Unspeakable Islam:
The Sea, the Memory, the Life, and Afterlife of the Middle Passage

Sarah Abdelshamy
Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Montreal

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Abstract

This thesis examines the Middle Passage as a site of archive and movement in producing conditions of unspeakability within two life writings: Saidiya Hartman's *Lose your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007) and Ala Alryess' edition of Omar ibn Said's memoir, *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar Ibn Said* (2011). I begin by providing a brief synthesis of theoretical materials that aim to document the unspeakability of the Middle Passage. It is within this larger framework that I offer contextualized, close readings of my objects of analysis. I read them together to explore unspeakability in relation to concepts of witnessing, haunting, and fiction. Throughout out the thesis, I make connections with Islam both as a marker for unspeakability and a vehicle for resisting it. I specifically focus on the two narratives in order to explore the sea as history and an archive of stories; fiction as a vehicle for truth; and finally, the legacies of unspeakability which equip Islam with the ability to render unspeakable subjects alive. I suggest that the sea can offer us stories, truths, and lives that would otherwise be submerged and that could potentially help us imagine life.

Résumé

Cette thèse propose une analyse du concept de l'indicible vis-à-vis de la traversée de l'Atlantique, étant un site d'archives et de mouvement à l'aide de deux récits de vie, soit *Lose your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007) de Saidiya Hartman et le récit de vie de Omar Ibn Said *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar Ibn Said* édité par Alaa Alryyes (2011). Mes analyses revisitent ses récits à travers les concepts de témoignages, de la hantise, et de la fiction. Tout au long de ce travail, j'établis des liens avec l'islam à la fois en tant que marqueur de l'indicible mais aussi en tant qu'un véhicule pour résister l'indicible. Je me concentre, plus spécifiquement, sur les deux récits de vie afin d'examiner les histoires et les vies que l'Atlantique maintient ainsi que pour explorer le rôle d'histoires fictives dans la recherche de la vérité. Ma cible finale est d'explorer la manière dont l'islam à la capacité de rendre vivants des sujets indicibles. Je suggère que l'Atlantique peut nous offrir des histoires, des vérités et des vies, qui seraient autrement submergées et pourraient potentiellement nous offrir de nouvelles façons d'imaginer le monde.

Note on Translation and Transliteration

In this thesis, I have used a standard Arabic copy of the Qur'an. When citing a verse or chapter, its reference is always included at the end of the verse. When providing English versions of the same verse, I have used M.A.S Abdel Haleem's English translation of the Qur'an (Oxford World's Classics, 2016).

When including passages from Omar ibn Said's manuscript, I am citing directly from Alaa Alryyes' *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar ibn Said* (2011). This book contains the original scanned Arabic manuscript which is legible but difficult to transcribe. Any Arabic transcription is a close approximation of the original manuscript. In the case where a word is illegible or missing, I will indicate so between parentheses. I also provide Alryyes' English translation which is included in the same book.

All other translations are my own unless noted otherwise.

To transliterate Arabic words using English letters, I follow the simplified IJMES system of Arabic transliteration, without dots and dashes.

Acknowledgments

This thesis is a future-oriented project that waters in me a desire to make the world a more liveable place—an endeavor that is only possible by virtue of those around me.

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This dissertation is an ode to the sea and is dedicated to my late father, whose own life has been significantly marked by the sea. I am thankful for the sacrifices he has made in building a world for myself and my siblings.

To my mother, for everything.

Preface: Introduction to Lifeworlds

I was first introduced to the sea at the young age of ten—several months after having suffered an immense loss in the family. I didn't think much of it at first, despite my mother's exaggerated excitement, until someone nudged me and said *your father used to walk to the sea every week, right where you're standing*.

I recognize this moment, personal as it may be, as the first among many where I locate the ability for immense bodies of water to carry within them human life. In the context of my personal life, this realization is a sentimental one that developed in me a natural pull to the sea; in the context of the world, this realization is profound and complicates our understanding of the sea itself. This thesis is an exploration of the lifetimes that have marked, specifically, the Atlantic Ocean during the treacherous forced voyages of the Middle Passage. Having carried thousands of captured, kidnapped, and abducted Africans, the ocean is now the only living witness to the extensive violence that occurred during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Inconspicuous as it may appear, the ocean has not only witnessed—and become a witness of—harrowing lifetimes, it has also protected them.

This thesis emerged from urgency, curiosity, and speculation which partly stemmed from my personal attachment to the sea. This then enriched my experiences reading various texts that meaningfully consider the sea as a transformative site. I was particularly drawn to Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007) and found myself submerged in her vivid, almost psychedelic, descriptive encounters with the sea. As I tried, on a personal level, to make sense of the sea as a site of life and reconcile its involvement in the Middle Passage, I sought out texts that also desired to make sense of the sea, water, life, and death. This led me to the works of Derek Walcott, M. Nourbese Philip, Stephanie Smallwood, Samera Esmeir, Toni Morisson, Christina Sharpe, Rinaldo Waltcott and Hortense Spillers — all of whom I draw upon in my thesis but also whose works I often found refuge in throughout my writing process and beyond.

I hope, here, to express, remember, and similarly archive parts of those lifetimes as well as the stories they tell, the names and nameless they hold, and its Afterlife.

Chapter 1: Islam, Slavery, and Unspeakability

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the legacies of the Middle Passage by centering the sea as both a site of archive and movement but also as a reference point in the production of the unspeakability. I define unspeakability both as something that is too horrible to express in words, but also as something that has not been spoken about in official documentation. I hope to challenge unspeakability by establishing a legible dialogue between life writings as testimonies for the unspeakable and Islam. I have chosen to read Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007) as a self-reflective academic book that oscillates between autobiography, history, and fiction.[1] Centering her own journey discovering the slave routes in Ghana, Hartman deliberates the movement of the Middle Passage and its Afterlife — bending time by analysing the same space of the sea as occurring simultaneously in the past, the present, and the future.[2] I will read this work together with the only surviving narrative written in Arabic by a kidnapped African enslaved in the Americas, Omar ibn Said's memoir, *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar ibn Said* (2011). This text, in which Said details his life after having crossed the Atlantic Ocean, was edited and translated by Ala Alryess. Said's text draws out the symbiotic relations between Islam and unspeakability through his own life. From my close readings of these two works, I aim to develop analyses that connect to Islam, the Middle Passage and its Afterlife, unspeakability, and life-making. My focus on Islam will also extend past these connections as I aim to explore how it retains its capacity for resistance.

Methodology and Approach

My thesis extends to multiple fields of study so that I can probe the complex relations between Islam and the Transatlantic slavery within the North American context. My theoretical framework draws on an eclectic series of works that help me to explore unspeakability through questions of memory and truth, particularly in life writing and its connections to witnessing. My aim is to complicate our conceptions of truth and witnessing and contemplate the ways in which

[1] See Saidiya Hartman's essay "Venus in Two Acts" where she coins the term *Critical Fabulation*. This refers to a methodology that combines historical and archival research with critical theory and fiction.
[2] While Saidiya Hartman's journey to Ghana is, as indicated in the title, along the slave routes, she also explicitly and organically feels a pull to the sea. It is within this pull that many of her own fictional musings emerge which I will also closely examine.

individual lives and stories, in the context of extreme violence, are themselves witnesses. I use several methods of inquiry and analysis in complementary ways in this thesis. The first is by offering analyses of the sea as a repository and archive that retain truths that can only be discovered through the unconventional and difficult work of imagination. The second is contextualized, close readings of my objects of analysis—the two works of life writing by Hartman and ibn Said. A comparative element is part of my reading method, whereby I read together two texts written at different times, in very different contexts, to explore unspeakability in relation to questions of death-making, life-making, and truth-telling. The final method is to read these works in relation to the theoretical and legal analyses written in contemporary North America, focusing primarily on the othering and silencing of Islam and Muslims. I use the growing scholarship to draw out the connections between the unspeakability triggered by the Middle Passage and the role of Islam in resisting it today.

As a starting point, I use Sylviane Diouf's assertion that while Islam and slavery have a dialectical relationship, Islam ultimately did not survive slavery.[3] Despite having been somewhat creolized during post-slavery eras, Diouf argues, the traces of Islam in slavery cannot be distinguished with the naked eye. Building off the impeccable typology of Islam and slavery that Diouf provides in her seminal text, I ask a slightly different question, not how did Islam survive slavery, but rather *What exactly has Islam inherited from slavery*? Surely after having been heavily involved in both slavery and slave-making, Islam would be practiced, disseminated, and remembered in distinct ways that are informed by it. In this study, I emphasize the oceanic, terrestrial, and cosmic terrains in which the Middle Passage's Afterlife has interlocked with our current lifetimes, the lifetimes before us, as well as the ones to come. To do this, my study is divided into four chapters.

In my first chapter, "Islam, Slavery, and Unspeakability," I provide a synthesis of works that document slavery and the Middle Passage, specifically the various genres and methods scholars and historians use to uncover and/or speculate about truth/s. I aim to challenge traditional conceptions of truth and history by analysing the way in which the Middle Passage is

[3] Originally published in 1998, in *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), Diouf traces the genealogy of the Middle Passage through Islam. Diouf concludes that "Islam brought by the enslaved West Africans has not survived. It has left traces; it has contributed to the culture and history of the continents; but its conscious practice is no more" (251).

documented through narrations of the voyage, analyses of legal documentation, fictional and non-fictional storytelling, and auto-theory. I will also provide base definitions for terminology that I will be using throughout the dissertation. In the second chapter "The Sea, the Sea, the Sea," I will introduce the concept, value, and significance of the Atlantic as a site that has been marked by the Middle Passage and that has, in turn, marked the world. I will offer a literal and figurative understanding of the sea — the former focuses on the molecular value of the sea and the latter redefines the sea as an imaginative terrain in which the truth emerges and submerges. To do this, I use M. Noubese Philip's *Zong!* — a collection of poems composed exclusively from the words in the *Gregson v Gilbert* case file meant to address the murder of hundreds of Africans on board the slave ship Zong.

These two chapters provide the theoretical and methodological basis for me to move onto a more direct and close reading of my two objects of analysis in the thesis. The third chapter, "To Build a Life around the Word and the World" introduces the two texts: Saidiya Hartman's *Lose your Mother* and Alaa Alryyes' edition of Omar Ibn Said's memoir *A Muslim American Slave*. I place these close readings in relation to the larger questions of death-making, life-making, and truth-telling. In this chapter, I use Islamic texts as a framework of thinking through these questions. I close with a short final chapter "They Ask for Life and We Give them Only the Sea" where I investigate the ways in which current articulations of Islam also exhibit an unspeakability that can be traced back to the Middle Passage, specifically by using the carceral as a site of investigation. My conclusion explores the value of reflecting on the past in life writing, as I identify the Afterlife of the Middle Passage to be a vital component for the imagination of the present and future of the world.

Terminology

In the section below, I explore some of the concepts I use throughout my thesis. Most of the concepts I am using here are *sticky*. The discourse on emotions, concepts, thoughts, and dreams being sticky is explored by Sara Ahmed in her seminal book, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2004). In this book, she explains that the relationships between two things (bodies, objects, or signs) are the result of friction or contact between the two. When one thing comes into contact with another, they stick to each other and create an affective history and value. This concept is relevant here to point to the symbiotic relationships between the histories, terms, and

stories used throughout this thesis. Indeed, they have each come into contact with one another, sticking to each other and creating points of contact, and this in turn allows us to better imagine and interact with them. It is important to preface my discussion of terminology with this understanding because it reflects the complex nature of the Middle Passage, specifically in that the concepts and ideas I will be using all interact with and stick to one another.

One of the terms I will frequently use is "death-making," which invokes the production or acceleration of death. I am likening it to the concept of "slave-making" as they both designate not only a singular action but also an industrial complex—the workings of which have become its own structure separate from moral, ethical, liberal, or humanist views of the world. Neither of these paradigms refer to the singular process of abducting African captives, but rather an industrial-level apparatus of the temporal and spatial nature which is why it contains the word "making." I use the term "death-making" as that which refers to or is related to the distribution of death as well as its different expression as seen within memoirs, fiction, various theorizations, as well as within Islamic texts. Death-making is heavily involved in and triggered by slave-making. To elaborate further, slave-making is not just the process of abducting African captives, but rather an apparatus of a temporal and spatial nature that has been produced, maintained, and facilitated by individual people (slave-makers) as well as systems (capitalism and thingification).[4] As such, death-making emerges from various scenes of destructive subjugation, namely the Middle Passage, which then results in an accelerated production of death: physical death, social death, and ontological death.

Life-making is a similarly expansive, methodological paradigm that shifts everything it encounters. I argue that life-making is more precarious and fragile than death-making due to its reliance on the labour of those who are located within the apparatus of death. Essentially, just as death-making is produced by slavers, life-making is produced by captives and enslaved peoples. Subjects of life-making include the various ways that African captives have fought back: resisting their abduction/s, breaking shackles, organizing resistance movements, holding onto personal spirituality in the face of brutalization, producing life writings such as memoirs and

[4] I take the term "thingification" from Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000) where he equates colonization with thingification as a result of "relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production" (42). The term is also used by Christina Sharpe in her book, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016) where she explores the commodification of Black subjects in the production of slavery and its Afterlife.

autobiographies, and writing بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم (*bismillah al-rahman al-rahim*) atop these life stories. I am choosing to refer to such productions as life-making because I believe it is a proper reflection of the death-making engendered by slavery which inevitably forces its captives to find alternatives ways of living. In the retention of certain parts of their identities and principles, enslaved Africans provoked a cosmic reaction to preserve life. These instances of life-making are just as crucial as ones of death-making, as both structural paradigms — when understood as a logical continuation and response to one another —allow for a better understanding of slavery and subsequently of the world that slavery produced.

