REPRESENTING THE WEST IN THE ARABIC LANGUAGE: THE SLAVE NARRATIVE OF OMAR IBN SAID

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In From Behind the Veil, a seminal text in African-American literary studies, Robert Stepto posits that for African-America, the ‘pregeneric myth’—a shared myth both predating the literary form and influencing the texts composing a culture’s literary canon—is ‘the quest for freedom and literacy’.¹ His study takes as its starting point four slave narratives that represent the earliest period in the history of the African-American narrative as literary form. Introducing key phases in the slave narrative, Stepto charts the increasing independence of the slave’s voice. He notes the plethora of voices, represented by appended documents, which serve to authenticate the narrative, and he subsequently analyses slaves’ strategies of gaining authorial control over their texts.

The work, a critical study of the slave narrative, could not have anticipated the 1995 rediscovery of a particularly significant text in the history of the African-American narrative, which would trouble this declared pregeneric myth: the 1831 slave narrative of Omar ibn Said. Commissioned to write in the Arabic language, Omar wrote the earliest piece of extant Arabic writing on American soil, and the only existing autobiography of an American slave in Arabic, thereby complicating Stepto’s statement regarding African-American literature. Omar’s narrative, written in the language of a slave already literate before coming to America, thus sets aside the driving myth of the quest for literacy. Furthermore, his having written in Arabic seems to dispense with the standard requirement for authenticating documents—endorsed

by slaveholders or abolitionists—that historically proved the slave’s capacity to write his or her own narrative.

Two other important distinctions of this text are (a) that it is written by a Muslim, rather than a Christianized African-American; and (b) that despite the existence of this narrative as a testimony to Omar’s experiences in slavery, it is doubtful whether he ever actually succeeded in achieving freedom or manumission during his lifetime. The narrative was written while Omar was still enslaved.

This article is an analysis of Omar’s manuscript, studied in the light of its importance as a unique text in the African-American literary tradition, particularly in the slave-narrative genre. Focusing on its most significant distinctions—its use of Arabic language and Qur’anic references—we observe the ways in which Omar’s narrative reveals a differing image of the ‘West’ and the ‘Christian’, not as that to which the African must aspire and with which he must necessarily affiliate, but rather as ‘Other’ in the realm of this enslaved Muslim African’s world.

Recent scholars have interpreted Omar’s autobiography in relation to various manuscripts he wrote as evidence of his adherence to Muslim practices, or, conversely, to prove his renunciation thereof. Before the rediscovery of the document in 1995 and its retranslation, all previous translations had been carried out by Christian missionaries eager to view Omar as an enthusiastic adherent of their religion. As a result, examiners of Omar’s life could rely only on these tinted translations. This article, however, concerns itself with the narrative itself, studying the manner in which Omar strategically both identifies and disidentifies with the Christians/Westerners by whom he was surrounded and influenced. What we discover is that through his specific uses of Qur’anic references, he maintains a distinction between himself as Muslim and the Westerners/Christians with whom he interacts.


3 The most thorough examination of the primary documents of Omar ibn Said’s life was carried out by Allan D. Austin in his African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook (New York: Garland Publishing, 1984), 455–507. At the time he was writing this work, the original of Omar’s autobiography had not yet resurfaced, forcing Austin to rely on a missionary trans. of the work for his sourcebook.
These strategies seem to have affirmed for his American supporters his conversion to Christianity, which resulted in great interest in his life and writing, and some degree of freedom (though apparently not manumission).

**BACKGROUND ON OMAR IBN SAID’S LIFE**

Omar ibn Said was born and grew up in Futa Toro, a region between the Senegal and Gambia rivers in West Africa, where he became a scholar, teacher, and trader. He learned Arabic for religious purposes, and made the pilgrimage, an indication of his position as a learned man in his society. He was captured in his homeland in 1807, and transported across the Atlantic to Charleston, South Carolina, where he was sold to his first owner, the ‘evil’ Johnson, a ‘small, weak, and wicked man who did not fear God at all, nor did he read nor pray’. Johnson reportedly was cruel to Omar, putting him to work in the fields.

