deep ravine, with steep sides, marking the course of a torrent; esp. one containing a deposit of gold" (*OED*). Instead of a deposit of gold usually found in this space, however, Milkman discovers a haunting wail in the gulch. That is, Ryna's immaterial wail replaces the materiality of gold. Morrison describes this wail variously as a "sob," "scream," and "moan," which preserves a powerful lament and is a crucial part of her story. Although some members of the Shalimar community declare that it is only the wind, Milkman perceives Ryna's voice as distinct from the wind. Yet the wail is intimately connected to changes in atmospheric pressure. In his words, "[y]ou could hear [Ryna crying] when the wind was right" (302). The location of the wail is as significant as the wail itself. However, this location constitutes more than just geographical space. It is also a space of memorialization that works to give shape or form to an immaterial cry.

The very stability of the location, then, memorializes Ryna's grief. Without a grave to mark her death, the gulch becomes akin to a memorial space that makes it possible for Ryna's descendants to recollect her subjectivity and her memory. Put

differently, the gulch is a place that can be visited and returned to, a physical space that houses Ryna's intense grief. As one Shalimar local, Calvin, tells Milkman, "Folks say a woman name Ryna is cryin *in there*" (274; emphasis added). Despite the stable geographical position of Ryna's cry, her sorrow is anything but static. Indeed, we are reminded that the sounds of her sorrow travel from the bottom of the ravine upwards, for Milkman describes her cry as a "long moan sail[ing] up through the trees" (273). As her cry journeys upward, her call is intensified as is the weight of her sadness.

The location and weight of Ryna's grief acquires a different meaning when read through *huzn* (also known as *ghamm*), a concept that, as noted above, I draw from Islamic epistemology, to consider the spatial concentration and temporal suspension of the wail. According to the traditions of Sufi Islam, *huzn* provides a paradigm for melancholia, wherein insurmountable grief arises from a desire to seek union (*wiṣāl*) with the divine or beloved, which is ultimately impossible to achieve. In *Epistle on Sufism*, the eleventh-century Islamic scholar Al-Qushayri's definition of *huzn* resonates with contemporary formulations of melancholy as a potentially productive force: "[s]adness [*huzn*] is a state that prevents the heart from roaming in the valleys of forgetfulness [of God]. It is one of the characteristic features of the wayfarers on the Sufi path" (156).<sup>117</sup> *Huzn* also embodies a temporal and spatial dimension since it entails a journey—a movement in time and space toward the beloved or that which has been lost—known as *mi' rāj* or "ascending ladder."<sup>118</sup> The concept of *mi' rāj* enables us to grasp the spatial dimension of Ryna's

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<sup>117</sup> Al-Qushayri also compares a heart bereft of sadness to a derelict house: "It is said that the heart that is empty of sadness dilapidates like a house that is empty of tenants" (156).

<sup>118</sup> In the Islamic tradition, the ultimate *mi' rāj* event is the Prophet Muhammad's ascent to heaven, which is regarded as a night journey (*isrā'*).

disembodied grief: as a movement upward and as a station for deep reflection. Therefore, the components of *ḥuzn* that expand on melancholy are spatial and temporal prolongation. The evocative cry has both spatial and temporal resonances insofar as it emanates from a particular location in the United States and both crosses and defies linear time by persisting despite the passage of time. The spatial component transforms the disembodied wail into an embodied experience. This wail, moreover, constitutes a vocal expression of melancholy or *ḥuzn*, which is encoded in the various articulations of song and chant. Indeed, *ḥuzn* denotes deep feelings of sadness and grief that arise from spiritual anguish.

Ryna's Gulch can accordingly be understood as a weeping station or *maqām fi-al ḥuzn*. That is, a *mi'raj* or journey comprises "stopping places called stations (*maqāmāt*) or way stations (*manāzil*), ancient terms that were used for the stages of caravans" (Chittick, *Divine Love* 165).<sup>119</sup> In this way, Ryna's Gulch transforms into a stopping station for Milkman during his quest to retrace his heritage because it is the place that propels him to investigate Ryna's voice and learn about his ancestors. Furthermore, the stations that the Sufi travels through are known as valleys—including gulches. Within this weeping station, Milkman listens to, and reflects on, Ryna's sobbing and, therefore, implicitly contemplates her suffering. However, it is not only Milkman who embarks on a journey. Ryna's voice also appears to sail upward, perhaps as an appeal for residents of

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<sup>119</sup> We might also look to Sufi sheik All-Qushayri's *Epistle on Sufism* (c.1045) again, where he establishes *ḥuzn* as a *maqām* (station), "place of residence." Some of the other *maqāmat* (mystical stations) include repentance (*tawba*), silence (*samt*), certainty (*yaqin*), among others (viii).



Shalimar to hear her anguish and grief, which resonate as all the more poignant when we recognize that the movement of her wail contrasts with her ability to leave.

In addition to disrupting space, Ryna's extended cry, which is vocalized first during the antebellum period, also disrupts conventional time, marking it as nonlinear. Milkman's realization that "Ryna was the black lady *still* crying in the gulch" (304; emphasis added), emphasizes the persistence of Ryna's wail. At the same time, the fact that she is still crying also suggests the incompleteness, and even perpetuity of, her mourning. The grieving person, as Dana Luciano contends, also experiences time differently since time is slower "[i]n grief, [and] the sensory body does not rise out of time so much as fall behind it" (20). Ryna's grief seems to have slowed down to the point that it is fixed in a specific place and continues to echo into the twentieth century.<sup>120</sup> Ryna's melancholy enables her memory to persist and invites others to consider its meaning.

Ultimately, however, it is the space of Ryna's grief—the gulch—that amplifies her wail. Indeed, if we consider Ryna's Gulch as a weeping station, a *maqām fi-al ḥuzn*, we can see how part of the American landscape transforms into a station for grief and remembrance. More significantly, Milkman hears Ryna's sobbing at a pivotal moment in his journey. This hunting trip, then, signals the beginning of Milkman's spiritual transformation that eventually leads him to uncover his ancestral history, a journey that culminates in the revelation that Ryna is his great-grandmother. In this context, *ḥuzn*

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<sup>120</sup> In contrast to structures of national memorialization crystalized in monuments, Luciano explains the countermonumental as "the assurance that past, present, and future are linked not in a single linear narrative but in an ever-evolving array—and the countermonumental impulse—the demand for historical memory to work through this linkage without relying on amnesia or subscribing to a redemptionist teleology" (171).

takes on a positive dimension that memorializes Ryna's history as it prompts Milkman to search it out. Commenting on the positive dimension of *huzn*, Kristina Nelson observes that "[w]ith *huzn* one knows true humility, awe of the divine, human frailty and mortality. . . [which] is communicated through the reciter's voice and artistry, heightening the listeners' sensitivity and awareness and moving them to tears" (99). Ryna's *huzn* refuses silence and is akin to a call that demands to be listened to by her future progeny.