Finally, the concept of unspeakability is a recurring theme in this thesis and one of its overall framing concepts because it is one of the significant characteristics of the Middle Passage. A symbolic pipeline between a past life and a dead future, the Middle Passage has come to represent a liminal space wherein neither the past nor the present function and wherein a future could never be imagined. With over two million Africans dying during the journey, sometimes by suicide, death permeates the very essence of the Middle Passage. The unspeakability of the Middle Passage has multiple departures, one of which is the seemingly inconceivable idea that death would be a more bearable alternative than the conditions people were living in. Stuck between slavery and the open sea, the weight of death bears down upon the captives exponentially.

The second possible feature of the unspeakability of the Middle Passage is the lack of documentation. There are almost no surviving testimonies documenting the journey itself and the ones that do exist are almost too unbearable to engage with in meaningful ways. As Ruth Mayer puts it: "There are no stories of the Middle Passage. One hundred million people were stolen and sold from their homes, shipped across the world, and not a single story of that journey survives."[5] There are so few stories about the Middle Passage perhaps because it is impossible to narrate such violence.[6] This implies that the ocean that carried these slave ships acts as a blank, empty, unified silence as it constitutes a literal blank in history while also being akin to

[5] Ruth Mayer. "Africa as an Alien Future: The Middle Passage, Afrofuturism, and Postcolonial Waterworlds." *American Studies*, vol. 45, no. 4, (2000), 557

[6] Most "stories" about the Middle Passage can only be found in ledgers, court transcripts, and other forms that seek to document numbers. These sources do not necessarily capture the horrors, experiences, or lives of African captives.

something that has been redacted or censored—for were it to be written, its violence would beg for redaction.[7] Indeed, the Middle Passage emerges as a burial ground.

Part of what makes any analyses of the Middle Passage thorny and complex to elaborate is the lack of official documentation that archives what occurred on the ships that carried human cargo. From this fact emerges a different, loaded reality: the Middle Passage is marked by an unspeakability and any attempt to capture it will be speculative in nature. The marker of unspeakability is not only a designation of its allegorical meaning--something that is too bad, or horrible, to express in words—it is also a designation of its literal meaning. How can we speak about the Middle Passage when we relatively know very little about what occurred during the perilous voyages?

Writing and Speaking about the Unspeakable

An important premise of this thesis is that alternative kinds of narrations to preserve untold truths exist. This emerges from structures of death-making, life-making, and unspeakability coalescing into one. By virtue of operating in a context of extreme death-making, life itself resists traditional modes of documentation. This fact alone does not prevent subjects from creating or making life and therefore resisting death-making. This section will explore the different ways of speaking about and preserving the unspeakable, specifically regarding the Middle Passage. It is divided into five subsections, history, speculation, testimonies/ memories, auto-theory, and fiction.

<u>History:</u>

The most common and traditional mode of documentation and understanding is through historical processes — meaning academic analyses of primary texts. As such, history is established as a legitimate form of documentation that first and foremost assesses what is or is not worthy of being recorded. This means that the truth is not always encapsulated by history. Indeed, the scholarship on the Middle Passage is saturated with blanks, speculations, and conjecture. However, many of its blanks can be and have been used by scholars such as Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe, and M. Nourbese Philip as deliberate tools to re-shape history.

[7] For more on the concept of the "blank" see: M. Nourbese Philip's *Blank: Interviews and Essays*. (Toronto: BookThug, 2017).

According to Sylviane Diouf —leading scholar of slavery and Islam, who has written extensively on the Middle Passage—though there is very little documentation about the forced march to the slave ships and voyage across the sea, most of what we do know comes from the testimonies of Muslims.[8] Diouf notes that Muslim slaves are rarely spoken about in the scholarship on slavery, despite the significant number of Muslim slaves recorded. In *Servants of Allah,* Diouf has provided one of the most thoroughly documented studies of Muslim slaves and the way in which Islam became a channel through which they could become more than just objects of violence: subjecting themselves to the godliness of bearing witness to their lives. Diouf proposes that: "the African Muslims remained attached to their faith, and their enslavement was itself a good reason to be even more devout. Faith meant hope, moral comfort and *mental escape.*"[9] The fact that most of the existing documentation about North American slavery was penned by enslaved Muslims points to Islam's foundational role in the conditions of remembrance.

Most historical analyses of the Middle Passage, which are largely drawn from limited sources that include ledgers, documentations, autobiographies, reveal that "the business of slave trading produced two interrelated but distinct bodies of archival material—one quantitative, and the other largely textual."[10] Stephanie Smallwood's *Saltwater Slavery* (2007) is an expansive book that seeks to transform and bring "the people aboard slave ships to life as subjects" by centering the role of the Middle Passage in the process of enslavement.[11] One of Smallwood's primary interventions is to probe the ways in which the archival memory of slavery operates differently than other forms of archiving. Though there is an abundant presence of ledgers and other formal ways of accounting or monitoring stakeholders' investment in slave-making, these documents rarely mention, even less reflect, the atrocities involved in this process. Indeed, I argue that documentation often sterilizes processes of violence as it waters down the impact and atrocity of unspeakable acts. The quantification process that is implicated and produced in the making of slavery records is undoubtedly reflective of the systems that created slavery in the first place. This is partly why these records are devoid of any qualitative records and emptied of any life—meaning that the human experience is not only unrecognized but rejected. This posits a

[8] Diouf, 64.
[9] Diouf, 86 (emphasis not my own).
[10] Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 4.
[11] Smallwood, 122

complex and even contradictory relationship as the supposed truth presented in "objective" texts are artificially produced. It also complicates the designation of these acts as unspeakable since they are technically "spoken" about in these ledgers.[12] This begs the question of how can a violent act that is inherently meant to be unspeakable remain as such when it is in fact documented in texts that are designed to "tell the truth"? The textual archival material available consists mostly of correspondence between colonial agents stationed in coastal Africa or in the Americas and official agents in London.[13] But, today, many interventions made about the Middle Passage are interested in the human story of it and attempt to, through these lifeless documents, focus on the lives of the enslaved in ways that were denied to them.[14]

An example that demonstrates how some historical records attempt to depict the depersonalization and unspeakability of the Middle Passage, despite its limitations within the official documentation is the *Brookes* ship. In 1788, a diagram of the Liverpool slave ship, the *Brookes*, was used when "[Liverpool] Parliament was deliberating upon a law that in effect would have restricted the *Brookes* to a cargo of no more than 454 slaves."[15] The historical analysis of the *Brookes* vessel done by Smallwood, in addition to Sylviane Diouf's historical writing on the role of Islam in the Middle Passage are two examples of scholarship that use legal ledgers, documentation, and evidence to outline the unspeakable. "It was calculated that if every man slave was allowed six feet by one foot, four inches, platform space, every woman five feet six by one foot, the *Brookes* could hold 451 slaves. A witness who had been on the *Brookes*'s voyage of 1783 testified that 'they bought upwards of 600 slaves and lost about seventy in the voyage.'"[16] The dehumanizing dimensions of the space allocated to each person coupled with the fact that the Brookes exceeded this number and carried 740 Africans—an excess of 289 people—is a chilling and realistic depiction of the severity of the experience of the Middle Passage.

The *Brookes* was not an exceptional ship in its size or mission, like many other slave ships it produced high mortality rates for the Africans on board, though not the Europeans. This is what Smallwood calls "the political economy of the slave ship" where she compares the

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[12] The "fact" that the acts produced in the Middle Passage are technically "spoken" about is debatable and worth considering. It is "spoken" about on an exclusively economic level that reveals only a single dimension of the brutal exploitation and therefore it would be difficult to designate it as a document, spoken fact.
[13] Smallwood, 20.
[14] See the works of Tim Armstrong, Ian Baucom, Karla Holloway, Claudia Rankine, and Marcus Rediker.
[15] James A. Rawley and Stephen D. Behrendt, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 243.
[16] Rawley and Behrendt, 243.

treatment that enslaved Africans received on board the ship to the commodities sold by African traders.[17] She notes that it was common practice to stretch the ship's capacity as it was a means of maximizing "the rate of return that investors demanded […] it answered the captain's self-interest" and generally expanded the ship's profitability. This is an example of using historical records—court transcripts and a diagram of the ship—to highlight a broader truth that is not necessarily encapsulated by those documents. Whereas these documents simply illustrate numbers and facts, Smallwood's analysis of these documents depicts the processes of death-making involved in the production of slave-making.

Speculation:

Historical analyses based on official documentation are not only about analysing the contents of official documentation, but also an analysis or focus on what isn't said, what can't be said, and what has been prevented from being said. Speculation is a difficult but necessary tool to understanding the depth of absence, lack, and silences—all of which saturate the scholarship on the Middle Passage.

To return to the work of Stephanie Smallwood, her scholarship uses history as a primary method of archiving the unspeakable, but she also speculates on the meaning and impact that the sea had on kidnapped, enslaved Africans aboard slave ships. Indeed, the sea was itself unfamiliar and strange for the captives as they generally considered the Atlantic to be uncharted territory. Prior to any contact with the Europeans, Africans developed their own knowledge of the sea and the land: "Africans knew that the sea was controlled by powerful deities whose benevolence was the real source of the sea's gift to them and whose disfavor was the source of the sea's destructive potential."[18] Their relationship to the sea followed a common pattern in African cosmology that the metaphysical and literal, the sacred and secular, are bound together and manifest in different ways in the material world.[19] From this, Smallwood speculates that this reinforced fear in many captives as they believed that by embarking on the sea, they were

[17] Smallwood, 65

[18] Smallwood, 129.

[19] The connection between the Middle Passage and cosmology is what initially pushed me to think more about the voyages, its impact, its stories, and its lives from an Islamic framework. Smallwood's book works to establish an intuitive connection with spirituality and cosmology in ways that really enrich her analyses. The connection to Islam, here, is evident as according to historians such as Sylviane Diouf a significant number of enslaved Africans were Muslim.

embarking on an unforgiving spiritual journey.[20] And they were right. When captives would throw themselves overboard into the water, they were directly breaking a spiritual belief that to take one's own life is to deny one's soul the possibility of joining its ancestors. Thus, the journey becomes inherently spiritual and renders captives' decision to jump into the sea an inherently complicated one for the African Muslim captives whose religious beliefs prohibit taking one's own life.

Sylviane Diouf is another historian who uses speculative analysis of historical documentation to get at the truth of the experience of the Middle Passage.[21] Indeed, Diouf's endeavor to trace Islamic ties, influence, and impact on slavery and its Afterlife, shows multiple accounts of enslaved African Muslims' antagonism toward their captors.[22] One of the earliest recordings of a slave revolt by enslaved Africans in the Americas occurred on the sugar plantation of Admiral Don Diego Colon—Christopher Columbus' son— in what is now the Dominican Republic. In fact, not long after their arrival to the New World, a series of anti-Muslim legislative acts were constitutionalized in various parts of the New World.[23] The earliest record of such legislation dates back as early as 1503, when the Spanish Crown attempted "to put a complete stop to the introduction of Africans, because they fled, joined the Indians, and taught them 'bad customs'"[24]

Based on an analysis of the complete text of Fernandez de Oviedo's description of the revolt published in 1549, Diouf traces this event where "[they] went from plantation to plantation trying to rally other Africans [and] killed a dozen whites" to other rebellions that took place in San Juan, Puerto Rico; Santa Marta, Colombia; and Panama.[25] Diouf concludes that Muslim Africans in the Americas had indeed set a trend where they were institutionally recognized as "arrogant, disobedient, rebellious, and incorrigible."[26] These exact words are extracted from original documents published in Spanish which Diouf translated and highlighted in her own book, *Servants of Allah*.[27] "In the first fifty years of Spain's establishment in the New World, no

[20] Smallwood, 129-32
[21] Note that Smallwood and Diouf do not explicitly claim that their work utilizes speculation as a way to dissect existing documentation, this is my own reading of their work and while they could be conscious of their use of speculation in this context, it is not explicitly stated in their main works that I am citing.
[22] Diouf, 209-10
[23] Diouf, 210
[24] Diouf, 211
[25] Diouf, 211
[26] Diouf, 211
[27] Diouf, 211

fewer than five pieces of anti-Muslim legislation were issued [...] as the Spanish Crown feared the expansion of Islam in America and was confronted with the deadly rebellions fomented by Muslim slaves and maroons."[28]

While much of the documentation of the Middle Passage is limited to ledgers and legal documents, Diouf was nonetheless able to logically deduce implied truths about the extent of violence as practiced by slave-makers. Legislation not only communicates the logistics of slave-making, but also reflects the ways in which slave communities actively resisted this—enough so, at least, to warrant legislative intervention by the state. From the existence of such anti-Muslim legislations, for example, Diouf can conclude that there were attempts and interventions by the state to control African Muslims as their history of defiance presented a threat to the captors.[29] In this way, many Muslim slaves maintained their faith. Given that Islam ensures that every believer could not be anything other than free men and women, there is a strong sense of reclamation in these insurgencies. It allows them to never compromise their own identities as human beings first.

Stripped of their identity, names, and pasts, Muslim slaves were somehow able to retain their religion often going to great and dangerous lengths to do so. One of the ways this was possible was through the preservation and practice of Islam's five pillars — observing them in whichever forms were available. Diouf explains that often "[Islam] was [a] link to the past, to a time when they were free, respected, and, for some, engaged in intellectual pursuits, not menial labor."[30] For example, Diouf documents the life of a runaway slave who, when found wandering in Kent County, Pennsylvania, introduced himself as "Allah. Muhammad."[31] His slave name was Simon but his birth name was Ayuba Suleyman Diallo. Diallo was Fulani, a primarily Muslim people scattered throughout West Africa. When given the order to tend to his captors' cattle, not only was it likely familiar labor, as the Fulani relied primarily on stockbreeding as an occupation, this also gave Diallo the freedom to leave his cattle for long enough to hide in the woods and pray in secret.[32] He was able to do this for quite a long period of time; however, he eventually was caught by a young white boy who threw dirt on his face, mocking him.