Apparently because of this cruel treatment, Omar ran away from his owner’s rice plantations in South Carolina, hiding in what he describes as ‘houses’. He headed north, but shortly thereafter was recaptured while praying and was thrown in jail in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Unable to communicate in English, he used coal to write on the wall petitions to be released. His literacy was a spectacle for the local people, who came to the jail specifically to see his writing. After Omar was put on the auction block by his jailer to pay for his keep, he was bought by General Jim Owen of Fayetteville, one of the many visitors who had gone to the jail to see him write. It appears that the

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5 Diouf, *Servants of Allah*, 68.

6 *The Life of Omar Ibn Said, Written by Himself*, with introd. and trans. by Ala A. Alyryes, in Marc Shell and Werner Sollors (eds.), *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature: A Reader of Original Texts with English Translations* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 90–1. All English renderings of the text are from Alyryes’s masterful translation unless otherwise indicated; the only deviation is that we have used the word ‘God’ where he uses ‘Allah’, to render the text more religiously neutral. Page references to the translation are given in pairs here: the first is the page with the original Arabic document, the second is its translation by Alyryes.

Owens were kind masters, and Omar’s literacy gave him an easier life as a house servant and gardener.\(^8\)

It was while he was with the Owens that Omar was commissioned to pen his narrative, which he did in 1831. At the time he had been with the Owens for approximately twenty years.\(^9\) The person who made the request was a ‘Shaykh Hunter’; no further information is known about this man. The translator of the rediscovered document, Ala Alryyes, speculates that perhaps he was a member of the American Colonization Society (ACS), an organization dedicated to sending freed slaves to Liberia.\(^10\) It is highly likely that his title of ‘shaykh’ was one used by Omar as a sign of respect, rather than by the man himself.

Omar’s literacy gained him general renown. Many were concerned about his fate: Pastor William Plummer, for example, wrote a full-length report about him entitled ‘Meroh, a Native African’, which appeared in the *New York Observer* in 1863.\(^11\) Several evangelists and members of the ACS also met Omar and wrote about him.

Fourteen of Omar’s manuscripts are extant, thirteen others are quoted by interested parties. His writings include three Lord’s Prayers, two twenty-third Psalms, two lists of his masters’ family’s names, a commentary on Christian prayer, and several parts of the Qur’an. His last known manuscript is a copy of the Qur’anic sura 110, *al-Naṣr* (Succour). All his writings begin with an invocation to Allah and His Prophet.\(^12\)

Omar actively sought his freedom through the written word, and owed his improved situation to it. Many of his writings are testaments of faith. The renown Omar gained from his literacy was complemented by the recognition he received from his daily religious practices. Plummer mentions that he was a staunch ‘Mohammedan’ who kept his fast of Ramadan at least the first year with great strictness. He wore a skullcap or turban, a visible sign of both his religious and cultural adherence.\(^13\)

When he wrote his autobiography, Omar was about 59 years old, and had been a slave for twenty-four years. He remained enslaved until the end of his life in 1864. There are no signs that he had any descendants in either Africa or America.\(^14\)

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\(^9\) Ibid. 92–3.

\(^10\) Ibid. 60.


\(^13\) Ibid. 66–7, 76.

\(^14\) Ibid. 141, 180.
GENERAL CONTENTS OF OMAR’S NARRATIVE

Upon its rediscovery in 1995 in an old trunk in Virginia, the manuscript of Omar ibn Said’s narrative was found to be in remarkably good condition: the document is easily legible to the naked eye. It was sold at an auction to the collector Derrick Beard, who lent it out for translation and display.

Omar’s narrative is introduced by a single page in English: ‘The 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’. This introduction conveys five pieces of information that relate to Omar’s personal identification and relationships with those who played a part in the manuscript’s production. Fullah is a reference to Omar’s ethnic Fulbe background.15 Lahmen Kabby was the freed slave also referred to as Lamine Kebe, with whom Omar exchanged letters, such as one beginning with ‘In the name of God, the compassionate’, and continuing with apologies for Omar’s forgotten Arabic before proceeding to matters of his earlier Islamic education.16 Kebe had been a schoolteacher in his hometown in Africa, had been enslaved, and then had gained his manumission and was waiting in New York to be transported to Liberia.17 Theodore Dwight (1796–1866) was a Free-Soiler opposed to the spread of slavery, who had close connections at least with Kebe.18 Cotheal was treasurer of the American Ethnological Society and an enthusiast of Arabic manuscripts.19