Voice remains central to the memory of both the historical and fictional Ryna. In the WPA oral history, Rosa Grant, Ryna's granddaughter, recalls Ryna as a prayerful figure, reflecting: "Den she say a prayuh. I doh nmembuh jis wut she say, but one word she say use tuh make us chillun laugh. I mumbuh it was 'ashamnegad.' Wen she finish prayin she say 'Ameen, ameen, ameen.' . . . Friday wuz duh day she call huh prayuh day" (145). The Islamic acoustics of prayer, and by association the call to prayer, even unbeknownst to her progeny, secures Ryna's religious spirit. Although the fictional Ryna's deep wail is not conceived of as religious, Morrison evokes the religiosity expressed in the oral history interview by imbuing the lament with a deep spiritual resonance that enables Milkman and other listeners, community members, to reorganize their worldview. While the enslaved African Muslim woman remains invisible, her cry becomes audible, making possible new epistemologies for recovering and recalling this absent figure. Once in contact with Ryna's lament, Milkman is able to strengthen his aural sensibility by "listen[ing] with his fingertips, to hear what, if anything, the earth had to say" (279). Milkman's resolve to connect to the landscape—to connect to the surface—subtly reveals the ways that the history of slavery also marks the American landscape.

In addition to furnishing us with a method to conceptualize the spatial dimension of melancholia as a stopping station, situating Ryna's wail within an Islamic intellectual tradition also extends the exclusionary formula of religious melancholia in the U.S. Put simply, the space of melancholy has a wider significance, for Ryna's Gulch connects to a broader territory of American melancholy. Within early America, New England Puritans introduced a uniquely American Protestant form of melancholy that was informed by "a divinely appointed mission—an 'errand into the wilderness'" (Rubin 42). As Matthew Bell explains, "[c]entral to this was the theme of migration to the wastelands of America, fraught with danger and uncertainty and filled with the potential of temptation and salvation for the Puritan soul" (111). Yet, the first African brought to colonial British North America in 1619 experienced the Americas not in terms of temptation and salvation or migration, but rather in terms of painful separation, a violent severing of ties and erasure of culture.<sup>121</sup> Significantly, the first African slaves brought to America landed in Virginia, the same location where we find Ryna's sonorous cry.

Nonetheless, there were competing burial and mourning rituals in colonial America, notably between indigenous inhabitants and the Puritan settlers. Mitchell Breitwieser shows that the Puritan system encouraged mourners to contain their emotion

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<sup>121</sup> The West's approach to melancholia also obscures the medieval Islamic world's intellectual contributions to this concept. Indeed, knowledge of Greek science, medicine, metaphysics, among other subjects, would have been lost without the translations of medieval Arab and Islamic philosophers and physicians from the eighth to the thirteenth century. In *Medieval Islamic Medicine*, Peter E. Pormann and Emilie Savage-Smith remind us that "medieval Islamic medicine was not simply a conduit for Greek ideas, which is the stereotypical picture, but it was a venue for innovation and change" (1). Despite these insights, numerous affect studies theorists, neglect the long history of the medieval Islamic world on the transmission and translation of Greek medical works to medieval Europe. We can enrich these important ideas about the productiveness of loss posited by scholars Eng and Kazanjian by acknowledging the roots of melancholia in medieval Arabic medical and philosophical thought.

in order to maintain “[a] manly constancy . . . [that] delimits grief to a defined interval” (59). In fact, as the sixteenth-century Puritan preacher Andreas Hyperius put it, a Puritan ethos rejects any “womannish kinde of wayling and shricking” (qtd. in Breitwieser 65). Ryna refuses a Protestant ethos of restrained grief by “scream[ing] and scream[ing]” until she “lost her mind completely” (323). Ryna belonged to slave communities in the antebellum South that developed and introduced funeral and mourning rituals distinct from the rituals of their white slave owners.<sup>122</sup> The melancholy of subjects excluded by American society, such as African American and indigenous peoples, is always in tension with American national narratives and can thus be understood as countermonumental.<sup>123</sup>

Morrison does not just memorialize Ryna in this unconventional way—a memorialization carried by the subject being memorialized—she also considers Ryna’s estranged husband, Solomon. Solomon’s memorial space appears to be a cliff that is named after him and is the location of his departure or abandonment of Ryna and their children. It is important to address Solomon because, as Cartwright establishes, he is a “Senegambian Muslim patriarch” (84); and he is also the catalyst behind Ryna’s wail. Like Ryna, he is accorded a separate space or physical landscape known as Solomon’s

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<sup>122</sup> For more on funeral rituals among slaves in antebellum America, see James M. Volo and Dorothy Denneen Volo’s *The Antebellum Period*, and Kristen D. Burton’s “Myths Laid to Rest: Death, Burial, and Memory in the American South.”

<sup>123</sup> According to John Owen King, the “myth of spiritual pilgrimage” continues to inform the American character and experience. Yet, he posits that while the cultural legacy of religious melancholy endures, its meaning changes:

Within the earlier lives, whether oral or written, Puritan authors described symptoms of melancholy that they read as signs of salvation. . . . By the end of the nineteenth century the meaning attached to such obsessional ideation had precisely reversed: a horrid thought indicated that one might become morally insane. The Puritans’ case of conscience had been transformed itself into the Victorians’ neurological “case.” (10)

Leap.<sup>124</sup> During Milkman’s pilgrimage-like journey, or *mi ‘rāj*, through Shalimar, he encounters Solomon’s Leap, which “was the higher of two outcroppings of rock. Both flat-headed, both looking over a deep valley” (335). Here, *mi ‘rāj* denotes physical movement that is spiritually-inflected, like ‘Umar ibn Sayyid’s holy movements. The cliff and the deep valley it towers over, Ryna’s Gulch, revise traditional understandings of memorialization by inscribing a memory that challenges the system of slavery that denied them their voice and freedom. Solomon’s cliff is the place where Solomon took flight to escape his enslavement, a bittersweet freedom for it also entails deserting Ryna and their twenty-one children. For Melvin Dixon, Ryna’s Gulch and Solomon’s Leap are “gender-related spaces” (168). Morrison seems to offer a critique of Solomon’s Leap, a decidedly masculine space, which towers over or eclipses Ryna’s feminine space—the gulch—and, therefore, marginalizes the memory of enslaved African women. Ryna’s cry, thus, contests this erasure as her voice rises towards Solomon’s Leap and continues to soar long after Solomon’s abandonment of her and her children. In this way, we can discern in Ryna’s cry her desire for the freedom granted to Solomon.

Although Solomon’s Leap is designated as a space for flight and departure, it also becomes a burial ground. Once Milkman reveals to Pilate that the bones she has been carrying belong to her father, Jake, they decide to return to Shalimar to bury his remains properly. During the burial ritual at Solomon’s Leap, Guitar shoots Pilate. (By this point, Guitar is hunting Milkman in order to secure the gold he believes Milkman to possess).

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<sup>124</sup> While the name Solomon brings to mind the Biblical Solomon, it also conjures Ayuba Suleyman Diallo, known as Job ben Solomon (1770-1773), an African Muslim from Senegal enslaved in Maryland, whose memoir was published in 1734 by Thomas Bluett (*Some Memories of the Life of Job Ben Solomon*).

Solomon's Leap, then, is also a space of death. Devastated by her death, Milkman begins to sing a version of "Song of Solomon": "Sugargirl don't leave me here / cotton balls to choke me / Sugargirl don't leave me here / Buckra's arms to yoke me" (336). At this moment, Milkman experiences the full meaning of the funeral song—adapting her song to ease her journey out of the world—even when aspects of its meaning remain unknowable to him. Yet Milkman also implicitly takes on Ryna's perspective, her despair at being left behind in a system that guarantees her social death at the hands of buckra, a term that Morrison invokes in the song referencing Southern U.S. slang to denote white masters or white men.