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[28] Diouf, 212
[29] I will return to this fact in Chapter Four, when I explore the current state regulation to control Muslims in the contemporary world.
[30] Diouf, 87
[31] Diouf, 72
[32] Diouf, 89

Humiliated and apprehensive of his captor's retaliation, Ayuba fled, but as was often the case, he was eventually captured and taken into custody for his owner to reclaim him.[33]

Diouf dedicates an entire chapter to how literacy was interpreted by slave-makers both as a distinction and a danger. African literacy was not always welcomed by captors and often posed a threat not only to their own identity, but there was also the threat that these enslaved African Muslims would teach other enslaved Africans how to rebel and resist their enslavement. With Islam's emergence in the continent, literacy rates in Muslim were quite high, and therefore also people kidnapped and expatriated to the Americas were often literate.[34] After Diallo's release from jail, he identified himself to his captors as a Muslim man which impressed them, and they ended up lightening his workload and allowing him a place to pray.[35]

Islam therefore is able to articulate freedom and urges believers to retain their personhood which, in the case of bondage, facilitates liberation. This was the case for Ayuba Suleyman Diallo who — knowing no other words or any other way to communicate who he was, where he came from, or to whom he 'belonged' — used Islam to communicate his identity. Indeed, Islam extends beyond its traditional role as a religious faith and has become something you pronounce when denied any form of identification or belonging. What, then, are the implications of using Islam as a vehicle for the unspeakable? Diallo's literacy impressed Europeans and eventually he was engaged as an Arabic translator for the president of the Royal Geographical Society and was freed from his bondage.[36] From London, he wrote letters to his father in Senegal and eventually returned to his homeland—crossing the ocean twice now. Diouf points out that for him, "literacy meant the difference between a life of servitude in America and a free life in Senegal."[37] Islam, in this case, became a vehicle for freedom in a context of pillage and violence.

<u>Testimonies / Memories:</u>

Another way that historians such as Sylviane Diouf have been able to get at certain truths about the Middle Passage is through written testimonies of enslaved Africans. Memory, which often

[33] Diouf, 87
[34] Diouf, 25
[35] Diouf, 87
[36] Diouf, 233
[37] Diouf, 72

stands in opposition to history, can be another source of truth. To explore this in more depth, I want to briefly turn to theorizations of national memory, what we might call history, in contrast to individual memory, specifically in the context of mass destruction and death. The memory of slavery acts in constant opposition to what scholars term a national memory, precisely because it is so difficult for it to be archived or documented in history. I am specifically referring here to Heonik Kwon's theorization of memory which emerges from the context of mass violence in My Lai and Ha My. Kwon focuses on the local ritual of remembrances practiced by the surviving Vietnamese villagers in both localities. He starts by stating that "household death-commemoration rites are a rich store of historical evidence."[38] This is important to note because it suggests that personal rituals of remembrance are evidence of that which they are remembering regardless of whether they have been officially recognized. Kwon offers a clear distinction between national memory and local memory. He defines national memory as a constructed imagination to generate community and consolidate a nation-state's legitimacy.[39] Local memory is, according to Kwon, located within the margins of national history and is generated through the act of remembering *that which national memory has not recognized.*[40]

In many ways, Kwon challenges national memory and presents it as illegitimate as it does not create reality but rather it creates two different planes of remembrance: the local and the cosmopolitan. Local memory is located within the margins of national history and is made up of the surplus—the excess that was not synthesized into a national memory. In simpler words, instances of mass violence are often forgotten by everyone except for the people whose existence is contingent on the ritual of remembrance. If the Middle Passage cannot be synthesized into a national consciousness, it can still be located in other forms of documentation and archive such as speculation, fiction, and prose.[41]

Building on Heonik Kwon's theorization of memory in relation to the Middle Passage, I am also using Samera Esmeir's essay on memory, "Memories of Conquest: Witnessing Death in Tantura," to provide more depth to my analyses. Focusing on the undocumented massacres that occurred in Tantura, Palestine, Esmeir delves into the complications of memory, defining the act

[38] Heonik Kwon, *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai* (University of California Press, 2006), 57.
[39] Kwon, 60.
[40] Kwon, 62
[41] See Rinaldo Walcott's article on the Middle Passage and representation: "Middle Passage: In the Absence of Detail, Presenting and Representing a Historical Void" (*Kronos* (44), 2018).

of remembering as an act of witnessing. She proposes that the first moment of witnessing occurs during the moment itself, and "another is becoming a witness of that moment when recalling it."[42] This argument, when added to Kwon's conceptualization of memory, helps to build a compelling theoretical framework to study the Middle Passage as they both highlight the value of memory to the point of referring to the person remembering as a witness. Esmeir's use of the language of witness implies that this person is legally compelled to tell the truth about an event. While it isn't the case that the people remembering instances of violence are legally compelled to be witnesses, Esmeir proposes that it is an automatic shift that occurs from remembrance to witnessing. Esmeir's essay on memories in many ways acts as a continuation of Heonik Kwon's theorization of national versus local memory. She argues that the act of remembrance disrupts linear temporality of time as the concept of memory occurs during two different times. In what follows in this thesis, I work with these concepts—ensuring that I recall that witnessing operates on multiple levels: witnessing as seeing, witnessing as testimony, and witnessing as remembering.

Auto-theory:

Auto-theory is a category used to describe works and books that are often genre-bending. It refers to self-narration as an approach to theorize about the world itself. It is a growing category that has become especially mainstream in feminist literary practices. Vinson Cunningham traces the tradition of auto-theory to Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) in which he recounts his own experiences as a Black child growing up in Martinique, his personal musings on race relations, and his professional psychological findings while working with traumatized Algerian civilians and combatants during the almost decade-long revolution in 1954. He recounts, analyses, and locates these experiences within and with the objective of understanding the structural legacies of the world. Fanon's book is not a collection of psychological findings, nor is it an autobiography; nor is it a theoretical manifesto—instead, it is a combination of all these genres to create a unique, personal, but applicable theorization of the world.

More recently, Afro-Pessimism is another location in which the concept and category of auto-theory has become widespread. Afro-Pessimism is "a metatheory [that uses] Marxism,

[42] Samera Esmeir, "Memories of Conquest: Witnessing Death in Tantura," in *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*, ed. Ahmad H. Sa'di and Lila Abu-Lughod, Columbia University Press, 22.

psychoanalysis, feminism, and other critical theories [with] the ambition [of clarifying] the irreconcilable differences between, on one hand, the violence of capitalism, gender oppression, and White supremacy, and on the other hand, anti-Black violence."[43] Afro-Pessimism lends itself naturally and intuitively to auto-theory as it is a form of study interested in dissecting the status and role of Black subjects in society, a practice rooted in the study of slavery. Saidiya Hartman is claimed as an Afro-Pessimist, though scholars such as Gloria Wekker are careful to separate the works of Saidiya Hartman, Frantz Fanon, Hortense Spillers, Sylvia Wynter, and Orlando Patterson from the more recent works of Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton by categorizing the latter with the label of "A.P 2.0."[44] As such, I identify and locate Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* as a good example of auto-theory and tentatively as the kind of Afro-Pessimism that Fanon was later claimed to practice himself.

Reading Hartman's work alongside that of Fanon is useful, not only because it allows us to better understand the genre of Hartman's book, but also to understand its objective. Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*, and her scholarship more generally, emerges from an in-depth examination of the subjugation of Black people, anti-Black violence, and the legacies of slavery as being necessary for maintaining the current structure of the world. Frantz Fanon is one of the best-known writers to describe the universe as a compartmentalized one that subjugates Black subjects to create the white subject. It is within this framework that Hartman's own work and life writing operate. Hartman uses her life as a vehicle to map out concepts of social death and the Afterlife of slavery. *Lose Your Mother* personalizes contemporary theory that has often been subject to an impersonal, academic gaze even though such contemporary theory centers epistemologies that have produced personal damage to both individuals and collectivities. I argue that auto-theory is a useful way of understanding epistemologies that have previously been turned academic and thus rendered lifeless. By using a life to think about the universe, Hartman is resurrecting phenomenologies and theorizations that are primarily concerned with human life.

Fiction:

"This is not a story to pass on." This sentence, penned by Toni Morrison when recounting a story about a slave woman who killed her own children, depicts the complications in "passing on" a

[43] Gloria Wekker, "Afropessimism." *European Journal of Women's Studies* vol 28, no. 1 (2021), 88
[44] Wekker, 89

story that is too horrible to be remembered, let alone recounted. In her piece titled "Truth, Fiction, and Leaving the Page Blank," Michelle Hartman argues that stories of violence and war are often told through fiction precisely to narrate such difficult truths.[45] M. Hartman uses the example of Toni Morison's *Beloved* to display the way in which "fiction becomes a location where we can dispense with the notion that we must seek facts, or what really happened in order to express a truth."[46] Morrison's conceptualization of truth and fiction can help build ways to understand the Middle Passage and its stories despite the lack of evidence or direct stories from people who survived it.

Thinking about how fiction can and does manage to tell truths is a way to supplement the lack of scholarship on the Middle Passage and means that this lack need not hinder the validity or truth-value of the existing speculative scholarship—fictional or otherwise. M. Hartman's article uses Morrison's concept in relation to narrations of the Sabra and Shatila massacres and theorizes that ambiguity and silences can provide fictional narratives of heft and importance. As she argues in relation to Toni Morrison's work, "The phrase 'pass on' also invokes death and what happens when the body transitions to another way of being—layering meaning in a novel filled with living people and ghostly apparitions."[47] This further theoretical insight is important to retain in my thesis because it implies that passing on the story will fill the story with ghostly apparitions.

Fiction acts as an alternative to the official, recognized channels of history that have prevented thorough documentation of the Middle Passage. Indeed, an important premise of this thesis is the ability for alternative kinds of narrations to preserve untold documented truths. "I met History once," writes Derek Walcott to nobody in particular, or perhaps to the world that had erased him out of existence, "but he ain't recognize me."[48] It is within the lack, within the spaces that have been erased that storytelling, oral histories, life writings become arbiters for humanity. To embark on the channels of storytelling is to recognize that within the official archival history "[you are] either nobody, or a nation."[49] Stories allow people to attain the personhood that has

[45] Michelle Hartman, "Truth, Fiction, and Leaving the Page Blank: Women, Children, and the Sabra and Shatila Massacre" in *Women's War Stories: The Lebanese Civil War, Women's Labor, and the Creative Arts*, ed. Malek Abisaab and Michelle Hartman. (Syracuse University Press, forthcoming).
[46] Hartman, forthcoming.
[47] M, Hartman, forthcoming.
[48] Derek Walcott, "The Schooner Flight," from *Collected Poems 1948-1984*.(Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986), 1.
[49] Walcott, 1.

been denied to them and allows for them to move forward in a world that has convinced them that they are backwards. For Omar ibn Said, that means that while writing the story of his life, he is able through his words, to retain an agency that threatens the very process of slave-making; for Saidiya Hartman, that means that by documenting the Afterlife of the Middle Passage she is defying the archive's structural integrity, namely its reliance on lacks. By using words to express some of the most intimate or brutal parts of their lives, existence acquires meaning that has otherwise been erased, denied, and destroyed. After all, "[...] that's all them bastards left us: words."[50]

Conclusion

This chapter provides a brief glossary of the terminology that I use throughout my thesis, most importantly as death-making, life-making, and unspeakability. They each coalesce into conditions that make documenting, passing on, and archiving stories of the Middle Passage more complicated. I also provide a synthesis of works that document the Middle Passage in different traditional and nontraditional ways, namely through history, memory or testimonial evidence, speculation, and fiction. This is meant to preface my use of life writings as a way of getting at some of the truth/s of the Middle Passage. Indeed, not only does reading life writings that have emerged either from the Middle Passage itself or from its Afterlife enrich our understanding of the sea, it also allows us to treat it as an archive that holds many stories and histories. Embodying both death and beginnings, but mostly, the kind of unknowability that is usually reserved for a purely religious destination: the Afterlife.

[50] Walcott, 1.

Chapter 2: The Sea, the Sea, the Sea

> Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs? Where is your tribal memory?
> Sirs, in that grey vault. The sea. The sea has locked them up. The sea is history.
> —Derek Walcott, "The Sea is History"

In Chapter 1, I close with the poetry of Derek Walcott where he expresses the power of language and words to speak on and tell stories or truths that history doesn't recognize. His poetry is itself evidence that prose and fiction can express and recognize truths that have been ignored but I cite the above passage to also highlight the sanctity of the sea. Derek Walcott writes to a world that has erased his ancestors' story, a world that has no evidence of the battles that took place on the not-so-buried slave ships. "The sea is history,"[51] he writes and indeed it is because the sea bore and continues to bear witness to crimes that we may not yet know the extent of. Though it is unspeakable, it is not forgotten. Of course, the sea is not just history, it is also sacred ground as it is a place of rest for those who perished during the Middle Passage.

In this chapter, I will explore different ways to approach and attempt to understand the sea. I identify the Atlantic as a site that holds many lives, stories, and unspeakable violence. This chapter is dedicated to delving into the challenges that the sea presents us as it embodies different sites— a mass grave, a site of movement, a site of immobility, a veil between life and death, among others. All of these interact in uncomfortable, but significant, ways with the Middle Passage and its Afterlife. As my thesis focuses on the Afterlife of the Middle Passage, and the specific way it has informed life-writings as well as life itself, it is important to dissect the different embodiments of the sea. I will begin by considering the molecular value of the sea through a scientific analysis of water as an element to connect it to my larger analysis. This literal approach will ground my analysis by emphasizing that the sea is not merely an abstract, conceptual framework but also a tangible one. It is through the combination of the literal and conceptual understandings of the sea that I argue we can extrapolate truths about the Middle Passage.