The narrative itself follows. Omar begins it with the Islamic formula ‘In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate’, a formula used to begin all but one sura of the Qur’an. To this he adds ‘May God bless your Lord (sayyidikum) Muhammad’. He then continues with a rendition of sura 67, al-Mulk (Dominion), followed by an apology that he has ‘forgotten much of my talk as well as the talk of the Maghreb’,

16 Diouf, Servants of Allah, 139. Note the recurrence of these themes in Omar’s autobiography, as discussed below.
18 Alryyes, The Life of Omar Ibn Said, 712; Austin, Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles, 118. It is interesting to note that as in the case of Omar, there was widespread belief that Kebe had converted to Christianity, but Theodore Dwight believed that he remained a staunch Muslim till the end of his life.
19 Jessup, Fifty-Three Years in Syria, 42–6.
presumably meaning his own language as well as Arabic. Although this is a common disclaimer in the slave narrative, and has frequently been dismissed as such, it is also a fact: Omar has forgotten parts of Sūrat al-Mulk that he records, sometimes confusing words. He then reiterates ‘In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate’ before proceeding: ‘From Omar to Sheikh Hunter’ and repeating his apology for having forgotten his Arabic. He continues here with a statement about his education and his teachers.

Omar gives very little information on the servile life he had to endure. Diouf explains that this may have been due to his pride and dignity, but there is the consideration that he wanted to please his master—a theme present throughout the text, such as in his Christian utterances—and therefore felt he should refrain from alluding too much to slavery. He talks a little about his journey to America, his adventures upon arrival in the hands of his first master, his escape from him, and his transfer into the hands of Jim Owen. He highlights some principles of Islam, describing how he used to practise them in his native land. Notably, he does not use the past tense in his descriptions, indicating his probable clandestine continuation of the practices. At this point, he quotes the Fāṭiḥa, the opening sura that is recited in every prayer, and then the Christian Lord’s Prayer.

Omar’s main emphasis for the final portion of his narrative is praise for the Owen family. He proceeds to name all the members of the nuclear family, enquiring rhetorically, ‘O people of America; O people of North Carolina: do you have, do you have, do you have such a good generation that fears God so much?’ Here the family is thus linked with religion, the major motif in the narrative. Omar ends his manuscript by extolling his master in particular: ‘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.’

It must be stressed that, unlike other writings in the genre, Omar wrote his manuscript while still a slave. While very few understood his manuscript in the original, it was immediately translated into English, becoming available to the public at large. Also, because it was in Arabic, no editor was needed, leaving it up to the slave-author to do his own

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23 Ibid. 92–3.
24 Arabs did not start coming to the USA until the 1850s; for more on this see Ami Ayalon, ‘The Arab Discovery of America in the Nineteenth Century’, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 20: 4 (1984), 5–17.
editing. Omar became the prime example of the literate African: ‘The literate Africans used their knowledge not only to remain intellectually alert but also to defend and protect themselves, to maintain their sense of self, to reach out to their brethren, to organize uprisings, and, for some, to gain freedom.’ Therefore, while even as narrative it maintains certain conventions found in the slave-narrative genre, such as the humility of the slave author regarding his command of the written word, it also evidences Omar’s manipulation of the Arabic language, rendering various readings possible. Arabic was associated with his freedom of expression, just as earlier it had won him his freedom from jail. Thus, although reluctant to state explicitly any negative points of view throughout his narrative, Omar nonetheless feels free symbolically—and thus subtly—to express them.

**USE OF THE QUR’ĀN IN OMAR’S NARRATIVE**

The most noticeable way in which Omar expressed his views is through his use of Qur’ānic literary style and Qur’ānic passages. Since he had learned the Qur’ān for religious purposes, this was the style of writing with which he was intimately familiar. This comes across in his use of Qur’ānic phrasing, such as ‘O People of North Carolina; O people of South Carolina; O People of America’, (pp. 80–1). This general vocative, translated into English as ‘O’ with an accompanying subject, mirrors Qur’ānic verses, such as ‘O You who have attained to faith!’ (e.g. Q. 57. 28; 58. 11–12; 60. 1, 10, 13; 61. 2, 10, 14; 63. 9), ‘O Prophet!’ (60. 12; 65. 1; 66. 1, 9), or ‘O humankind!’ (4. 1; 22. 1; 49. 13). The vocative evokes a sense of directness, emphasizing that the speaker is calling the attention of a specific and particular audience intended to hear the words.