Solomon's Leap is also a reminder of the painful history of enslavement that changed the political landscape of the United States. Klaus Martens delineates a secondary meaning to this cliff, one that recalls and parodies the American narrative of discovery. Martens writes that "Plymouth Rock [is] . . . a symbol of liberty and of the successful voyage to the Promised Land [that] is replaced by Solomon's Leap to a supposedly happier existence in a lost African Eden" (199). In this regard, Solomon's Leap serves as a counterpoint and countermonument to Plymouth Rock, illuminating America's failure to realize its promises to black and indigenous subjects. In his well-known speech, "The Ballot or the Bullet," Malcolm X sums up this second reading of Plymouth Rock: "We are not Americans. We are a people who formerly were Africans who were kidnaped and brought to America. Our forefathers weren't the Pilgrims. We didn't land on Plymouth Rock; the rock was landed on us" (delivered in Washington Heights, NY on March 29, 1964). Plymouth Rock, then, carries negative connotations for African Americans as it is marked by white settlement and a nationalist mythology that

excludes them. Instead of being seduced by the model of American national identity that depended on the exploitation of his body, Solomon chose to distance himself from the U.S. through flight. Unlike the Plymouth Pilgrims, Solomon's pilgrimage to the cliff strengthens his resolve to construct a home outside the United States. This shift renders unintelligible Plymouth Rock as part of the American national imaginary, insofar as this site no longer signifies religious freedom and renewal. In contrast to Plymouth Rock, Morrison depicts Solomon's Leap as a place of departure, encouraging flight rather than settlement. Yet this freedom is incomplete because it required Solomon to abandon Ryna and their children. In countering the American myth of discovery, Morrison's Solomon's Leap offers a unique American location that transposes enslaved Africans outside an American national imaginary. Underpinning this alternative to monumental historiography is a folksong that both preserves and mourns Milkman's ancestral history and, by association, the history of enslaved African Muslims.

### Mourning and Illegibility in the "Song of Solomon"

In the previous three chapters, I considered how incomprehension becomes manifest in 'Umar ibn Sayyid's marginal notations, in recitation of an Islamic manuscript in Joel Chandler Harris's *The Story of Aaron*, and in Malcolm X's retelling of his Hajj experience. In this section, I connect the issue of incomprehension with the "Song of Solomon," the children's rhyme, which Morrison divulges in snippets before finally revealing it in its entirety. Tellingly, the revelation comes only after Milkman has returned to the rural South, the home of his ancestors, and after he has listened to Ryna's cry. Yet, neither the children nor Milkman fully understand the complete meaning of the

song. Nonetheless, I contend that Morrison suggests that even unintelligible sound is, in a sense, meaningful.

Two crucial issues structure the stories of Milkman's ancestry: the concept of illegibility and rituals of mourning. The melancholic subject is often alienated from, and cannot completely comprehend, the object of her grief. Although the concept of *huzn* provides us with a language to contemplate and analyze spiritual melancholia, there are components of melancholy that can never be fully known or made legible to us. Unable to fully grasp or communicate his or her melancholic state, the melancholic subject, then, is confronted with the incomprehensible. In some instances, it is Ryna, the novel's exemplary melancholic subject who produces seemingly unintelligible sounds.

Morrison interweaves strands from the WPA interviews found in *Drums and Shadows* by restaging an African funeral song. Specifically, she draws on a Mende song invoked by a participant in this oral history project, Prince Sneed, a resident of White Bluff. Prince Sneed recalls:

Muh gran say ole man Waldburg down on St. Catherine own some slabes wut wuzn climatize an he wuk um hahd an one day dey wuz hoein in duh fiel an duh dribuh come out an two ub um wuz unuh a tree in duh shade, an duh hoes wuz wukin by demsef. Duh dribuh say, 'Wut dis?' an dey say, '*kum buba yali kum buba tambe, Kum kunka yali kum kunka tambe,*' quick like. Den dey rise off duh groun an fly away. Nobody ebuh see um no mo. Some say dey fly back tuh Africa. Muh gran see dat wid he own eye. (79; emphasis added)



Although Prince Sneed repeats his grandfather's story, he does not understand the incantation that enabled the flight of African slaves. Nonetheless, he feels the power of the song even though the meaning is lost on him.

What we do know about this song is that its origins go all the way back to Sierra Leone, where it has been attributed to a Sierra Leonean woman. During the eighteenth century, a West African woman was violently seized from her home, forced aboard a ship where she survived the trauma of the Middle Passage, and was condemned to slavery on a plantation in the Sea Islands of Georgia. She was among thousands of Sierra Leoneans kidnapped from their homeland and brought to the American south during the eighteenth century. Despite the efforts of transatlantic slave-traders to obliterate her name, traditions, history, and humanity, this woman defied her fate by singing in her native language. She managed to share a particularly wrenching song with her daughter, who then shared it with her own daughter, who subsequently passed it on to her female descendants. In 1933, the African American linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner discovered that this song continued to be sung on the Gullah Islands, even though none of the performers understood its meaning. Turner's research on the Gullah/Geechee culture led him to Amelia Dawley of Harris Neck, who had memorized the haunting song of her ancestors.<sup>125</sup> Turner recorded Dawley's song, even though both he and Amelia did not

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<sup>125</sup> Almost a decade later, Turner played his recording before his graduate students when Solomon Caulker, a Sierra Leonean student studying in the U.S., recognized the language of the song and identified it as an old funeral hymn sung in Mende, his native tongue. Caulker offered the first translation:

In the evening we suffer; the grave not yet; heart, be cool perfectly.

In the evening we suffer; the grave not yet; heart be cool continually.

Death quickly the tree destroys, steals [it]; the remains disappear slowly;

Death quickly the tree destroys; be at rest, heart, continually.

Death quickly the tree destroys, steals [it]; the remains disappear slowly;

Death quickly the tree destroys; be at rest, heart, continually.

In the evening we suffer; the grave not yet; heart, be cool perfectly.

understand the meaning of the words.<sup>126</sup> Significantly, women sang and carried on this song as it was “a woman’s song . . . used to call villagers together for a funeral” (“National Park Service” 73). Although the Mende funeral song, “Kum Buba Yali,” is not Islamic, it is a powerful slave song passed on by generations of black women, some of whom may have been Muslim.

In placing the Mende song in the long tradition of African American protest expression, Morrison expands the American sonic landscape. Fittingly, Milkman’s first encounter with a segment of the song, is through his aunt, Pilate, who sang it as a blues

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In the evening we suffer; the grave not yet; heart be cool continually.  
 Death quickly the tree destroys, steals [it]; from afar a voice speaks;  
 Death quickly the tree destroys; be at rest, heart, continually. (qtd. in Turner’s *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* 256).