An imaginative component is necessary when invoking unspeakability, specifically when endeavoring to comprehend the crimes that took place. I identify the poetry of M. Nourbese Philip as a literary and imaginative expression of histories that bear witness to some of the

[51] Derek Walcott, "The Schooner Flight," from *Collected Poems 1948-1984* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986), 5.

unspeakable crimes of the Middle Passage. From these analyses, I identify the act of witnessing as an important component of the remembrance of the Middle Passage. Here, we enter a site wherein death and haunting interlock: the only living witness of the Middle Passage is the sea itself and as both a grave site and a site of life, I argue it engages with the living, today, in very intrusive ways. I will draw out the complicated ways that both life-making and death-making are implicated in the movement, currents, and motions of the sea as it engages with the world. Finally, I will provide a speculative understanding of witnessing, specifically arguing that the sea has become a witness to unspeakable violence.

In this chapter, I will also analyse one of Philip's poems from *Zong!* This work is an exceptional endeavor to map out the facts of what took place aboard the eponymous ship. In the hopes of revealing the impossibility of grasping unspeakable phenomena, Philip utilizes prose to communicate the unspeakable. Philip uses the only surviving documentation of this ship, including ledgers and court transcripts, together with her own imaginative narrative, to recount the crime and encapsulate the loss in the *Zong* ship in a way that official documentation does not. Indeed, she uses prose and poetry to imagine and speculate upon a story and life behind the lifeless words that compose the ledgers. The poems are all interactive and follow a non-linear, untraditional flow which is why I am choosing to use it as a frame for the sections of this chapter.[52] I turn to the *Zong* ship here, and Philip's way of expressing it, as exemplary because of how it so effectively demonstrates the processes of death-making, life-making, witnessing, and dreaming.

All is Water

The sea is perhaps an obvious site – one among many – wherein we can locate the Middle Passage. Objective detailed descriptions are common and reliable ways to represent realities, but they have severe limitations. I propose that in breaking down the molecular identity of water, we can access an understanding of the Middle Passage without reflecting its multi-dimensionality. In this section, I will attempt to define the sea in an expansive, literal way. After all, the sea does

[52] I would also like to note that the poems are literally interactive as her poetry is meant to be performed. In her performances, she transforms her words that, on paper might seem illegible, into sound. She uses silence, inflection, and cadence to emphasize certain words over the others. In so doing, the lifeless words that once composed the court transcript become full of life -- in that they express the loss of life aboard the *Zong*.

not exist only in the collective intergenerational memory of the captives: it exists as a real and tangible substance.

In his work on the principle of unification, pre-Socratic philosopher Thales, claimed that "all is water."[53] Troubled by his inability to discern where the origin of mathematics lay, Thales instinctively returned to water as a measure of mathematics, and thus as the measure of any universe that works within the laws of those measurements. Thales' principle of unification uses the premise that all life depends on water, and therefore it is critical in conceiving the world itself. The hypothesis of unification is that "diverse, complex, and apparently unrelated phenomena, can be unified under a single principle that unifies the phenomena under the aegis of a simpler and more elegant law or principle."[54] So, Thales' arguably ominous, or even one dimensional, pronouncement that "all is water" is in fact a profound realization that this world is a continuum, measurable only by smaller continuums within its body. I use this principle in my own inquiry into the Middle Passage as a reference for understanding the world itself. Within the context of the Middle Passage, we can ask: what happens to the water that once carried the slave ships from the West Coast of Africa to the Americas?

To highlight the importance of water in my own reading of the Middle Passage, I will draw on the chemical principles of Stoichiometry and Bonding. There are two kinds of bonds that are involved in the molecular identity of water: intermolecular bonds and intramolecular bonds. Intermolecular bonds work to bind two, or more, individual elements together within the same unit or molecule. In the case of one water molecule, intermolecular forces connect the two hydrogen atoms and a single oxygen atom. Based on an elementary understanding of chemistry, we know that Intramolecular bonds refer to the bonds between each water molecule and are significantly weaker than the intermolecular bonds that make up a single water molecule — but they work to bond units of the molecule. Simply put, water molecules remain water molecules but their state (liquid, gas, or solid) can change depending on the environmental circumstances they are exposed to. These bonds are more easily broken and, in turn, regenerated through heat.

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[53] Patricia F. O'Grady. *Thales of Miletus: The Beginnings of Western Science and Philosophy*. (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), x

[54] Harry Hamlin Ricker "Johannes Kepler and The Magnetic Unification of Terrestrial and Cosmic Physics" (John Chappell Natural Philosophy Alliance, 2013), 1

I am interested in the vocabulary of bonding specifically in communicating the science behind water — a ubiquitous element, held together by very strong, but invisible bonds. I would like to extend the vocabulary and imagery offered to us by these chemical/scientific principles as a metaphor for reading the Middle Passage. I am interested in the difference between inter- and intramolecular bonds especially as I propose to view energy as a determinant of a group's strength. I am introducing this as a model through which we can think both more literally about the sea and more symbolically about the Middle Passage. I argue that under the scientific premises and understanding of Stoichiometry and Bonding, any source of power that is enough to generate and produce a reaction could substitute energy and fill its role. Rage, for example, is an energy that is enough to generate and produce, not a chemical reaction, but a revolution. When bonds are broken, there is a common misconception that it is the intramolecular forces that break which would mean the molecule itself would cease to exist. That is false. When bonds are broken—a molecule's shape can lose form or break into smaller parts, but it remains intact thanks to the intramolecular bonds. We scientifically understand that energy is released not when chemical bonds between units (or individuals) are broken, but rather when they are formed. Not only is it harder to form bonds, but it also takes more to break them. Bondage, then, ceases to exist, but the bondaged never will. After all: All is water.

I am presenting this literal, scientific analysis of water and its molecular identity first, to illustrate the different ways to understand the sea and secondly, to provide an alternative way of understanding bondage. As I move forward within this thesis, I primarily rely on the conditions of the Middle Passage and its intergenerational impact. By building a discourse of community through chemical theories, it is easier to see the value of resistance on a cellular level. Indeed, by breaking the intermolecular bonds which bind them to slave-maker, enslaved Africans never compromise their own molecular identity and the bonds between each other. Again, whichever energy is used to break bondage has very little importance so long as the energy is enough to break the bonds. "All is water," Thales pronounced, triggering a body of work on the process and importance of unification—not just in the field of mathematics but echoing further into the universe. Mostly, I want to demonstrate that while there is value in considering the literal components of the sea or in practicing an "objective" impersonal analysis of the sea, it will not necessarily help capture the unspeakability of the Middle Passage. I suggest that treating the sea

as an ambiguous site is central to understanding its role in the creation of unspeakability.

Stories are Real and They Witness Things Too

While there is value in emphasizing the literal components of the sea, I would now like to turn to its imaginative components. There are certainly limitations and depth to using the imagination or fiction as a vehicle to understand the sea, and I hope to reflect these complexities in this section. To be clear, I am proposing here that imagination is a point of departure to uncovering the many meanings inscribed within the sea. That is precisely what M. Nourbese Philip does in *Zong!* — a collection of poems composed exclusively from the words in the *Gregson v Gilbert* case file. The back cover of the book reads: "*Zong!* tells the story that cannot be told yet must be told."[55] This sentence fits into my own framework of uncovering the unspeakable — what cannot but must be told — through public documents, histories, official archives to excavate meaning and stories. The slave ship *Zong* is exceptional in two ways: first in that the captain deliberately drowned the captives on board his ship and attempted to claim an insurance loss to collect a fee, and second in its role and influence in the movement of slavery abolition.[56]

Philip's work also suggests that official documentations, specifically in this case that are produced in spaces of legal justice, are not only unequipped with addressing the unspeakable violence that took place in slave ships, but any documentation that archives attempt to do so will be inherently flawed and reductive. Philip is aware that to tell "the story that cannot be told yet must be told" she will have to "mutilate the [*Gregson v. Gilbert* transcript …] murder the texts, literally cut it into pieces, castrating verbs, suffocating adjectives, murdering nouns."[57] These are techniques that she uses to highlight the way in which official archives and traditional forms of documentation about the Middle Passage aren't enough to understand its crimes.

Each poem utilizes white space on the page strategically to create blanks, interruptions, and overlaps. This is even more evident in the live readings and performances of Philip's poetry where she employs unconventional production practices. Specifically, she uses overlapping

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[55] M. Nourbese Philip, *Zong!* (Wesleyan University Press, 2008), back cover

[56] See: James Walvin, *Black Ivory: A History of British Slavery* (Oxford, UK: Malden, 2001)
"It took no great leap of the imagination to appreciate that the logic of pursuing the murderers of the slaves on the Zong would be the first tug which would unravel the entire garment of the slave system. And in some respects, this is precisely what happened, for it was around the small band of men of sensibility, outraged by events on the Zong, that they developed the first powerful body of abolitionist feeling and action. The line of dissent from the Zong to the successful campaign for abolition was direct and unbroken, however protracted and uneven" (15).

[57] M. Nourbese Philip. *Zong!* (Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 193-194

audios, sounds of waves crashing, and pauses to create a unique and powerful auditory experience. The experience is different as a reader: it is up to the reader's imagination to fill the blanks and to imagine a pace. Indeed, her consistent use of line breaks stimulates us into instinctively trying to imagine the potential meanings that are underlying. In other words, the way in which I read or understand Philip's *Zong!* will almost necessarily be different from another's reading of it. In this section, and throughout the chapter, I will provide a reading of her poetry to emphasize the role of the sea in understanding the story that "cannot be told yet must be told." In Philip's postface, she writes that "always what is going on seems to be about water."[58] My readings attempt to extrapolate where the water is located in her poems and analyse the role of stories, even if fictitious or imagined, in uncovering the unspeakable.

Setting sail in 1781, from the West Coast of Africa to Jamaica, the *Zong* was captained by Luke Collingwood and carried four hundred and seventy abducted Africans. Built to carry about two hundred people, the ship stood very little chance at safely arriving to the Americas even without the added navigational miscalculations which effectively condemned over two hundred Africans to a violent death. Their deaths, however, were not part of the accidental, unfortunate, but understandable peril of a sea voyage. The captain was under the impression that if his many navigational miscalculations led to the "natural death" of African slaves, the owners of the ship would be held liable but that if they were "thrown alive into the sea, it would be the loss of the underwriters."[59] The possibility (not the certainty) of somehow fiscally profiting from this error was enough to commit the massacre.

The complete depersonalization of enslaved Africans is partly due to what Stephanie Smallwood calls the "commodification of human beings." In *Saltwater Slavery,* Smallwood challenges the emphasis on the quantification of the slave trade as a means of understanding it; instead, she uses primary sources to emphasize the role of the sea in the commodification of enslaved Africans. She underlines that the barbaric practices of enslavement transformed African captives from human cargo to commodities.[60] These analyses are missing from official documentation in the sense that what we can read in the archives is that a trial was held when the

[58] Philip. 195
[59] Philip, 189
[60] Smallwood's chapter titled "Turning African Captives into Atlantic Commodities," analyses saltwater slavery through a lens of commodification to emphasize the social death and the Afterlife of slavery. By framing the practices of slavery as a supply for a market that "valued people as commodities [which meant that captives'] exchangeability on the Atlantic market outweighed any social value they might have" (Smallwood, 52).

ship's owners began legal action against their insurers who refused to "cover the losses." Scholars such as Smallwood and M. Nourbese Philip, however, point out the unspoken conditions that would allow for such a fact. Smallwood narrows in on the commodification and depersonalization of enslaved African as an explanation for the *Zong*, whereas Philip displays this in the very premise of her book. Indeed, Philip's poems tell a story that she clearly deemed wasn't adequately portrayed in the documents referring to the legal case about the *Zong* and she creates poetry as another way of remembering the massacre that took place aboard the ship.

As I discuss in Chapter One above, remembrance and storytelling are tied together in more ways than one and operate on multiple levels. In this case, we first understand their relation through Philip's impetus for writing her book: the words that comprise the primary, archival documentation of the massacre would traditionally be understood as objective. Ledgers, court hearings, and archival records are all meant to document what happened in supposedly "objective" ways. While the *Gregson v Gilbert* case is meant to put the ship's captain and crew on trial on the basis of monetary loss, it also allows us to see how human life, specifically African human life, is discarded. Indeed, the case itself is trivializing and dehumanizing. By reconstructing the narrative from these words, Philip is offering an alternate story for us to remember. Second, is the basic understanding that for something to be remembered it must be told. Given that the only witnesses to the massacre are slave and slave maker, remembrance is severely compromised.

The language of witnessing in relation to the slave ship is obvious especially as a court case naturally implicates evidence, witnesses, and testimonies. I am invoking this language in the context of the Middle Passage deliberately to display how the sea itself is a witness to the crimes on slave ships. The fact that there are no living witnesses today doesn't mean that the story of the *Zong* isn't known or remembered. To think through the concept of witnessing a bit further, in relation to storytelling, remembrance and truth, I turn to Islam and Islamic texts and traditions. I believe that for a deeper understanding of the discourse of witnessing, a well-known Hadith about trees and witnessing can help further to understand and probe Philip's goal with *Zong!*:

> Ibn Umar reported: We were with the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, on a journey and a Bedouin passed by us. When he came near, the Prophet said, "Where are you going?" The man said, "I am going to my people." The Prophet said, "Would you like to bring goodness with you?" The man said, "What is it?" The Prophet

> said, "That you testify there is no God but Allah alone, without any partners, and that Muhammad is the servant of Allah and his messenger." The man said, "Who will bear witness to what you say?" The Prophet said, *"**This tree is a witness.**"* The Prophet called the tree from the edge of the valley, and it ploughed through the earth as it came until it stood before him. The Prophet asked for its testimony and ***[the tree] bore witness three times*** that he is the messenger of Allah. Then, it returned to the place where it grew. The Bedouin returned to his people, and he said, "If they follow me, I will bring them all to you. Otherwise, I will return alone to be with you."[61]

I am drawing on this hadith to emphasize the role of the sea in excavating the truth from the Middle Passage. The hadith, first and foremost, typifies the sea not only as a site that is inherently alive but also one that is legally or spiritually compelled to tell the truth about the atrocity it witnessed. In addition, it undermines the existing documentation and archive. Philip's *Zong!* reveals the way in which the writing in the existing archive is significantly biased and, in some cases, even fails in displaying the truth. On the other hand, this hadith suggests that in an Islamic framework, it is a fact of life that every living thing, such as the seas and the trees, is not only a witness to life (and death) but it is also compelled to testify, recount, and document the truth. Thus, we can extrapolate from this Hadith that the sea is a living witness to the crimes which occurred during the Middle Passage. We can also understand the sea as something living, despite having partaking in the process of death-making for the captives on board.