Likewise, Omar mirrors the Qur’ān’s iterative style, for example, in repeating the aforementioned words in a later context: ‘O people of America; O people of North Carolina: do you have, do you have, do you have such a good generation that fears God so much?’ This use of the vocative combined with repetition is evident in such Qur’ānic verses as 49. 11–12: ‘O you who have attained to faith! No men shall deride [other] men: it may well be that those are better than themselves; and no women shall deride [other] women: it may well be that those are better than themselves... O you who have attained to faith! Avoid most guesswork [about one another]’. Such usage has the effect of creating

an emphasis and sense of urgency, drawing further attention to the words. Here the repetition is an emphatic tool: Omar juxtaposes the ‘people of America’ and God, by asking whether this particular people—who had so much power over him—feared God, the true holder of power.

In addition to its literary style, Omar’s writing indicates a belief in the authority of the Qur’ân, both when his linguistic skills fail him, as well as when they do not. Towards the end of his rendering of Sûrat al-Mulk, he confuses the order of its verses, and then realizes his mistake. He cannot cross out his error since it is the Qur’ân—the word of God—so he places dotted lines over it and continues with the correct verse. He omits a small part of the second to last verse, as Alryyes points out.27 Conversely, his recital of Sûrat al-Âtiha is completely accurate; if indeed he continued to pray upon his arrival to the USA, it would have been a chapter that he would have recited five times a day, perhaps enabling his perfect retention of it.

Qur’ânic passages evidence Omar’s beliefs on both universal and personal levels. He begins by quoting Sûrat al-Mulk in its entirety, without giving its title. In a context where he has limited freedom of speech, Omar evidences his state of mind and his point of view through his quotation of this sura, the main theme of which is to recognize God as the sovereign of the world. Slaves can be referred to in Arabic as mamlûk (possessed/owned), and thus by giving God dominion and ownership (al-mulk), Omar de-emphasizes the significance of his position as a slave by highlighting that all human beings are ultimately owned by God. Although in the New World he is identified as slave in contradistinction to his free white owner, he retains and affirms the understanding that all human beings are subjects of God. In The Message of the Quran, the translator and commentator Muhammad Asad explains that ‘the fundamental idea running through the whole of this surah is man’s inability ever to encompass the mysteries of the universe with his earthbound knowledge, and hence, his utter dependence on guidance through divine revelation’.28 The chapter therefore provides solace to slavery in the recognition that supreme sovereignty rests with God alone, rather than with any slave master.

Since Sûrat al-Mulk is the first sura of the twenty-ninth part of the Qur’ân, and Muslim children have often been taught to memorize the Qur’ân beginning with the last three parts (which have much briefer and more easily memorizable chapters), this would have been a set of verses with which Omar was very familiar. It is interesting to note that

28 The Message of the Quran, trans. and explained by Muhammad Asad (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1984), 879.
the other Qur’anic chapter that Omar quotes and with which he was clearly familiar, *al-Fātiha*, also includes the word *Mālik* (derived from *mulk*) in *Mālik yaum al-dīn* (Owner of the Day of Judgement), thus once again referring to God as Owner. Earlier in his manuscript, Omar refers to God as ‘our Lord, our Creator, and our Owner, and the restorer of our condition, health and wealth by grace and not duty’. A reference that could be taken by his slave owners to indicate the ascendancy of Christianity’s grace over Islam’s duties, and thus be seen as a confirmation of Omar’s conversion to Christianity, the statement is also one that employs Qur’anic terminology, again using the word *Mālik* for Owner. To Omar, a slave robbed of his wealth and to a large extent his health through his enslavement (he refers to himself as a small ill man), it was comforting to remember God’s role as the true restorer.

The choice of *Sūrat al-Mulk* has further significance with regard to Omar’s own personal situation. Asad paraphrases the following from the prominent twelfth-century Qur’anic commentator Zamakhsharī: ‘Best known by the key-word *al-mulk* (“dominion”) taken from its first verse, the surah has sometimes been designated by the Companions as “The Preserving One” (*Al-Waqiyah*) or “The Saving One” (*Al-Munjiyah*) inasmuch as it is apt to save and preserve him who takes its lessons to heart from suffering in the life to come.’ The thirteenth-century commentator and imam Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī elaborates that it is the sura that saves its reciter from the punishment of the grave and of the life to come, and the fourteenth-century commentator Ibn Kathīr narrates several *abādith* to this effect, including a couple (deemed weak), where the Prophet specifically says, ‘I wish it [i.e. this sura] were in the heart of every person of my community’. The theme of being saved is clearly relevant here, just as it is in Omar’s subsequent recitation of the Lord’s prayer, including the line ‘But deliver us from evil’. The sura as a whole serves as further affirmation of the primary importance of the eternal life to come, as opposed to present life struggle and suffering.