<sup>126</sup> In 1999, the context and significance of the Mende funeral dirge of the Mende people was documented in the film *The Language You Cry In*. In this documentary, three scholars search for the roots of Amelia Dawley’s song. The film’s narrator reveals that Dawley’s song is derived from “[a]n ancient African song of a legend [said] to have the mystical power to connect those who sing it with their ancestors, with their roots, in time and in space.” The film completes the vision of the song by documenting Amelia Dawley’s daughter, Mary Moran, and family members travelling to Senehun Ngola to reconnect with their lost kinfolk. The village elder, Nabi Jah, shares a Mende proverb that powerfully captures the possibilities of retrieving identity through a mourning cry: “you can speak another language, you can live in another culture, but to cry over your dead, you always go back to your mother tongue. The language you cry in” (*The Language You Cry In*). These scholars also interviewed Baidu Jabati, headwoman of Senehun Ngoal, who had orally preserved a song very similar to Dawley’s. She learned the song from her grandmother, who insisted she carry it on for one day some long-lost kin will return and the song will “bridg[e] the worlds of the living and the dead” (Wade-Lewis 84). Jabati traced the song to an ancient funeral ceremony called teijami or “crossing the river” (Wade-Lewis 84). In 1997, Tazieff Koroma, Edward Benya and Joseph Opala documented and translated the full text:

Ah wakuh muh monuh kambay yah lee luh lay tambay  
 Ah wakuh muh monuh kambay yah lee luh lay kah.  
 Ha suh wileego sehai yh gbangah lilly  
 Ha suh wileego dwelin duh kwen  
 Ha suh wileego seehi uh kwendaiyah.  
 Everyone come together, let us work hard;  
 the grave is not yet finished; let his heart be perfectly at peace.  
 Everyone come together, let us work hard;  
 the grave is not yet finished; let his heart be at peace at once.  
 Sudden death commands everyone’s attention, like a firing gun.  
 Sudden death commands everyone’s attention,  
 oh elders, oh heads of family  
 Sudden death commands everyone’s attention, like a distant drum beat. (“National Park Service”

song. The blues, as Amiri Baraka has poignantly expressed, is “the deepest expression of memory . . . It is the racial memory” (189). Here, song unifies African and African American aesthetics and is a vehicle for the transmission of black memory—memory that is accessible to those willing to endure the journey to the deep south where the history of slavery lingers.

In Morrison’s novel, the Dead family’s relation to song bears out the traditional role of the blues as a means of expressing African American experiences of oppression, adversity, and survival. As Houston Baker, Jr., observes, the blues “offer a language that connotes a world of transience, instability, hard luck, brutalizing work, lost love, minimal security, and enduring human wit and resourcefulness in the face of disaster” (188). Blues songs often crystalize a mournful moment and an intense emotion or expression distinct from white history, and which critiques that history. As Ralph Ellison eloquently put it, “the blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” (“Wright’s Blues” 78). For Ellison, the blues impulse is a worldview that the blues artist keeps alive. In the *Song of Solomon*, there are components of the blues tradition evident in the litany Pilate sings. These components are also evident in the wail and the children’s chant, even though these varied sonic forms are not, properly speaking, the blues. According to Ron Eyerman, a central “reference point” in blues music “can be traced back to slavery” (119). With this “reference point” in mind, the varied forms of song carry racial memories that contain emotional resonances for slave descendants.

The blues also serves as a medium for both revealing the instability and persistence of the past and for strengthening familial relations. Pilate's powerful blues song reverberates at four key moments: as the insurance agent Robert Smith plummets to his death; during Milkman's birth; during a scene of familial bonding between Pilate and her daughter Reba and granddaughter Hagar; and as Pilate is dying:

O Sugarman done fly away

Sugarman done gone

Sugarman cut across the sky

Sugarman gone home. . .

Despite its specificity, Pilate's song takes the place of a general lament. Her version of "Song of Solomon" also illuminates the role of song in revising and working through the melancholy of a lingering past. Pilate unintentionally revises the song by substituting "Sugarman" for "Solomon." Pilate's substitution, likely the result of her misremembrance, introduces the potential for misinterpretation. To an extent, the substitution illustrates that a story of a broken spirit can only be revealed through a fragmented, and at times altered, form. This broken spirit is especially perceptible when Pilate sings with her daughter and granddaughter, adding the following verses: "O Sugarman don't leave me here / Cotton balls to choke me / O Sugarman don't leave me here / Buckra's arms to yoke me" (49). Nonetheless, despite Pilate's misremembrance, she protects a memory of her ancestors without knowing it. Importantly, these are the very lines that Ryna would have screamed in response to Solomon abandoning her. Her fear, then, is not only connected to being separated from her beloved, but also to her social death under slavery. Yet, the very lines that express bondage and oppression

comfort Pilate because of their familiarity. The ritual of the song or the lament in this moment overshadows the content of the litany.

Neither do the children of Shalimar who perform “Song of Solomon” know the full meaning of the song. The performance consists of a group of children who form a circle around a boy who stands in the middle. The boy spins “with his eyes closed and his arms stretched out pointing,” while the children sing “Song of Solomon” (302):

*Jake the only son of Solomon*

*Come booba yalle, come booba tambee*

*Whirled about and touched the sun*

*Come konka yalle, come konka tambee*

*Left that baby in a white man’s house*

*Come booba yalle, come booba tambee*

*Heddy took him to a red man’s house*

*Come konka yalle, come konka tambee*

*Black lady fell down on the ground*

*Come booba yalle, come booba tambee*

*Threw her body all around*

*Come konka yalle, come konka tambee*

*Solomon and Ryna Belali Shalut*

*Yaruba Medina Muhammet too.*

*Nestor Kalina Saraka cake.*

*Twenty-one children, the last one Jake! (303)*

When the children shout “Jake!” the boy in the middle falls to the ground. If his finger is pointed at another child, the children fall to their knees and sing the couplet that concludes the song. This is a couplet that Milkman knows as Pilate’s song: “Solomon done fly, / Solomon done gone / Solomon cut across the sky, / Solomon gone home” (303). Unknowingly, then, the children re-enact not only Ryna’s melancholic embodiments—by rehearsing the grief that leads her to fall to the ground—but they also perform a funeral service that resurrects the story of Ryna and Solomon. The children’s conversion of the melancholic funeral dirge into a playful chant and game unconsciously recreates the experience of Ryna’s loss and grief. By rejuvenating Ryna’s melancholic state, the children demonstrate the productiveness of melancholy, an attachment to loss, which enables them to pass on the legacy of their ancestors by evoking the funeral dirge without necessarily comprehending its meaning. The children nonetheless leave out a few lines that, as noted above, Pilate sings with her daughter and granddaughter— “O Sugarman don’t leave me here / Cotton balls to choke me / O Sugarman don’t leave me here / Buckra’s arms to yoke me” (49). These lines, as I mentioned earlier, belong to Ryna. The children’s version, then, not only represents embodied grief, but also re-enacts Ryna’s marginalization, namely by reducing her to an embodied grief that lacks voice.

Unlike the children in Harris’s *The Story of Aaron*, however, the children of Shalimar do not comment on the unintelligibility of the words, but continue to recite them, despite their inability to fully understand them. As with Malcolm X’s mumblings during his hajj prayers, discussed in Chapter Three, while the children do not have the

tools to understand the words, their embodied performance is as meaningful, indeed as important, as their articulation of the words. Milkman recognizes the power of the children in maintaining historical records, commenting that, “Shalimar left his children, but it was the children who sang about it and kept the story of his leaving alive” (332). Although Milkman eventually deciphers the song, in his early encounters he is uncomprehending. Like the uncomprehending children in *The Story of Aaron* who compare Aaron’s recitation of an Islamic manuscript to “Jabber,” Milkman first refers to the “Song of Solomon” recited by the children of Shalimar as a “meaningless rhyme” and later as “nonsense words” (264; 302). Despite his eventual decipherment, the full meaning of the song remains inaccessible because the Mende funeral hymn appears untranslatable.