What, then, do we make of the sea as a blank, a burial ground, and a witness? How, then, does the Middle Passage change the very nucleus of the sea? The grip of lost mothers and orphaned children is not necessarily a story that should be told (but as Philip says it is one that "cannot be told but must be told"). Nonetheless, it is one that the sea remembers. This is reflected in the life writings of Saidiya Harman and Omar ibn Said. "With my eyes shut, the ocean sounded louder and even more threatening" writes Saidiya Hartman, "at night it's so loud I can hardly sleep"[62] "All is water" pronounced Thales, not to be written (for there are no surviving writings by him), but to be remembered and passed on. "All is water" is implied in Saidiya Hartman's writings. Though the water is not the same as it was when it carried over the

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[61] Elias Abu Amina. "Hadith on Miracles: Trees Bear Witness to the Prophet." *Daily Hadith Online*, 22 May 2019, abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2014/06/05/tree-bears-witness/ (Emphasis mine).
[62] Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. (Farrar, Straus, Giroux 2007), 107.

slave ships, though bondage between slave and slave-maker is broken, the water never broke, and its waves still carry the violence it witnessed. "We sailed in the big Sea for a month and a half,"[63] pens Omar ibn Said, writing nothing more about the treacherous waters. The water, like the tree that the Prophet Muhammad called over, is a witness—for all that is alive is a witness. How cruel for something as alive as water to take part in something as deadly as the Middle Passage?

One of the many poems that comprise Philip's *Zong!* is indeed dedicated to telling the story of the ship itself and the murder of people aboard it. No one testified to what she wrote specifically; however, using the words that make up the case court, Philip recounts the story in ways that are more realistic, perhaps accurate, and true than the same words when documented within the court case itself. In "Zong! #3," Philip writes "the some of negroes / over / board / the rest in lives / drowned / exist did not / in themselves / preservation / obliged / frenzy / thirst for forty others / etc." Though short, this poem takes up an entire page because of Philip's use of formatting and spacing. Indeed, her use of blank spaces and indentations is, as Philip herself attests, a symbolic gesture to resistance in archives, or as she says, "an untold story that tells itself by not telling."[64] The blanks that occupy the space on this page, divorcing words from each other, are a deliberate attempt to reflect the fundamental pitfalls of the archives. Though my analysis in what follows focuses on the words themselves, I will first explain the display of the page's format and focus briefly on her employment of space to explore further meanings of her poems. Below is an approximate reproduction of "Zong! #3" as it appears in Philip's collection:

the some of negroes
over
board
the rest in lives
drowned
exist did not
in themselves
preservation
obliged

[63] Alaa Alryyes, *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar Ibn Said*. (University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 63.
[64] M. Nourbese Philip. *Zong!* (Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 194.

frenzy
thirst for forty others

etc.

The words are dispersed over three columns in total. The middle column has the following words aligned: the some of negroes; board; the rest in lives; exist did not; and preservation. The last one has: over; drowned; in themselves; obliged; and etc. The first column has the words: frenzy and thirst for forty others. I highlight this unique format because it gestures to the possibility that the poem could be read in multiple ways. The first is in its aligned order, moving from one column to the other; the second works by reading all the words from the first column first; the second column next, and the third column finally; and third is by reading the second column first, the third column next and the first column finally. This versatility enables Philip to access a kind of mobility that provides more depth to her argument and puts to practice the liability of words. I am highlighting and choosing to reproduce this unique format because it challenges our conceptions of truth, there isn't one way to read this text and therefore there is more than just one truth. As a reader, especially one reading a text that is meant to express or reproduce the life from the lifeless, we are particularly keen to read it right. Which of these versions of reading is the one that represents the truth? Part of what makes Philip's text so compelling is exactly this line of questioning which forces us readers, to think more critically about whether the truth could be found at all: is it between the lines; is it in the overlapping of voices and truths; is it in the format itself which is meant to mirror the chaos that must have been on the ship; is the content simply meant to mirror the form?

In what follows, I offer my personal analysis of this text which is not to say it is the only one, let alone the one that presents the truth. She opens the poem with "the some of negroes" which alludes to the fact that only some Africans were picked to be thrown overboard. This both shows the arbitrariness of the cruelty and murder, as well as a certain nonchalance about documenting the real numbers of people killed. There is a distinction between saying "some Africans were thrown overboard" and "one hundred and fifty Africans were thrown overboard." By eliminating the exact number, or a close approximation of, enslaved Africans thrown overboard, the remembrance of the story is compromised because it reduces the narrative to general approximation despite the facts being known. "Some," here, also designates a number, because of its assonance with the word "sum." Playing on the homonymic sounds between these

two words, it could be understood that the sum of African lives far exceeds a certain number of people, on the ship or otherwise. In separating the word "over / board" with a line break in the middle, we can understand the meaning of the opening to be either that first, some Africans were thrown overboard and /or two, the sum value of African lives could not be more valued than the profit extracted from the rest of those aboard the ship. It is also a visual representation of the break between being on board and not being on board; the break between being alive and dead, aboard a ship and underwater. The line break emphasizes the multiple meanings and challenges the reader of the text to think more deeply about each word and the multivalent meanings within them individually and how they work together.

In the next line, we can notice that the word "board" doesn't just belong to the opening statement of being thrown overboard. Perhaps she separated the word in two to make the following statement "some [Africans] were thrown over. The rest, those aboard the ship, live." The flow, here, between the words "board" and "the rest in lives" is not as smooth at the opening which makes it more difficult to assign a relation between "the rest in lives" and "drowned" which is the following word. She could be saying that "some Africans" were treated in terms of their "sum" or value while the others, or "the rest," were treated in terms of their "lives." This gestures to the archive, documented by historians Rawley and Behrendt, that the crew "designated sick and weak slaves, and on that day fifty-four were thrown into the sea" meaning that it would make sense to say that having been categorized between healthy (alive) or sick, Africans were either chosen to throw overboard or not.[65] It is also possible to understand the proximity between "the rest in lives" and "drowned" as symbolically indicating that those who weren't thrown overboard have spent the rest of their lives "drowned." When reading "the rest in lives" we almost expect for it to be followed by a word indicating life-making, not one indicating death-making. However, this is a subtle way of subverting the belief that those who survived the Middle Passage had the privilege of living. Philip here suggests that those who "survived" the Middle Passage also in a sense drowned, and if we continue down the same column it could be understood as drowned "in themselves." Perhaps even, Philip suggests, they drowned in their remembrance.

[65] James A. Rawley and Stephen D. Behrendt, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History* (University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 257

The line between "drowned" and "in themselves" is "exist did not." This line directly challenges the insinuation that though the rest of the people aboard survived the journey in some way, while enslaved, they still did not exist—insinuating that while enslaved, existence is compromised. One of the more powerful implications, I believe, comes in the next line. Following "in themselves" is the word "preservation," suggesting that the drive for self-preservation— preservation of dignity, preservation of identity—can be found within the enslaved people themselves. In fact, the next word "obliged" suggests that the enslaved are forced into conditions that oblige them to develop a drive for self-preservation. There is something both compelling and uncomfortable in the fact that you can arrive at different meanings each time you read the poem and, depending at what pace you read it. Moreover, each time you read Philip's work, you gain additional insights because of its complex layering. Given that the poems are never composed of full, stand-alone sentences but rather a combination of words, the onus is on the reader to make sense of the words and build meanings around them. When reading from top to bottom, the reader can flesh out a sentence that is different from one read from the bottom up. Additionally, a third different sentence can be constructed only after having read it one way immediately followed by another reading. This suggests that the poem is meant to be read more than once— and in more than one way— to access the different meanings encoded in the blanks and indentations, as well as the words themselves.

The last lines of the poem are grouped together in the first column: "frenzy / thirst for forty others." This distich is visually separated from the rest of the words on the page which makes it seem as though it could be understood and read independently from the others. Indeed, its wording is quite self-explanatory: in a frenzy for sustenance, the crew were bloodthirsty enough to kill forty more captives. What's unclear is whether the word "frenzy" here is referring to the captives or the crew. It is possible that Philip deliberately uses this word, to pass a moral value on the actions of slave-makers. The distich, which is visually isolated from the other lines, conveys the hysteria that must have ensued on the *Zong* when it was in crisis. This implies that the ship's crew was hysterically participating in genocidal actions, whereas the captives were hysterical due to dehydration, starvation, dysentery, and threat of death. In not specifying who the "frenzy" should be attributed to — the ship's crew or the captives — Philip pushes the reader to make assumptions. My first time reading the poem, I assumed that the word "frenzy" described the captives, but upon reading the next line almost immediately, I concluded that it

was about the ship's crew as it followed "thirst for forty others." It would make sense then that the preceding "frenzy" also refers to the crew since we know that she is referring to the crew or captain having a thirst for forty other Africans, Additionally, the use of the word "thirst" works on multiple levels as the technical reason behind their throwing of captives overboard being a lack of water supply while also invoking the sentiment of being "thirsty for blood." It also emphasizes how one can be thirsty, when surrounded by water, that the sea is both life giving and life taking.

The final line of the poem stands on its own in the third column. This separation from the other words accentuates the distance between the preceding verse. It is repeated from the first line as well. The final line is a single word: "etc." an abbreviated Latin expression for "et cetera," used to mean "and other similar things," or "and so forth." This single abbreviated expression is profound in its meaning as it invokes an almost-bureaucratic way of expressing factuality, in a detached manner. "Thirsty, hungry, captivated, etc." Etc, here, implies some form of enumeration that the writer can't be bothered to mention and has instead chosen to use this all-encompassing term for its succinctness. It is almost an offhand way of referring to something, but the enormity of what it conveys here is belied by this. I imagine it would be a reoccurring word in the ledgers and archives of slavery — a symbol of how the archivist would not find it necessary to enumerate all the ways in violence was enacted against African slaves.

An Ocean of Haunting

Building off the discourse of witnessing, specifically in an Islamic framework that everything alive can and will bear witness, I propose that the truth of the Middle Passage also lies in those who have died or perished at sea. By virtue of having been alive and therefore having witnessed the Middle Passage, enslaved Africans' testimony is elemental in excavating the truth about the Middle Passage which can, then, be located in the movement of the specters it created. Indeed, the Middle Passage has never ceased producing specters.[66] For example, in

[66] For more on the scholarship of haunting see Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Toni Morrison's *Sula* (Vintage International, 2004), *Song of Solomon* (Vintage International, 2004), and *Beloved* (Everyman's Library, 2006);) *Haunting the House of Fiction: Feminist Perspectives on Ghost Stories by American Women,* edited by Lynette Carpenter and Wendy Kolmar (University of Tennessee Press, 1991); Deborah Horvitz's "Nameless Ghosts: Possession and Dispossession in *Beloved*" (*Studies in American Fiction*, 1989). These texts reflect on the value of fiction, the limitations of history, and the impact of absences when working with complex histories that do not always represent the truth. These

Saidiya Hartman's life writing, which is also the following chapter's object of analysis, she describes her visits to the dungeons in Ghana as a personal journey. She says, "But it was personal too. Could I trace my despair back to the first generation stolen from their country [...] and attempt to figure out how this underground had created and marked me."[67] She still feels haunted by something she did not directly experience—and though she never lived it, her life was shaped by those deaths. "Be careful," warned Saidiya Hartman's mother "all the white world sees is black skin" to which Hartman replies, solemnly: "My mother's stories had become mine."[68] In this way, Hartman's ontology is haunted by the specter of her mother's stories and the past. She is made up of stories, traumas, and injuries that are not necessarily her own.[69]

To better understand the conditions that would produce such hauntings, of which Hartman displays when she states that she is made up of other past stories of the Middle Passage, I turn to Hortense Spillers' famous 1987 article "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." In this essay, Spillers challenges current conceptions of gender and traces them back to the Middle Passage. She explains the way in which "the vessel that carries [the human cargo] is sometimes romantically (ironically) personified as 'she'" and how this informed the depersonalizations of the captives. She points specifically to the role of the sea having the captives embody an ambiguous identity:

> Those African persons in the Middle Passage were literally suspended in the 'oceanic' […] removed from the Indigenous land and culture, and not-yet 'American' either, these captive persons, with names that their captors would not recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also *nowhere at all.*[70]

It is this condition of being nowhere at all, that creates a paradigm of haunting that persists today. I want to turn to Islam once again to make sense of what it means to be nowhere at all, specifically through the Islamic conception of the barzakh. Sayyid Husayn Shirazi describes the literal meaning of barzakh "as a veil or barrier that stands between two things and which does

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authors -- through fiction, literary analyses, or sociological frameworks -- emphasize haunting as a means to understand what has or is currently happening.