30 Ibid. 92–3.
33 Alryyes, *The Life of Omar Ibn Said*, 88–9; see below for more on Omar’s recitation of the Lord’s Prayer.
There has been much debate surrounding the possibility of Omar’s conversion to Christianity. Some, such as Sulayman S. Nyang, have presented him as an example of those that ‘became freed men and reluctantly converted to Christianity’. This impression in part results from the missionary translators of his Life, as well as others, such as the authors of The Christian Advocate (the official periodical of the Methodist Episcopal Church), who clearly saw Omar as a member of the Presbyterian Church. William Plummer reported that Omar had been baptized by the Reverend Dr Snodgrass of the Presbyterian Church in Fayetteville, and received into that church.

Omar, like other Muslim slaves, had a bible in Arabic, as well as a Qur’an. His pastor mentioned that ‘through the kindness of some friends, an English translation of the Qur’an was procured for him, and read to him’. The secretary of the American Colonization Society reported in 1837 that he had ‘retained a devoted attachment to the faith of his fathers and deemed a copy of the Qur’an in Arabic (which language he reads and writes with facility) his richest treasure’. Omar clearly read at least parts of his copy of the Bible. Alryyes postulates that perhaps Omar sought spiritual Christians to make up for the loss of community he suffered in his religious isolation as a slave. Diouf suggests that he may have even read the Bible prior to his coming to America, since there is evidence that Muslims from his region had access to the book through their Arab teachers that they met in Makka, Cairo, or their homelands. In fact, he is quoted in the New York Observer as saying that the translation in his possession of the New Testament was not very good, suggesting that he had encountered a previous one. Perhaps also this was an excuse for him not to adhere to the principles of faith outlined in it. Despite his reading of the Bible and his copying of several fundamental Christian beliefs, Omar overtly writes in his autobiography ‘I am Omar, I love to read the book, the Great Koran’, before moving on to placate his masters by linking the Bible

36 Plummer, New York Observer, 1.
37 His Arabic bible is extant, though his Qur’an is not (see Austin, Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles, 130).
38 Diouf, Servants of Allah, 113.
40 Diouf, Servants of Allah, 39.
41 Plummer, New York Observer, 1.
with ‘the path of righteousness’. Yet even here, he follows up with Qur’ānic terminology, quoting the second verse of *al-Fātiha* and of the Qur’ān as a whole: ‘Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds’. 42

Throughout his narrative Omar refers to English as the Christian language. Being a native speaker of Fulfunde, a non-Arabic language written in Arabic letters, 43 he had learned Arabic for religious purposes. As a result, language and religion are conflated for him. He recounts that he was ‘sold to a Christian man’, and ‘sold in Christian language’ in a ‘Christian country’, specifically in a place called ‘Charleston in the Christian language’. 44 He explains the meaning of the English word ‘jail’ by referring to it as ‘jeel in the Christian language’. 45 Upon his release from jail, he saw ‘many men whose language was Christian’. They spoke to him, but he ‘did not understand [hear] the Christian language’. 46 Omar never learned to speak this Christian language well, since it was not his language culturally or religiously.

The positing of Arabic and Islam vis-à-vis English and Christianity can be seen in other instances. As previously mentioned, Omar recites *Sūrat al-Fātiha* in one part of his narrative, then follows it immediately with the Lord’s prayer. In the old missionary translation this reads:

‘When I was a Mohammedan, I prayed thus: …’ followed by quoting the *Fātiha*.

‘But now I pray, “Our Father . . .”’ followed by quoting the Lord’s Prayer. 47

This suggests Omar’s conversion from Islam to Christianity, and was the translation that was available until the 1995 rediscovery and retranslation of the document. Upon retranslation, Alryyes rendered the passage as:

‘First, [following] Mohammed. To pray, he said: “Praise be to Allah . . .” followed by quoting the *Fātiha*.

‘And [but?] now, I pray in the words of our Lord Jesus the Messiah: “Our Father . . .”’ followed by quoting the Lord’s prayer. 48

This rendering highlights the ambiguity in Omar’s statement. In fact, word for word, the text reads:

‘First, Mohammed. To pray, he said:’ followed by quoting the *Fātiha*.