The lines that remain “meaningless” to Milkman are from an ancient West African funeral dirge that, as I noted earlier, belong to a woman from Sierra Leone who was forcibly captured and brought to the Southern United States. The lines “*Come booba yalle, come booba tambee*” and “*Come konka yalle, come konka tambee*” (303) are a corruption of the lines, “kambay yah lee luh lay tambay” and “kambay yah lee luh lay kah” (“National Park Service” 74). Tazieff Korma translates these lines as follows: “the grave is not yet finished; let his heart be perfectly at peace,” and “the grave is not yet finished; let his heart be at peace at once” (“National Park Service” 74). Taken from a ritual of lament and grief, these lines, in fact, constitute memory, a call for the community to gather and remember the dead. While “kambay” means grave in Mende, “Kamba,” which is derived from this term, denotes a “dead person’s spirit,” according to the *Mende Triglote Dictionary* (95). A “dead person’s spirit” is essentially a ghost that is

easy to miss, especially when the history of enslavement in the U.S. has not been rectified.

In “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” Morrison writes that the Africanist presence is “the ghost in the machine” (136). *Song of Solomon* converts the machine into a song. While the song anchors Milkman’s ancestral heritage, the lament of black women makes this tracing possible. The survival of the Mende funeral song reminds us that women were the ones who kept this song alive for centuries. Remarkably, to this today, the Gullah people along coastal Georgia preserved this song, often singing it to younger children.

In Morrison’s novel, however, it is the children who maintain the most elaborate performance of the Mende song. In fact, the embodied actions of the children resemble the ring shout, a sacred dance that drew on African religious practices and which was practiced among enslaved African Americans in the United States. Art Rosenbaum and Johann S. Buis observe that, “the ever-present single rhythmic pattern accompanying each song hints at a prominent characteristic of Islamic-Arabic dance music practice” (170). Similarly, earlier work by ethnologists Lydia Parrish and Lorenzo Turner posit that the ring shout is thought to comprise the Islamic tradition of *shaw’it*, a religious practice that involves the counter-clockwise circling around the *Ka’ba*. Like twirling dervishes, a religious ritual practiced by Sufis, the children unintentionally enable Milkman to grasp his history and memorialize Ryna’s suffering.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> In the *Whirling Dervishes*, Shems Friedlander explain that dervish “describes the one who is at the door to enlightenment” (15). During religious ceremonies, the dervishes whirl to the background of music, by extending their arms and turning “counter-clockwise, repeating their inaudible zikr, ‘Allah, Allah’” (92).



In a similarly unintentional manner, the children's embodied expression and reference to Medina invoke the rituals of hajj. Milkman's hajj-like journey through the south, however, also overlooks an important female figure. Just as Malcolm X failed to recognize the importance of Hagar, whose path he imitates at the hajj, Milkman forgets and dismisses Hagar, his ex-lover, when he embarks on this journey.

When we recall the fragmentary sources of black women's song that Morrison draws on for her representation of "Song of Solomon," we can see that the novel focalizes on the development of a black male character in order to emphasize the necessity for African American men to understand their legacy, which is integrally tied to a lost female presence. It is as much the responsibility of African American men to remember and mourn this loss as it is for black women to do so, as shown in Morrison's gendering of the emotional labour of singing and listening to the song. Rather than inadvertently repeat his great grandfather's desertion of his wife, Ryna, Milkman is tasked with preserving the memory of black women.

Yet, this generative exchange is rarely smooth or without challenges. Instead of securing a productive exchange between himself and the women in his life, both from the past and present, Milkman first focuses on the patriarch, Solomon. Ultimately, Milkman celebrates the fact that "[his] great-granddaddy could flyyyyyy and the whole damn town is named after him," not acknowledging "[w]ho'd he [left] behind?" (328). Although Milkman "listen[s] and memorize[s]" the children's chant, thereby unknowingly performing the funeral hymn, he also misses the melancholic note of the song (303). While in this moment Milkman seems to deflect the responsibility of men to remember and mourn loss, after celebrating his great-grandfather's ability to fly, he also ponders

“But who was the ‘black lady’ who fell down on the ground? Why did she throw her body all around? It sounded like she was having a fit” (304). In reflecting on the fallen woman, he realizes that the lines are referring to Ryna: “Was Ryna the black lady still crying in the gulch? Was Ryna Solomon’s daughter? Maybe she had an illegitimate child and her father—No. It’s Solomon she is crying for, not a baby. ‘Solomon don’t leave me’” (304). Despite his slow realization, this recognition of Ryna and her grief ushers in new affective registers that propel him to confront his own failure toward the women in his life.

### A Chorus of Wails

While Milkman sings in Virginia, back in Michigan Pilate screams. Like Solomon, Milkman had left behind Hagar, who suffered in his absence. In striking similarity to the biblical Hagar, Morrison’s Hagar is driven mad by her lover’s absence, which eventually leads to her death. During a funeral service for Hagar, Pilate conveys her grief with a shout. She bursts into church, according to the narrator,

shouting “Mercy!” as though it were a command. A young man stood up and moved toward her. She flung out her right arm and almost knocked him down. “I want mercy!” she shouted. . . . The word needed a bottom, a frame. She straightened up, held her head high, and transformed the plea into a note. In a clear bluebell voice she sang it out—the one word held so long it became a sentence—and before the last syllable had died in the corners of the room, she was answered in a sweet soprano: “I hear you.” The people turned around. Reba had entered and was singing too. (316-17)

In this moving passage, Pilate's sorrowful song powerfully extends and improvises both the Mende funeral hymn and Ryna's wail. In her improvisation, Pilate momentarily fantasizes about making her grief tangible by placing it in a "frame," which is also a desire to preserve her pain and memory of Hagar. A frame, however, would domesticate and make recognizable her scream and, by extension, her grief. To a degree, she accomplishes this feat by naming and articulating her grief in terms of mercy. Nonetheless, Pilate's thunderous pain proves uncontainable. In this moment of despair, "like an elephant who just found his anger and lifts his trunk over the heads of the little men who want his teeth or his hide or his flesh or his amazing strength, Pilate trumpeted for the sky itself to hear, 'And she was loved!'" (319).

Pilate sings to express her grief. Yet Pilate converts the word mercy into a placeholder for her sorrow, extending the term to "a sentence" wide enough to fill her experience of loss and pain. Pilate's wail stretches back to the Mende slave women (who kept the funeral hymn alive by singing) and intersects with Ryna's mournful cry. This chorus of wails augments the pain that each woman felt and demonstrates the power of the cry to connect women across time and space. As Angela Davis has elaborated, the blues of black women "offers psychic defenses and interrupts and discredits the routine internalization of male dominance" (36). The song weaves the voices and laments of black women, strengthening their elaborated cry.

We can discern the resonances of this deeply felt racial melancholy in another powerful scream cited in *Song of Solomon*, which belongs to Emmett Till's mother, Mamie Bradley Till. Hospital Tommy, the owner of a barbershop where Milkman and Guitar go to socialize, conveys the brutal episode of Till's death. Tommy focuses on

Bradley's screams: "[Till's] dead. His mama's screaming" (81). Morrison's references to Till, a fourteen-year-old boy who was brutally murdered in August 1955 in Mississippi by two white men for allegedly whistling at a white woman, raises questions about mourning practices in America.<sup>128</sup> Indeed, Hospital Tommy's brief observation that "[Mamie Bradley] [w]on't let them bury him," invokes Bradley's request to hold an open casket funeral with her son's mutilated face unretouched, as well as her request that photographs of Till's mutilated corpse be published in black magazines (81).<sup>129</sup> I draw on Bradley's refusal to bury Till because it nuances readings of incomprehension insofar as a racialized form of violence sanctioned by a nation that allows the lynching of black subjects, renders Till's mutilated face illegible, while making visible the violence of white supremacy. I use illegible here because in this photograph Till's features are so disfigured as to be no longer discernible.<sup>130</sup> In Bradley's call to confront the mutilation of her son's face is an injunction to trace, in order to uncover, the very causes for this illegibility. While Bradley implores us to read what has been made illegible, Morrison entreats us to listen to what has been made inaudible.