[67] Hartman, 130

[68] Hartman, 132

[69] Hartman writes "I, too, am the afterlife of slavery" (Hartman, 6)

[70] Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* vol. 17, no. 2 (1987), 72 (emphasis not mine)

not allow the two to meet."[71] He gives the example of the part of the ocean wherein both saltwater and freshwater bounce but never meet, as though there is an invisible barrier between the two. In Islam, however, barzakh also refers to the realm between this world and the next—it is not quite the afterworld, but it isn't ours either. It is essentially a facsimile world wherein you embody a facsimile body, "they will appear quite like our worldly material and body but, factually, they are not."[72] Barzakh is a form of purgatory, a world more precarious than the previous and more tangible than the after. Shirazi gives the example of seeing someone who is deceased in a dream to depict the facsimile: "you will observe [the deceased] in [their] worldly material body whereas [their] body (and matter) is in the grave and what you see in the dream is [their] facsimile form."[73]

Somewhere along the journey of the Middle Passage, the slave ships entered a realm suspended in time and space, they were nowhere at all—penetrating a veil that separates our world from the next. Perhaps, they have entered the place wherein both saltwater and freshwater meet, perhaps they have entered the barzakh. It is no accident that much of the scholarship on slavery describes the Middle Passage as a state of in-betweenness.[74] This imagery is a deliberate attempt to convey the way in which the time-space continuum and its laws did not apply to the Middle Passage out of its sheer brutality. The Afterlife of the Middle Passage is not a metaphor, it is a ghost that continues to haunt our present day and as M. Nourbese Philip's *Zong!* attests to, it is sometimes only possible to uncover those hauntings through story, imagination, and fiction.

As such, I want to briefly point to the pitfalls of narrating a story of the Middle Passage that is both haunting and haunted. The moment we tell a ghost story, or hear one, or see one, we become part of the stories. Those stories are often repetitive, redundant, and exhausting. Like loops. Loops that end where they begin, meaning they never end: a perfect loop—redundant and exhausting. What I will narrate now is a ghost story. It is not simply a story about ghosts or involving ghosts, but it is a story that haunts—and a story in which ghosts speak, live, and walk.

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[71]Sayyid Husayn Shirazi, "Barzakh (Purgatory) - The Stage Between This World and the Hereafter," in *Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project,* 25

[72] Shirazi, 26

[73] Shirazi, 26

[74] See, for example, Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008), Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. (Harvard University Press, 1993), Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. (Duke University Press, 2016), and Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), among others.

The story itself is a ghost which implies that the story must have died a horrific death—cursing it to a lifetime of haunting. What I will narrate now is a ghost story—a story that was murdered brutally, buried into the inconspicuous archives of death-making, and locked beneath the waters of the world.

This ghost story is one that never happened, and perhaps it took place in the recesses of my mind, or perhaps even yours. This story began on the coast of the ocean, on the frontiers of the terrestrial and the oceanic. Gazing, from the security of land, into a different realm, a young boy from a humble family would often play with his friends by the ocean. Sometimes, they would tell horror stories about the ocean. They knew very little about the unknown waters, only that it was treacherous and threatening. But, like any troublesome kids they would dare each other to go into the cold recess of the waters. *Up, up and above, in the skies among the clouds are the Gods. And the ocean, though it reflects the sky, is mischievous. It lures you into her, tricking you into thinking you are joining the gods but underneath: icy water lies. Hiding away monstrous things. Things that can't be imagined*.

This is a made-up story, perhaps it was once shared among these boys as they attempted to make a story for the unknown worlds. In time, one of the boys, it doesn't matter which one, became quite attached to the ocean. Enchanted even. Every night he would walk along its shore and feel its cold waters trickle onto his feet, resting comfortably at his ankles. Sometimes, on rainy nights, the water would reach his knees and he would be reminded of what lies beyond his own lifeworld. Though enchanted by the mesmerizing rise and fall of the water, the boy was also petrified by the possibility it embodied: when the water would rise to his knees, or even his thighs, he knew that the water wasn't still and that it could swallow him up. I don't know much about this boy, despite his being a figment of my imagination, but I like to imagine a life for him. Perhaps he became a man infatuated with someone and he planned on marrying them. Perhaps he stayed home to care for his aging parents. Perhaps he had a good life.

One day, though, and I know this must have happened, men armed with weapons came into his town. At first sight, he probably thought they were reapers—symbols of death marking the beginning of a pestilence. But it was a marker for something quite different. Perhaps he was one of the many men, women and children that were chained and abducted. Perhaps even one of the four hundred and seventy people that were shoved into a ship built to carry two hundred humans. Perhaps he became collateral damage as the ship's captain, with a hard heart and a

troubled mind, threw him and twenty others overboard: an attempt to stretch out the small supply of water left. Or perhaps he wasn't thrown overboard at all and had the simple curse of witnessing the ship's crew commit the unspeakable act. Perhaps, in the next few days, upon realizing that water was classified as more vital than their own bodies and lives, he would feel livid when it poured rain for three days straight—supplying them with potable water.

Perhaps he was one of the thirty Africans who, days after the rain, reckoned with the ship's deceit as they too were thrown overboard. Or perhaps he was one of the ten abducted Africans who threw themselves into the cold waters: preferring icy death to whatever was awaiting them—finally becoming one with his first love. Perhaps, though I hope not, he was indeed the one man who, thrown overboard, managed to climb back onto the ship—only briefly meeting his enchantress. Perhaps he climbed back onto a vessel that would lead him to another world: an island where he would be surrounded by water. Perhaps his life, which started on the frontiers of the water, ended in its depths. Perhaps, the man was henceforth no longer a man. Or maybe the moment he encountered the ocean's abyss, part of him remained there. All is water, he would think perhaps, reducing his entire lifetime to the ocean.[75] A real ghost story, a scary one is a perfect loop—it begins as it ends.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explore the sea as a repository for archives, lives, and stories. I begin with the section "All is Water," in which I offer a molecular analysis of water as a metaphor for bondage. Using the principle of unification and the chemical principles of Stoichiometry and Bonding, we can better understand the intricacies of resistance and community-building among the bondages, specifically as forms of life-making. The second section "Stories are Real and They Witness Things Too" is an explicit link between the sea, the Islamic concept of witnessing, and the act of archiving truths. Here, I emphasize the role of the imagination as a point of departure to uncovering the many meanings inscribed within the sea. M. Nourbese Philip's *Zong!* emphasizes the role of fiction, imagination, and prose in attempting to extract the life out of lifeless

[75] I would like to make clear here that this entire excerpt is fictional. Reading over the theoretical scholarship on the Middle Passage, I often come across the sentiment of wanting to pass on the story of the Middle Passage without citing explicit or graphic details. Part of my thesis focuses on the ability for fiction to get at the truth in ways that flat facts can't. And I hope here to show how by imagining a story we can probe and question the unspeakable horrors that occurred during the voyages.

documents. The language of witnessing, testimonies and evidence emerges from my analysis of Philip's short poems and here I provide an explicit link to Islam. When conceptualizing liberation and resistance through Islam, we automatically enter a discourse of personhood. Indeed, Islam itself becomes a channel through which liberation is conceived and identity is retained, specifically as a form of life-making, resisting colonial, or death-making, efforts of removing identity from the enslaved person.

Islam complicates the facts of the crimes themselves as it introduces water, or the sea, as a witness to these crimes. When further probing the idea of a witness—as in a material witness; someone at the scene, legally bound to tell the truth—we identify the sea as a living witness and the captives as non-living witnesses. In this sense, I wanted to further probe this discourse by focusing on the concept of haunting. If we can typify dead people as still being witnesses, there is an immense haunting implicated. I argue that imagination allows us to extrapolate the stories from the dead. Here, I am referring to stories about the bondaged who were thrown overboard, who climbed back on board, or made it safely to the shore; it refers to stories that are themselves ghosts that haunt us; stories where ghosts speak; stories about the making of ghosts; Etc. The Islamic understanding that imagining a life after earth is inconceivable and raising people from the grave when inserted into the context of the Middle Passage, renders the ocean into a grave site, a witness, a process of life making and death making.

Chapter 3: To Build a Life around the Word and the World

Writing about one's life can be considered a practice of life-making as it preserves, remembers, and passes on a life and a universe— a process that archives both an author's life but also the world which the author inhabits. This can be an act of exceptional resistance, especially when written in the context of death. Slave narratives are prime examples of literary resistance, specifically in their ability to denounce the harm that was enacted by white slavers, to condemn the processes of slave-making itself, to publicize their status as freed men or women, and to remember, retain, and archive their identities and lives. Indeed, life writings have the ability to manipulate the time-space apparatus of the lifetime in which they are created and read in, just by having been written down. When they are written in the wake of death, as was so often the case of these narratives, they become equipped with the power to uncover truths about life and death.

In this chapter, I will examine the kinds of truths and messages life writings offer us through a close reading of Saidiya Hartman's multigenre work, *Lose your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007); and Ala Alryyes' edition of Omar ibn Said's life narrative, *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar ibn Said* (2011), which includes a contextual prelude by the editor. Written 176 years apart, these two texts offer different, yet complementary, ways of writing the lives of enslaved people—they are both committed to preserving parts of life that deal with death but that also resist it. The latter is the only surviving slave narrative in North America written in Arabic, and the former is a reconstruction of the author's family history through a combination of historical and archival work, travel writings, and storytelling. Both authors position their texts as autobiographical accounts—though Said does so more explicitly.

My deliberate choice to read these very different works together provides a richer depth to my analyses. I am specifically concerned with how they reflect on the intergenerational legacy of the Middle Passage by engaging in truth telling and how they both bear witness to their own lifetimes as well as past and future ones.[76] I am also interested in drawing out the different, but complementary, ways that both life writings engage with the conceptual framework of the sea as a site of archive, a burial ground, and a witness as the previous chapter discusses in more detail. The sea is embedded in their narratives, lives, and worlds in different ways and enriches our own

[76] Both works acknowledge speaking about something unspeakable, and it is paradoxical that ibn Said's writing is now a marker for unspeakability (as a lot is left unsaid) when his literacy was likely due to the spread of Islam in West Africa.

understanding of where the truth lies. In this chapter, I will analyse these texts both separately and together to uncover the overlapping lines between historical fact and autobiographical truth, writing and unspeakability, as well as memory and loss.

Life writing's primary engine is remembrance— meaning that to write life or a part of life, it must first be remembered—and there is little that is as slippery as memory. The scholarship on memory and narration complicates concepts of reliability given that life writings are often written from a single perspective and is concerned with capturing a single life within a lifetime.[77] This is especially true for the two life writings that I will be analysing here specifically in that memory and invention become intertwined influences. Both these pieces are concerned with capturing the truth—an exceptional intent, as life writings are significantly unreliable. In this way, life writing is implicated in the process of invention. I later argue that this is fitting because both Omar ibn Said and Saidiya Hartman create and build a unique language of intervention especially in conversation with mutable matters such as the sea and its commodities. It is because of these distinctions that I am centering Hartman and Said's life writings in my examination of truth-telling, unspeakability, and memory in the midst of death.

Life Writing and Slave Narratives

In the next section, I probe more into how I identify my two objects of study as life-writings— Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* (2007) and Omar ibn Said's *Life* — the former as a self-reflective, multi-genre work and the latter as a slave narrative.[78] I will show how they are each a mosaic of memory, language, and truth. I locate the genre of life-writing within a larger intervention in Black, African, and African-American Studies that testifies to the impasses of official archives that don't account for the cultural memory of slavery and its Afterlife. I have divided this section into two subsections. The first uses Maya Angelou's *The Art of Fiction* as a framework to think through the relationship between life-writing, truth, and life-making.

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[77] For more on memory and narration see John Ernest's "Life Beyond Biography: Black Lives and Biographical Research" *(Common-Place* vol. 17, no.1, 2016), Ann Fabian's *The Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in Nineteenth Century America* (UC Press, 2002), Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow (Vintage Books, 2010).

[78] Omar ibn Said's life writing is from Ala Alryyes' *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar ibn Said*, a book composed of many essays written by different historians. One of the chapters is Omar's Arabic manuscript and Alryyes' English translation from which I am citing and referring. As such, when referencing Omar's manuscript which is titled "The Life of Omar ibn Said," I will refer to it as Omar's *Life* in order to differentiate between Alrayyes' book and the manuscript itself

Angelou helps to reconcile the literary production of life-writing as genre-bending work. The second subsection explores Said's complicated relationship with slave narratives specifically in its use of language, a tentative tone, and his experience to convey a subliminal truth instead of an explicit one.

Life-Writing:

I have chosen to closely analyse Saidiya Hartman and Omar ibn Said's texts primarily because, as autobiographies, we can extrapolate from them valuable truths that cannot be accessed through history or fiction alone. Important to my analysis of life writing is the conditions that produce and are produced by them. In an interview published in the *Paris Review* in 1990, writer Maya Angelou reveals her process of life writing by imparting her own devotional entanglements with language, truth, and memory.[79] Maya Angelou's life writing—similar to Omar ibn Said and Saidiya Hartman's—is an amalgamation of spirituality, lyricism, creation stories, and a drive to convey truths without relying on what is considered to be history. Angelou brilliantly evokes the subtle combination of these elements which I also highlight in my analyses of Hartman and ibn Said. Imparting the intimate details of how she embarks on her storytelling and life writing, it is possible to envision the empty hotel room in which she is swaddled during the process of writing and telling her own life.[80] She reveals that her process of writing her life is complicated and ritualistic as she will usually rent a hotel room and strip it of any decorations or personal touch in order to enwrap herself in a blank world that she could immerse herself in.[81] She depicts a ceremonial picture that extends also to her prose. Indeed, she credits the lyrical flow of various Biblical texts for her ability to work at the language and "get it to sing."[82] The influence of religion, spirituality, and other worlds similarly inform my own analyses of Said and Hartman's life writings.