43 Austin, *Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles*, 152.
44 Alryyes, *The Life of Omar Ibn Said*, 74–5, 76–7, 80–1, 90–1. All these are rendered *nasrānī* in Arabic.
46 Ibid. 78–9.
47 Austin, *A Sourcebook*, 467.
‘And now, the words of our Lord Jesus the Messiah:’ followed by quoting the Lord’s Prayer.49

Here we note three points: the order in which the texts are written, the language used to discuss Christian beliefs, and the placement of these Christian beliefs in a larger Islamic context. The first is that Omar gives the Fātiha first, then the Lord’s Prayer. This could be simply because of the chronological order in which he learned them, or the order of importance he is assigning to them. He could also be signifying the second option under the guise of the first.

Furthermore, he uses Qur’ānic terms to describe Christian beliefs, particularly the word ‘Messiah’, which, in the Qur’ān, refers to Jesus (e.g. Qur’ān 3. 45; 4. 157, 171, 172; 5. 17). The fact that he couples this with the word Lord (as in Lord Jesus the Messiah) does not indicate a recognition of the Messiah’s divinity. Earlier, he describes Muḥammad as ‘your Lord’.50 In fact, his use of this term sayyidikum (Your Lord) is highly irregular, as pointed out by Alryyes.51 The usual usage is sayyidinā (Our Lord); by using the second person plural, Omar emphasizes that Muhammad is the Lord of all, both Muslims and non-Muslims (such as those that commissioned his manuscript).

The third point is that these quotations of the Fātiha and the Lord’s Prayer are prefaced by a reference to Moses: ‘Because the law (Shara‘) was to Moses given, but grace and truth were by Jesus the Messiah’.52 Omar situates Jesus alongside Moses, keeping the former within the Islamic Prophethood framework rather than that of Trinitarian Christianity. Thus Omar juxtaposes Moses and Jesus as equals in the Prophethood chain.

All these references point to the Qur’ān as the centre of Omar’s Weltanschauung. Omar’s other writings confirm this adherence. Even when copying Christian passages, Omar’s continuous use of Islamic invocations to Allah and His Prophet point to his unfailing adherence to his original religion. His last known manuscript is a copy of sura 110, al-Naṣr (Succour), a Qur’ānic chapter that points to victory over one’s enemies, and people flocking to Islam. Remarkably, this last writing of Omar’s happened to be the last complete sura of the Qur’ān conveyed by the Prophet to the world, just over two months before his death.53 Thus, Omar followed in the steps of the founder of his religion all the way until the end of his life.

50 Ibid. 64–5.
51 Ibid. 712.
52 Ibid. 86–9.
53 Asad (trans.), The Message of the Quran, 982.
CONCLUSION

From 1703 to the Second World War, about 6,000 slave narratives were recorded in North America. Yet among these, very few are by African-born slaves, whose narratives generally were not sought after by the abolitionists, for propagandistic reasons. The disproportionate number of Muslim writers among the Africans can be attributed to the fact that as ‘non-Africans’—that is, as honorary Arabs in the imagination of white Americans—they were accorded more consideration than the ‘real’ Africans. Newspapers and other records fantasized about their origins, imagining them as rich Arab princes for whom the tables had been turned in their transplant to the Americas.⁵⁴ Also, their background as intellectuals probably encouraged them to seize opportunities to express themselves with the written word.⁵⁵

A textual analysis of Omar ibn Said’s manuscript reveals the striking ways in which some Africans identified themselves in the new American context, while retaining their prior sense of identification. This is particularly remarkable in a slave narrative, a genre often acknowledged more as propagandistic than as revelatory of slave identity. Through the use of Arabic and Qur’anic references, Omar reveals an image of the ‘West’ and the ‘Christian’ not as that to which the African must aspire, but instead as an ‘Other’ in the realm of his enslaved Muslim African’s world. Rather than being on the ‘double quest for literacy and freedom’ typical of American slavery, Omar ibn Said is a new representation as the already literate learned slave. His narrative provides a critical connection between Islam during slavery times and contemporary African-American Islam, strengthening the ties of ‘reversion’ to Islam that are central to the African-American Muslim identity today.

⁵⁵ Diouf, Servants of Allah, 140.