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<sup>128</sup> Historian Timothy Tyson in *The Blood of Emmett Till* revealed that Carolyn Bryant, the woman who had accused Emmett Till of whistling at her, had fabricated her accusation during the murder trial.

<sup>129</sup> Her key decision, as Fred Moten incisively surmises, "set in motion this nation's profoundest political insurrection and resurrection, the resurrection of reconstruction, a second reconstruction like a second coming of the Lord" ("Black Mo'nin'" 61). Moten compellingly adds that the photograph enacts a rehearsal of mourning, arguing that "Black mo'nin' is the phonographic content of this photograph" (66).

<sup>130</sup> Although I do not reproduce the photograph here, when we juxtapose the image of Till before he was murdered—as he smiles brightly before the camera—against the photograph of him after his face was destroyed, it becomes impossible to recognize Till. Looking at the bloated face of Till, one may wonder where are his eyes, what happened to his nose, why is he more swollen on his right side, and so on. Importantly, Mamie Bradley's mourning that galvanizes the nation is not in the service of the nation, but a critique of a nation whose version of justice does not extend to black bodies. Bradley upends narratives of national or cultural cohesion and asks us to actively read the face of Till that had become unintelligible.

Recast as a collective expression, the melancholy or *huzn* of the Mende song narrates grief and a long history of enslavement. Relegated to the margins, Ryna's cry reminds readers to attune themselves to the American landscape to hear her story. Whether belonging to Ryna, the Mende slave woman, Pilate, or Mamie Till Bradley, the women's wails provoke and propel a political dimension of melancholy that is spiritually inflected. Their maternal cry becomes a cry for justice while also evoking the tones of slavery's horrors. Yet, the unifying power of the wail allows readers to engage with those who have been forgotten in the archives; the chorus also preserves a degree of unreadability to reflect the reality of their experiences. As a result, Morrison shows the multiple forms in which one may hear the wail, suggesting that the enslaved African woman is a figure who can be recovered indirectly, in fragments and in inaudible sounds. Within these fragments the enslaved African Muslim woman emerges as an aural trace that continues to exist in the interstices of the American landscape.

## Conclusion: The Figure of the African Muslim Slave in Contemporary Transnational American Culture

I felt the life sneaking back into every inch of my body. I had always this fake happiness, though for a very short time. It's like taking narcotics. "How you been" said one the portoricans escorting guards with his weat English, "I'm OK, Thanks, and you", "No, worry, you gonna back to your family" he said. When he said so I couldn't help breaking in [REDACTED] lately, I became so vulnerable. What's wrong with me?. Just a soothing word in this ocean of agony, was enough to make me cry. [REDACTED] we had a complete

---Guantánamo Diary 113

I felt the life sneaking back into every inch of my body. I had always this fake happiness, though for a very short time. It's like taking narcotics. "No worry, you gonna back to your family," he said. When he said that I couldn't help breaking in [REDACTED].<sup>131</sup> Lately, I'd become so vulnerable. What was wrong with me? Just one soothing word in this ocean of agony was enough to make me cry.

---Mohamedou Slahi *Guantánamo Diary*

إني أريد أن يرى وجهي بلادنا ههنا في إفريقية في مكان يسمى كبا

---Umar ibn Said, 1819

"I wish to be seen in our land called Āfrikā in a place of the sea/river (*al-ba-hr*) called K-bā (or K-bya)."

---Umar ibn Sayyid; trans. Hunwick

<sup>131</sup> As editor Larry Siems notes, and as clear from the context, the first word redacted here is tears.

I began this dissertation under the supposedly post-racial period of Barack Obama's presidency, but I finished revising my final chapters as the United States entered a new phase of virulent Islamophobia. During the U.S. presidential debates of 2016, Hillary Clinton responded to a question on Islamophobia by emphasizing that Muslims have been in the United States since the nation's founding, implicitly establishing the legitimacy of Muslim Americans' sense of belonging. However, what Clinton did not acknowledge is that the first Muslims in America were slaves. The present perilous political climate lends fresh urgency to the task of remembering the history of enslaved Africans. Indeed, this history has become increasingly vital for understanding—and countering—today's Islamophobia, particularly in the United States.

Perhaps nowhere is the call for this reckoning more poignantly made than in the work of Mohamedou Ould Slahi. Almost a hundred and seventy-five years after the enslaved African Muslim 'Umar ibn Sayyid penned his autobiography, Mohamedou Ould Slahi would invoke the figure of the African Muslim slave in his own handwritten autobiography, which was published as *Guantánamo Diary*. Scott Korb, in an article published in *The New Yorker*, draws parallels between the *Guantánamo Diary* and the American slave narrative, observing that “Slahi's writing resembles . . . a body of American literature whose testimonies represent the clearest arguments against human bondage and systems of brutality that this country has ever produced.” Korbs adds that Mohamedou's narrative also conforms to the authentication convention of slave narratives in the form of a prefatory essay written by attorney and human rights advocate Larry Siems. Korb's insightful comparison suggests links between 'Umar's and

Mohamedou's respective autobiographies, one predicated on the exploitation of their bodies and their experience of institutional racism.

In this concluding chapter, I examine the invocation of the African Muslim slave by reflecting on its representation in Mohamedou's *Guantánamo Diary*. I consider 'Umar's work alongside Mohamedou's *Diary* not to collapse their differences in subject position—after all, they were held in captivity under vastly different systems and contexts—but rather to underscore the ways that their resistance takes a particular rhetorical form. Not only did both 'Umar and Mohamedou write to contest their degraded position, they did so by emphasizing their Muslim faith. While 'Umar counters the dehumanizing logic of chattel slavery, Mohamedou counters the dehumanizing rhetoric of the War on Terror. Another parallel is the deep entanglement between self-representation and prayer that animates their autobiographies. Rather than renegotiate his religious beliefs while imprisoned, Mohamedou emphasizes ritual practice, particularly prayer, reaffirming his Muslim faith. Nonetheless, his prayers are limited by the torture he is subjected to by his guards and interrogators. At the same time, this emphasis on torture, particularly on the body in pain, distinguishes Mohamedou's narrative from 'Umar's. In my reading of the *Guantánamo Diary*, I use Allahgraphy as a reading strategy to situate the narrative within an Islamic epistemological frame that is attentive to the surface or *zāhir* (literal meaning), suggesting that the *Diary*, unlike 'Umar's or even Bilali Muhammad's manuscript, brings the body, particularly the pained body, into sharp focus.