Angelou depicts an image of working at the language to make it work and to make it tell the truth in life by leaving it alone. "I will not write [my words] into the ground," she says. "I will not write the life out of it."[83] This is a concept that I explored in the previous chapter,

[79] Maya Angelou, interview by George Plimpton. *The Art of Fiction* (Paris Review no. 119, 1990), 1
[80] Angelou, 2
[81] Angelou, 4
[82] Angelou, 4
[83] Angelou, 5

through the work of M. Nourbese Philip whose collection *Zong!* suggests that official documents —traditionally typified as objective —are indeed lifeless. The impetus of Philip's work is to revive the words and restructure them in ways that extrapolate a story and therefore the truth. The idea that one could write the life out of words is important when thinking in the context of a slave narrative not only because their goal is often to depict life but also because the subject of a slave narrative is often death. What would it mean for Omar ibn Said's life writing, for example, to be devoid of life—or alternatively to be full of it? These questions will re-emerge later in this chapter where I further probe into what it means for there to be life (or death) in life writing. The idea that words may become lifeless even in the context of communicating a life will also be important to my own analysis of Said and Hartman's texts.

While it is a difficult process to write a life without writing the life out of it, at the time of this interview, Angelou had already released and published five autobiographical books, starting with *I Know Why the Caged Birds Sing* (1969) and ending with *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986). She reveals in the same interview that, perhaps unexpectedly, her autobiographies have followed the tradition of slave narratives. She points to Frederick Douglass' *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) as a prime example of a slave narrative within which is embedded a sense of responsibility to speak on something that precedes and succeeds his own life. Angelou's literary production is part of a larger intervention in African, African American, and Black Studies aimed to bear witness to the absence of documented and archived written words that account for a larger, cultural memory of slavery and its Afterlife. Indeed, slave narratives are the first of a much longer and ongoing tradition of publishing individual life stories to tell a collective history that belongs not only to the writer but to a collective. Omar ibn Said and Saidiya Hartman's life writings are both located in that intervention and therefore follow a similar literary tradition.

Maya Angelou's interview in the *Paris Review* provides us with some elements of a reading method to interpret life writings. The first of these is that the physical space in which one writes their own life is relevant to the words it contains; the second is that life writings can often follow the tradition of slave narratives, in that it will bear witness to something that resists documentation; and third is that while words are not inherently lifeless, they can become so. Maya Angelou's interview provides us with a framework through which we can read and understand Said and Hartman's life writings. I suggest we locate their works within a larger

impulse and tradition to testify to the cruel conditions of the world's past and future and to chart individual stories that operate against the oppressive systems aimed at erasing the collective. Hence, by centering an individual story and placing it within a larger collective history—that has not been recorded, catalogued, or documented—a truth is preserved and disseminated. In the next section, I will read Omar ibn Said and Saidiya Hartman's life writings together to highlight the ways in which they both speak and unspeak the truth and how the concept of witnessing is implicated in this process.

An important part of this analytical process is to first acknowledge complicated relationships with language held and carried by life writings. Indeed, in Said's life writing, language is deconstructed and tentative—he is writing in his native tongue which he has not employed or heard regularly for over a decade. On the other hand, Hartman combines history and memoir to form a new language of life writing. Despite these differences, they both develop a relationship between writer and reader where the primary goal is expressing a truth: truth to detail, story, meaning, and setting. Neither writer uses what could be called objective, cold, distant facts to express truth. In fact, both writers may even appear unreliable if only for the fact that they use their own memories, voices, and positionalities to express a truth that is too horrible to be spoken. When reading a life writing it is understood that the narrator may be somewhat unreliable as their life will be told exclusively from their perspective. As such, Said's shaky memory is explicitly expressed throughout his *Life* and similarly, Hartman emphasizes that her writing emerges from, is written, and told through her own personal and unique position as a Black American woman. In what follows, I will propose that the authenticity of these narratives has more to do with "integrity" in truth telling, than with the "facts." While most truthful narratives are expected to reveal concrete details, most truths are expressed through the emotion, details, and story of it.

Slave Narratives

As a literary genre, slave narratives are concerned with capturing a truth that is often impossible to convey or understand through historical records alone.[84] Surprisingly, Omar's life

[84] See Fred Moten's "Knowledge of Freedom" (*The New Centennial Review* vol. 4, no.2, 2004), *The Classic Slave Narratives*, edited by Henry Louis Gates (Mentor, 1987), Ronald A. T. Judy's *(Dis)Forming the American Canon* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts: Three African American Women's Oral*

writing does not explicitly fit within the genre of traditional slave narratives. Indeed, most such narratives were written and then distributed to publicize true accounts of slavery. Others were written by newly freed enslaved Africans or fugitives to assert and publicize their independence and freedom, however fleeting or incomplete. However, many of the narratives were actually written at the request of white editors to generate support for the abolitionist movement or to promote the spread of Christianity, among other reasons.[85] In this context, slave narratives were considered ''successful'' when they publicized, or disseminated, truths that would be otherwise impossible to convey through existing historical archives or texts. Omar Ibn Said's *Life* does not fit these generic parameters partly because he was still enslaved while writing it; the language with which he penned his manuscript; and finally, because of the lack of any explicit or graphic description of the abuse he has very likely experienced.

Said wrote his short memoir while enslaved under a colonial order which sought to control enslaved Africans in all aspects of their being, even in their life writing. The overwhelming majority of slave narratives were edited and altered by captors. Moreover, Alryess research demonstrates that of the slave narratives that have emerged most of them are imprecise if only because they are written in the English language.[86] White northern emancipators and editors often persuaded enslaved Africans to write their life stories which would then be published with one or more prefaces written by the editors. Their desire to publish slave narratives came from a colonial fixation on authenticity—they wanted to circulate "true stories" something that they did not feel was possible given "slaves' own exaggeration and trickery."[87] They asked enslaved people to write the narratives in English—a language they were taught after arrival, by other enslaved people, slaveholders, or other white Americans. Writing one's life story about being held in slavery is already a charged task but doing so in the language of one's captors fundamentally compromises people's way of expressing the "truth" of their experiences. Even though autobiographies are not necessarily a transparent and exhaustive account of the writer's life, this can be especially true in the case of slave narratives. This is because, for the most part, slave narratives were heavily mediated given that "slaves had no direct access to

Slave Narratives, edited by DoVeanna S. Fulton, Regionals H Pitts, et al. (State University of New York Press, 2010).

[85] Alaa Alryyes. *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar Ibn Said*. (University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 12.

[86] Unlike slave narratives by Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass, Omar ibn Said's autobiography is written in Arabic, an African language he learned before he was enslaved.

[87] Alryyes, 12

printers and publishers, they wrote because they were persuaded to by white editors who often co-wrote the slaves' autobiographies and published them with one or more prefaces written by them. Many of the antebellum narratives were dictated to and written by whites."[88]

In this chapter, specifically in the section titled "Omar's Language or 'Talk,'" I will provide a comparison between Omar's narrative and Frederick Douglass' *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) as a more traditional example of a slave narrative. My analysis will draw out the ways in which language can sometimes fail to address or encapsulate the truth and elaborate more on the questions that I have introduced and posed in this section.

Life, the Unspeakable and Islamic Resistance

As I have already identified Omar ibn Said's life writing within the genre of slave narratives, I will now provide a brief historical context and some analyses of his manuscript. The first subsection — "Omar's Life Before his *Life*" — will be a brief biography of Omar's life before he wrote his manuscript where I will also analyse the conceptions of literacy and writing in relation to the unspeakable. Specifically, the complications of writing about a life that has witnessed unspeakable things within the framework of slave narratives. The second subsection, "Islam and the Unspeakable," explores the deliberate use of Islamic verses to resist bondage, specifically in that it subverts the written statements and pushes the reader to think more intuitively about the kind of messages and truth/s offered by Said's life-writing. Next, "Omar's Language or *Talk*" explores the pitfalls of language in articulating certain truths, specifically in the restraint that Said practices while writing his life. Finally, in "How to Write a Life," I use Hortense Spillers' theorization of the failures of language to express certain truths as a framework for thinking through and reconciling the contradictions of and tentative tone of Said's life-writing.

Omar's life before his *Life*

Ala Alryyes' edition of Omar ibn Said's life narrative includes a prologue to the autobiography where he details Said's life and points out that "[this autobiography] was neither Omar's first nor his only Arabic text. In addition to this 1831 manuscript, a number of his other Arabic

[88] Alryyes, 32

inscriptions survive."[89] Though the text is titled "Omar's Life," it is not an exhaustive biography of his life, rather it provides context for a brief period of his life following his abduction. I make this distinction because I am suggesting here that this autobiographical text, or example of life writing, should not be considered only in relation to what it testifies to—the literacy and education of many enslaved African Muslims — but also for what it does not testify to. This distinction emerges from my elaboration of the unspeakability wherein I attempt to locate what is literally unspoken (in that it is not written about but is implied or can be speculated), but also the unspeakable things (things that are too horrible to be expressed in words) that actually are spoken or written. Self-titling his manuscript as "The life of Omar ibn Said" is fitting because it is a text about his life, but it also establishes an explicit link between himself and life, despite operating within the processes of death-making. I refer to his manuscript as "Omar's *Life"* to complicate our understanding of his life and his *Life*—as in his life writing. This will allow me to push the reader to think more about whether there is a distinction between the two (after all his *Life* is presumably about his life) while also making it clear which one I am referring to. Collapsing the categories of *Life* and life makes it easier to understand that within his own life writing, his life is retained.

Omar ibn Said was a Muslim West African scholar who lived in Futa Toro, which is in modern day Senegal. Said's life before his abduction and enslavement were impressive by virtue of his multifaceted identity as "an Arabic speaker, a Muslim, a Fulbe, a West African informant, an American slave, and an anti-colonizationist."[90] He was born to a wealthy family around 1770 where he was trained in early Qur'anic schooling and Arabic for over twenty-five years before he eventually became a teacher. It is approximately in the year 1807 that he was abducted into slavery by what he terms to be "a big army [that] killed many people."[91] He was then transported to Charleston to work on a rice plantation where he stayed for two years before escaping in the year 1810.[92] He was later recaptured near Fayetteville, North Carolina and jailed. Afterwards, he did not return to his [original] slaver and instead "became the property of General James Owen

[89] Alryyes, 4
[90] Alryyes, 3
[91] Alryyes, 61
[92] Alryyes, 4

of Bladen County and later moved with the Owen family during the Civil War [...] where Omar died in 1864."[93]

In 1831, while still unfree from bondage, Said penned his life story in the Arabic language—an exceptional act in that he is using a language he knew before slavery in which he was also educated to write about something so alien and about his estrangement; that he penned his life under conditions of enslavement; and in that he resisted his bondage by referencing his Muslim identity. In his short autobiography, consisting of twenty-three pages of quarto-pages, eight of which are blank, Said speaks of his upbringing in Futa Toro, his abduction, and the cruel treatment he endured by the hands of white slaveholder Johnson which led to his escape. He was eventually recaptured and imprisoned for fleeing. While jailed, Said gained notoriety for scribbling Qur'anic scriptures on the walls of his prison cells—another testament to the pivotal role of writing in the apparatus of resistance and unspeakability.[94] According to Alryess, "Omar's facility with Arabic made him a local celebrity [...as] he wrote in a masterly hand, writing from right to left in what was to local [observers] an unknown language."[95] His popularity garnered the attention of congressman and future governor of North Carolina, John Owen, who purchased him and eventually persuaded him to convert to Christianity.[96]

Islam and the Unspeakable

Omar ibn Said begins his memoir, by writing: بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم (*bismillah al-rahman al-rahim*) translated as "In the name of God, most Gracious, most Compassionate." It is customary in Islam to begin any task by invoking the name of God in this way, as this wards off evil. Before going any further, I would like to examine how these words, referred to in the collective as the bismillah, are placed in the manuscript. Usually, the bismillah is written at the top of a page, as a title: centrally aligned and followed by a line break. This is the case for most, if not all, writing that opens with bismillah, including every surah in the Qur'an. In Omar's manuscript, however, everything is written on the same line without any punctuation, indentation, or line break.

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[93] Alryyes, 4

[94] To draw out the link to unspeakability more explicitly: A By writing (and thus speaking), under bondage, Omar ibn Said subverts the misconception that enslaved Africans are illiterate and the attempts at rendering enslaved Africans inaudible subjects.

[95] Alryyes, 4.

[96] Said's conversion to Christianity is contested, Alryyes notes that "Ralph Gurley declared that Omar "had completely converted to Christianity," whereas Rev. Mathew B. Grier, "the minister of the church Omar last attended . . . expressed some doubt about the absoluteness of his conversion to Christianity" (44).

Visually, this is somewhat odd at first, especially for readers familiar with the traditional way the bismillah appears in written documents. The non-traditional placement creates a particular effect, where there is no break between the expression and the beginning of his *Life.* This effect emulates a particular auditory experience—similar to the one reproduced by M. Nourbese Philip in *Zong!* — wherein the reader subconsciously does not break or take a breath between the bismillah and the rest of the manuscript. It creates a rushed effect perhaps reflecting how second nature it was for Said to write these words; or perhaps reflecting the speed with which Said wished to tell his story. These are speculations on my part, and I am unsure whether the rushed auditory experience that his writing produces is deliberate or not and/or whether it is reflective of a deeper meaning or an urgency. Nonetheless in my reading here, this speculation adds layers of meaning to how we can build a sense of truth around his manuscript.

It is not only in written documents where these words have importance and meaning, but it is also of particular importance for Muslims to pronounce the bismillah when embarking a significant endeavor or journey. Indeed, these words are used to connote any or all of the following: under the dominion of God, with the blessing of God, in devotion to God, with the support of God, or for the glory of God. *Bismillah al-rahman al-rahim* is commonly pronounced by Muslims before eating and drinking, while making ablution, when entering or leaving the house, at the time of slaughtering an animal, when struggling in life, before entering the bathroom, when lowering a deceased body in the grave, when in physical or emotional pain, and when writing a letter.[97] Thus, while it is common for this sentence to be the first line of a book or other kinds of writing the significance is much greater than only being connected to the written word. In opening his life-writing with bismillah, he is articulating subliminal messages that he cannot explicitly express, namely his continuous attachment and devotion to Islam.