In 2005, Mohamedou wrote his *Guantánamo Diary* while unlawfully detained at the U.S. detention camp at Guantánamo Bay. The memoir was not released until 2015,



after it had undergone extensive redactions by American government officials.<sup>132</sup> The *Diary* is a 466-page handwritten manuscript that documents Mohamedou's experiences of captivity at the U.S. Naval Base at Guantánamo Bay. Mohamedou was initially suspected of having ties to al-Qaeda since he had joined the organization in the early 1990s to fight the Soviet Union. (At this time, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia were indirectly supporting al-Qaeda in its fight against communism.) Mohamedou admitted that he had sworn an oath to al-Qaeda in the early 1990s, but deserted in 1992. The *Diary* details Mohamedou's experiences from 2000 to 2005. Before his detention in Guantánamo in the summer of 2002, Mohamedou was imprisoned in several locations, beginning in his home country, Mauritania, in the fall of 2001. He was later renditioned to a U.S. detention facility in Amman, Jordan. Although, at that point, Mohamedou was still not formally charged with a crime, he was then sent to Bagram Air Force Base in Afghanistan, and finally to Guantánamo Bay, where he stayed for 14 years. He was finally released on October 17, 2016. The *Diary* testifies to Mohamedou's humanity and offers a critique of the U.S. as a carceral state, while establishing himself as a transnational citizen. By invoking the phrase carceral state, I refer to the U.S.'s prison-industrial complex, which restricts the movement of people, particularly people of colour.<sup>133</sup> Although Mohamedou is neither on American soil nor an American citizen, his

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<sup>132</sup> Despite the redactions that are meant to make aspects of Mohamedou's manuscript illegible for national security reasons, some of the words or phrases are easy to make out.

<sup>133</sup> For a nuanced reading of the racialized components of the U.S.'s prison-industrial complex, see Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. Elspeth Van Veeren also makes a link between Guantánamo and the carceral state, arguing that Guantánamo "emerg[es] not only out of US military and CIA history, but also out of the US prison and wider carceral system, and therefore something un-exceptional" (96).

imprisonment can be seen as an extension of the U.S.'s carceral system. (Recall that in the nineteenth century 'Umar was not a citizen either, though he was captured and forced to work as a slave in the U.S.) Recognizing this problem in the U.S. system, Mohamedou presents himself as a transnational citizen, a point that he highlighted in his poignant statement to the American Civil Liberties Union after his release: "I have come to learn that goodness is transnational, transcultural, and trans-ethnic. I'm thrilled to reunite with my family" (Shamsi).

### Iterations of the Muslim Slave

Although the antebellum slave narrative and the War on Terror memoir reflect varied experiences of bondage, Mohamedou himself explicitly links his captivity and American slavery:

I often compared myself with a slave. Slaves were taken forcibly from Africa, and so was I. Slaves were sold a couple of times on their way to their final destination, and so was I. Slaves suddenly were assigned to somebody they didn't choose, and so was I. And when I looked at the history of slaves, I noticed that slaves sometimes ended up an integral part of the master's house. (314)

Despite the diverse particularities of 'Umar's and Mohamedou's experiences, they are united in their status as human cargo that sustains, in 'Umar's case, the United States' burgeoning capitalism, and in Mohamedou's case, American imperialism. Indeed, Mohamedou recognizes that he is part of an exchange economy that fuels American imperialism, just as the slave trade fueled the economy of the New World. 'Umar, too, describes how he was exchanged between hands: "[an army] took me, and walked me to

the big Sea, and sold me into the hand of a Christian man (*Nasrani*) who bought me and walked me to the big Ship in the big Sea” (61). We find echoes in ‘Umar’s and Mohamedou’s experiences of entrapment in an exchange economy that dehumanizes them. The War on Terror, as Naomi Klein astutely observes, is also a capitalist venture, in which the Bush administration launched “a booming new industry that has breathed new life into the faltering U.S. economy” (12). Drawing an analogy between the plantation system and the detention camp, Mohamedou both recognizes and disrupts his role in this economy by recognizing his role in “the master’s house.”

In highlighting the carceral state, Mohamedou identifies the incarcerated black and Muslim body as a key component of the U.S.’s ideological war. Just as the black slave was a cog in the U.S.’s incessant capitalist enterprise, Mohamedou too is a cog in the U.S.’s War on Terror. In another moment in the narrative, when an interrogator demands that Mohamedou announce his guilt, Mohamedou defiantly responds by aligning himself with the figure of the enslaved African. He declares, “You know that I know that you know that I have done nothing,” I said. ‘You’re holding me because your country is strong enough to be unjust. And it’s not the first time you have kidnapped Africans and enslaved them” (211-12). During this exchange, Mohamedou does more than simply express his innocence. Instead, he offers a reading of the African slave and establishes multiple levels of knowledge, as well as an awareness of a broader historical process of enslavement. Implicit in this retort is Mohamedou’s understanding of his black and Muslim body in relation to the U.S. This exploitative relation between the U.S. and the black body is captured in the circular structure of his statement—“You know that I know that you know”—which ultimately points to the circuit of economic exchange that

is central to the U.S.'s aims to maintain its imperial power. For Mohamedou, the subjugation of black bodies continues, but under a different guise, specifically in the form of aggressive incarceration of black men. In creating a link between himself and the African slave, Mohamedou also addresses the lasting consequences of racial formation in the U.S. However, unlike 'Umar, Mohamedou describes the cruel treatment he endured, whereas 'Umar only gestures to the horrors of the Middle Passage in an elliptical manner. 'Umar simply stated, "We sailed in the big Sea for a month and a half until we came to a place called Charleston" (63). In contrast, Mohamedou's narrative details his experience of torture.

At Guantánamo Bay violence is at the surface; it is neither concealed nor latent. For this reason, surface reading is helpful here. Despite the efforts of government officials to hide elements of Mohamedou's experiences by censoring the *Diary*, the redactions, marked by thin black bars, stand in for the government's failed erasure. In the context of his physical torture, the black bars also appear as scars or bruises that appear on the body of the text. Yet the small bars may also signify the government's flimsy efforts to cover up state violence. Under the "Special Interrogation Plan," a program of enhanced torture techniques approved by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Mohamedou was subjected to torture and inhumane treatment while detained in Camp Echo. The torture Mohamedou experienced consisted of sleep deprivation, loud noise, sexual assault, threats to his family, and other forms of physical coercion. The Special Interrogation Plan combined with the U.S. government's redactions aim to not only make illegible aspects of Mohamedou's experiences, but to also transform his body so that it is no longer recognizable to him. In other words, the extensive redactions to the *Diary* and

the physical and psychological violence Mohamedou endured, illustrate that both his words and his body are under erasure by government officials.

For Mohamedou, however, one of the worst threats of erasure came in the form of restrictions on his faith, specifically his prayers. Mohamedou reveals that, “in the secret camps the war against the Islamic religion was more than obvious” (265). He continues, “[n]ot only was there no sign to Mecca, but the ritual prayers were also forbidden. Reciting the Koran was forbidden. Possessing the Koran was forbidden. Fasting was forbidden. Practically any Islamic-related ritual was strictly forbidden” (265). Despite all efforts by the U.S. government to maintain a façade of secrecy, Mohamedou and other prisoners perceive the War on Terror as a war on Islam.

“*Ya hayyu! Ya kayyum!*” exclaims Mohamedou as he is being stripped naked, diapered, blindfolded, and shackled (4). He explains that this is the prayer he recites when his identity and livelihood are threatened, writing “[d]uring the whole procedure, the only prayer I could remember was the crisis prayer, *Ya hayyu! Ya kayyum!* and I was mumbling it all the time” (4). This crisis prayer “*Ya hayyu! Ya kayyum,*” which translates to “O Ever-Living One, O Self-Existing One,” guides Mohamedou when he is under assault and frames his experience of state violence. In the context of Guantánamo Bay, prayer operates in a different paradigm—the War on Terror—and is intimately connected to Mohamedou’s suffering body. The root word of “*Kayyum*” or “*Qayyum*” in the crisis prayer is “*Qama,*” which means “to keep vigil, to arise, to rise; to halt, to stand up, to stand over; to come to pass” (*Oxford Islamic Studies*, “*Qama*”). This prayer, then, frames Mohamedou’s experience of bodily constraint of rising up and against his captors. Mohamedou’s ability to move his body, however, was regulated by his guards and

interrogators. During the Special Interrogation Plan, Mohamedou was made to stand for hours, once even for 24 hours, or would be forced to “stand up with [his] back bent because [his] hands were shackled to [his] feet and waist and locked to the floor” (220). The limitation of Mohamedou’s freedom of movement corresponds to the constraints placed on his prayers. Embodied prayer, then, becomes a defining aspect of Mohamedou’s perception of his body and psyche in relation to state violence.

### Housing vs. Homing: Carceral Spaces and the Imagined Return

The epigraphs that began this chapter delineate ‘Umar’s and Mohamedou’s respective desires to return home. In contrast to this imagined return home, Mohamedou is housed in Guantánamo, a space where human rights abuses, such as torture and unlawful detainment, are meant to remain private and concealed from the public. Mohamedou also deliberately compares his cell to a perverse home, telling us that the guards “threw [him] down on the metal floor of [his] new home” (261). This new “home” is Guantánamo’s notorious Camp Echo. The carceral space as a “home,” then, functions to hide particular bodies, here black and brown Muslim bodies, from the public. Nonetheless, ‘Umar and Mohamedou respond to such dehumanizing efforts and forced separation through life writing. In both cases, an Islamic ethos underpins their handwritten manuscripts as they both turn to Allah when the erasure of the self is under threat. Yet, for Mohamedou, even when he writes his story, government officials disrupt his narrative through redactions. The black markers reveal more than they conceal, particularly about state violence. Using the metaphor of Gitmo as a home, the redactions begin to appear as blackened windows that prevent the reader from full access (fig. 8). However, just as Mohamedou notes that

“slaves sometimes ended up an integral part of the master’s house,” Mohamedou has become an integral part of undoing the Gitmo house by uncovering human rights abuses at Gitmo.

He didn't believe that, he even laughed along with the interpreter and said at the same time "Ha...Ha, you speak German!" but we're gonna check. Suddenly, [redacted] the room [redacted]  
 [redacted] It was there was no mistake, he was [redacted]  
 [redacted] "Ja wshl", I replied. [redacted] was not [redacted] but his German was fairly acceptable, giving that he spent [redacted]  
 [redacted] He confirmed to his colleagues that my German was "[redacted]" After that both looked at me with some respect, however the respect was not enough to save me from [redacted] wrath. [redacted] asked me where I learned to speak

**Figure 8: Guantánamo Diary, 13**

For Mohamedou, Guantánamo Bay sheds light on the paradox in the U.S.’s declaration of freedom of religion, especially as he perceives the U.S. as a “highly electrified environment against Muslims and Arabs” (282). To resist this Islamophobia, Mohamedou invokes his Islamic faith.

Contemporary Islamophobia in the United States has deep historical roots that, as Sunaina Maira observes, “are intertwined with modernity, colonialism, and globalization and with the relationship of the United States to areas designated as ‘Muslim’ or ‘Middle

Eastern” (109-10). The War on Terror waged by the U.S. after the attacks of September 11, 2001, exacerbated this Islamophobic discourse. Although the term Islamophobia was popularized in the twentieth century in response to the Iran-hostage crisis and has intensified in the wake of 9/11 (Maira 109), an anti-Muslim rhetoric was already present, as my previous chapters showed, in the racial logic that resulted in the enslavement of African Muslims. While Islamic faith animates ‘Umar’s and Mohamedou’s autobiographies, they nevertheless wrote under different historical circumstances and offer differing articulations of Islam. During the nineteenth century, as Jacob Berman has shown, fantasies about the Arab and the Holy Land, abounded. ‘Umar’s narrative reflects an implicit critique of orientalist depictions of Muslims or “Mohammedans” by offering a portrait of an African Muslim slave who is learned, dignified, and peaceful. By contrast, Mohamedou’s concern with countering anti-Muslim bigotry is explicit and bound to his critique of the War on Terror.

In turning to Islam, Mohamedou offers us one possible defense against Islamophobia. Nonetheless, there has been a wide range of responses to contemporary Islamophobia by the *umma* or Muslim community. In the United States, some Muslims counter Islamophobia by minimizing their expressions of faith, while other national and international organizations actively shed light on Islam, such as the Muslim civil liberties organization known as the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) and Bridges



Foundation,<sup>134</sup> by correcting misperceptions about Islam.<sup>135</sup> While there are both continuities and discontinuities between ‘Umar’s and Mohamedou’s responses to dehumanization, they both respond to their oppression through prayer. America’s penchant toward Islamophobia has existed since the transatlantic slave trade, but it has also developed and changed over time. Despite this change, we note that Muslims like ‘Umar, Bilali, and Mohamedou challenged hostility toward Islam by openly practicing their faith. They were also able to transform places of imprisonment by identifying with the worldwide *umma*, or transnational Islamic community. Notwithstanding the comfort of recognizing oneself as secured to a global community, ‘Umar and Mohamedou continue to desire a “home.”

This history of enslavement is so firmly etched in America’s national fabric that we must attend to it and name it to understand its ramifications, particularly the present conditions of black Americans. And, as Timothy Marr reminds us, “the powerful historical templates that preceded and prefigured the mass immigration of Muslims still shape in some ways the contours of how Islam is perceived and received within the United States” (7). As I have shown in this dissertation, the figure of the African Muslim slave can be discerned through a reading practice of Allahgraphy, attuned, that is, to material inscriptions on the surface of manuscripts, to its embodied articulations, and to

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<sup>134</sup> Fadel Soliman, the founder of the Bridges Foundations, also offers online courses, such as “The Arts of Da‘wa: How to present Islam,” to demystify misconceptions about Islam. *Jusur* has held several workshops on Islam in the U.S (<http://bridges-foundation.org/>).

<sup>135</sup> For other members of the Muslim community, Islamophobia is inextricable from racial discourse. As a result, we witness Muslim organizations, such as the Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative, expressing solidarity with other social justice movements, like the Black Lives Matter movement. The Palestinian-American activist Linda Sarsour aligns her politics with African American anti-racism struggles.

its sonic registers. This reading approach enables us to perceive the significance of the figure of the African Muslim slave in the American literary culture across the nineteenth through to the twentieth century, and to reckon with its significance for resisting the varied forms of racial injustice, including Islamophobia. At a time when people are emboldened to express violent anti-Muslim, anti-black, anti-immigrant, and anti-women ideologies in the mainstream, it is crucial to oppose so-called post-truths about returning a nation to its destined “greatness,” by attending to histories that reveal the diversity that founded it, on the backs of figures like the African Muslim slave, whose mark can be seen and heard in the American literary tradition.

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2003-2007 B.A.

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### Honours and Awards:

Timothy Dow Adams Awards presented by a/b: Autobiography Studies	2015
Ontario Graduate Scholarship	2014-15
McIntosh Lecture Prize, Western University	2014
Western University Graduate Research Scholarship	2010-14
Dr. Betty Bandeen Graduate Award in English, Western University	2011-12
Chair's Entrance Scholarship. Western University	2010
Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarships Program (Masters)	2008-09

### Related Work Experience

Instructor, Fanshawe College, London, Ontario	2016-17
Professor, Western University, London, Ontario	2014-16
Teaching Assistant, Western University, London, Ontario	2010-15
Research Assistant, Western University, London, Ontario	2012-16
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