By invoking these words, he is speaking about things that he is not necessarily allowed to speak about, while still not actually saying it. Simply put, the strict understanding of writing bismillah only accounts for the literal translation of it and not for what it implies. When Said writes the bismillah he is not just saying that he is writing "in the name of God, the most Compassionate." First, it means that he remains attached to his Muslim identity despite his bondage. Second, that he is using a standard writing style in Arabic, implying that he is

[97] Richard Shelquist (Wahiduddin), "Bismillah al rahman al rahim," *Living From the Heart* (Blog, June 27, 2021), https://wahiduddin.net/words/bismillah.html

determined to remember and replicate his own practices and rituals before bondage. Finally, it suggests that this piece of writing likely symbolizes an important journey or marker for his life.

This third point is further reinforced by the fact that he chose to begin this short piece of life writing by transcribing the Qur'anic Surah al-Mulk. This is where I will probe further in my analysis. The significance of this surah in particular to emancipatory efforts is important.[98] Alaa Alryyes has speculated that the choice of opening with surah al-Mulk is a deliberate attempt to resist bondage. He explains that "the noun *al-mulk* comes from the tripartite Arabic root malaka, meaning both *to own* and *to have dominion*. The title of the *surah* is, therefore, the perfect allusion to slavery: absolute power through ownership."[99] Using spirituality as a means of mental escape from bondage is something that historian Sylviane Diouf shows to be a common occurrence for people who were enslaved.[100] Indeed, many enslaved Africans turned to Islam for spiritual liberation from their bondage as it gave them hope beyond their current conditions of enslavement.[101] Perhaps it is knowing that there lies another world where they will be free from bondage and that their captors will be forced to face their crimes that brought them comfort.

It is important to note that it is customary for Muslims to recite Surah al-Mulk before falling asleep as it will protect its reciters from punishment in the grave. "Verily, there is a chapter in the Quran which contains thirty verses" said the Prophet Muhammad, "It will intercede on behalf of its reciter until he is forgiven."[102] As such, this may well have been Omar ibn Said's most recited Surah, perhaps another reason why he chooses to open his *Life* with it despite the fact that he has "[forgotten] much of [his] talk."[103] Though most Surahs serve the purpose of protecting their reciters, Surah al-Mulk is exceptional in that it will actively intervene on behalf of its reciter "until he is forgiven." This is quite a powerful distinction in the context of Omar's *Life* because we can propose that he was consciously utilizing a Surah that is equipped with interventionary properties, while recording his story. This mode of intervention which takes place in the grave could very well be an analogy for Said's state of life when he wrote down his *Life*.

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[98] Wahion-Yoha, "Surah Al-Mulk Benefits That Every Muslim Should Know" *Quran Teacher Academy* (Blog, June 27, 2021), https://quranteacheracademy.com/blog/surah-al-mulk-benefits-and-virtues-muslim/
[99] Alryess, 18 (Emphasis mine)
[100] Sylviane Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (NYU Press, 2013), 124
[101] Diouf, 86
[102] Abu Amina Elias, "Hadith on Quran: Surat al-Mulk intercedes until he is forgiven," *Daily Hadith Online* (Blog, June 27, 2021). https://www.abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2012/07/27/surat-al-mulk-intercede-forgiven/
[103] Alryyes, 61

As elaborated in Chapter 2 above, Saidiya Hartman has identified the contemporary world as the Afterlife of slavery. Following Hartman's logic, it would mean that Omar ibn Said was indeed operating within the confines of death: narrow, damp, and perhaps suffocating like in a grave (in which the Surah that he penned would intervene on his behalf). We do not know the details, and I am perhaps exaggerating this in hopes that Hartman's concept is retained. It would make sense that someone who is in a state of ontological death would recite Surah al-Mulk as not only a means of protection but a call for interventionary efforts.[104]

I propose that we can read Said's choice to open his *Life* with Surah al-Mulk as a deliberate choice. It is thus productive here to take the time to break down and analyse the verses in order to put them in conversation with other elements of Said's life, not just his manuscript, *Life*, but his life—what he wrote about it, what he didn't write about it, what we can assume about it, what we can speculate about it, and what will remain silent, blank, or unknown. Analyzing the verses he penned—as they stand alone but also in conversation with his life—I argue, can potentially reveal truths about Omar and the apparatus of death-making under which he was operating, even when writing about his life. This will also allow me to speculate more about that which is unspoken in his text, and perhaps thus reveal some of the contours of the unspeakable.

Overall, the Surah is testifying to the profound regret over their doubts that disbelievers will experience on the Day of Resurrection. It is a Surah that challenges disbelievers' skepticism with declarations that God has total power over human subjects, as well as everything else that is included in this world and the next. The first verse emphasizes that God has power and dominion over all things: *"*Exalted is He who holds all control in His hands; who has power over all things; who created death and life to test you and reveal which of you does best."[105] This implies that "life and death" and "all things" are two different, distinct dominions over which God has control. Indeed, the verse is careful to state that unlike all things, God doesn't simply have power over "life and death," but rather that God has created "life and death." To clarify, this does not

[104] See: Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). Patterson the experience of being uprooted, estranged, desocialized and depersonalized produces a "process of social negation" (38). Patterson argues that the enslavement and subjugation of African captives is not a singular practice but rather that it implicates law, custom, and ideology. He argues that social death was necessary for the depersonalization of enslavement but that it did not mean that the slave did not exist. He positions African captives as dead despite still living (45).

[105] *The Qur'an*. Translated by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, (Oxford UP, 2005). (67:1-2).

imply that one could only have power over something one has created or that one cannot create something one has power over, but rather that "life and death" specifically are creations of God — things that have been invented.

In opposition to life and death, all things are not necessarily or distinctly creations or inventions but just symptoms of reality that can be manipulated, handled, and worked at by God. This is an important distinction that pushes us to think more deeply and meaningfully about how we ought to view the realms of life and death. By separating life and death from all things, we can assume that a life writing emerges either from "all things" or from "life and death." Combining life and death together doesn't necessarily lump them in the same category but it does lend for some blurriness in terms of separating the two from one another. In other words, life and death are similar enough that they can be united in the same category — distinct from "all things." Thus, even though Omar's manuscript is titled as a *life* writing, his *Life* is written in the context of death and therefore incorporates life and death in fundamental ways.

The first section of the Surah ends with a repeated commandment for us to look and consider the world around us. "You will not see any disparity in the [seven heavens, one above the other that] the Lord of Mercy creates. Look again! Can you see any cracks? Look again! And again! Your sight will turn back to you, weak and defeated."[106] This verse is both a commandment and a challenge to find a crack in the sky or a flaw in "life and death" as well as "all things"— meaning that we could only fulfill the commandment in its entirety after having experienced death. Though it could be argued that the commandment is figurative—meaning that it is not really a challenge set to us by Allah—if we were to take the commandment literally it would suggest that we must have experienced life and death.

Since Said's life and life writing highlight and deliberate death and the hold it has on life and in some ways, it means that he perhaps experienced both life and death — making him an apt contender for God's figurative challenge. The verse, when read in this context, written by Omar's hand, is even more powerful when one imagines the possibility that he had indeed searched for a crack in the sky. The perilous voyages across the sea constrained enslaved Africans to an existence between two open terrains: the oceanic and the aerial. The Surah he pens specifically mentions both the sky and the water, which is significant because they are the

[106] Qur'an (67:3-4)

two elements he was the most exposed to during the Middle Passage; they are also the realms that witnessed the voyage between life and death.

The second section of the Surah concludes with the following verse *"*Whether you keep your words secret or state them openly, God knows fully what is in every heart."[107] Once more, this verse carries a significant meaning when read as penned by Omar's hand, as it suggests that there could very well be a discrepancy between what he claims to be true and what is in his heart. The most obvious example one could glean from this is his conversion to Christianity. Though he writes in his *Life* that he has converted to Christianity, and he thanks the Owen brothers for this, he still opens his narration with Surah al-Mulk and above this writes the bismillah. This contradiction is not accidental, but perhaps was a deliberate attempt to resist his bondage, his conversion, and his conditional freedom in subtle ways. While it might seem that Said's tentative language in his *Life* does not reveal much about himself, his lifetime, or his world, the simple fact that he transcribed this particular Qur'anic verse communicates the complicated process of telling a truth about a life in the context of death. It also highlights that an autobiographical fact— that he has converted to Christianity—does not necessarily reflect the truth of his life story: that he is a Muslim man.

I close my examination of the Surah al-Mulk as penned by Omar ibn Said with an analysis of water—a fitting closure as I argue in Chapter Two that the sea is essential to understanding, but most importantly to uncovering truths about, the Middle Passage. The last verse of the Surah reads, *"*Just think: if all your water were to sink deep into the earth, who could give you flowing water in its place?"[108] The role of water in Islam is worth considering here as it is often mentioned either as a metaphor for our own internal struggles or as a metaphor for life itself. It seems fitting for the last verse that Omar ibn Said writes here to be about water, as it is the terrain in which Said's transition from life to symbolic death takes place. The reason I am isolating and highlighting this particular verse is because I believe references to water are significant, and also because I would like to take this analysis further and underline how the Islamic understanding of water and life is relevant to Said's *Life*. There is an important relationship between earth, as an element, and life. Indeed, Humans are created from earth; and

[107] Qur'an (67:13)
[108] Qur'an (67:30)

when dead, are returned to earth; and in the afterlife are resurrected from earth.[109] However, earth is not the only element crucial for life, death, and resurrection; as I argued in Chapter 2, water often symbolizes revival in Islamic texts. In analysing the interlocking themes of death and life as they interact with one another, scholar of Islamic Studies Alfred T. Welch, describes the relationship between water and life as "God [sending] down water out of heaven and thereby [reviving] the earth after her death."[110]

I highlight this symbolism which recurs in Islamic texts, primarily the Qur'an, because this allows us to consider the elements of earth and water in the process of the Middle Passage and its Afterlife. The concept of Afterlife, as used by Saidiya Hartman, refers to the structural legacies of slavery but also to haunting. Islam can deepen our understanding of the discourse of haunting in remarkable ways, which I invoke here my analysis. If humans are created from earth, die on earth, and then are revived through earth again, what does it mean for those who perish in the sea? Can people be revived if they are not within the earth, but rather within the water? This line of questioning is made more complicated when considering that the water represents life itself as it pushes us to even think about whether one can even be dead when enveloped by a body of water. If it is water that renders earth alive, does that mean that those stuck between land, in the deep waters, can even be considered dead?

This use of religion, here Islam, as a language and vehicle of intervention is significant when read side by side with Saidiya Hartman's life writing — a concept that will be elaborated in the later sections of this chapter. In the next subsection, I will explore more closely what it means to use limiting language to express something that resists expression— the unspeakable. I will follow that subsection with another that reads select passages of Said's manuscript as a slave narrative side-by-side with Frederick Douglass *My Bondage, My Freedom* (1855) to better illustrate its non-conventional flow.

Omar's Language or "Talk"

My argument that Said's *Life* and life has an intricate relationship with the concept of unspeakability might at first glance seem paradoxical. If I argue that Said writes about

[109] Alford T. Welch, "Death and Dying in the Qur'an" in *Religious Encounters with Death: Insights from the History and Anthropology of Religions*, edited by Frank Reynolds, Earle H Waugh, and American Academy of Religion. (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), 184-5
[110] Welch, 186-7

unspeakable things, then those "things" are no longer unspeakable since they have been articulated and disseminated through his *Life*—though this does compel us to look more closely at the differences between the spoken and the written. In a way, it is safer or easier to write about the truth than to speak it: you can more carefully choose your words, you have more control over what you choose to share, and you can be more tactful. Can Said's *Life* really be unspeakable if it was, in fact, articulated? I argue that Said represents an exceptional case for multiple reasons, which I will further explore in this subsection. First, there are truths or facts that he does not pass on to readers such as the specifics of his voyage during the Middle Passage and the cruel treatment he has likely endured by white slaveholders. Second, he conveys subliminally certain truths about his faith through minute details such as the syntax he uses. Finally, he draws upon Islamic scriptures to resist bondage.

The tentative language with which Said pens his *Life* is noticeable upon the very first read. It suggests that he wasn't writing freely—meaning that there is a certain restraint at play, perhaps because at the time of writing this text he was still enslaved. The lack of any details of the cruel treatment he likely endured and the arduous oceanic voyage he experienced is itself a suggestion that writing cannot express the unspeakable. Perhaps surprisingly to a reader who would expect such a narrative to necessarily articulate the practices of slavery in detailed and explicit ways, Omar's literacy illustrates that proficiency in a language does not necessarily mean that it will capture life, especially not when the crimes witnessed are unspeakable. I am highlighting these nuances because I want to illustrate that while, as I will later argue, there is an unspeakability to Said's life writing in that there are things he does not or perhaps refuses to speak on, this unspeakability is not a product of illiteracy. Access to words, languages, and more does not necessarily mean that unspeakable things can't be iterated. I am interested in these distinctions because it allows us to better understand the specificities of unspeakability that is produced by the Middle Passage.

Alryyes' prologue reveals that Omar was educated for over twenty-five years in the Arabic language and studying Quranic texts that often explore themes of resurrection and death before he was enslaved. Islam articulates an elaborate and sophisticated system around death, the process of dying, the rituals of cleansing dead bodies, the events that happen at the grave immediately following death, and also the Afterlife. In an anthology of *Religious Encounters with Death*, Alford T. Welch examines how "the Quran portrays close relationships between

concepts of death and life, death and creation, and death and resurrection."[111] Welch describes it as the "life-death-life complex" which is a chronological indication that after death there will necessarily be life. While this helps us better understand the Afterlife of slavery, which I will more closely analyse in the final chapter, it also suggests that the Qur'an offers its readers with an extensive repertoire of language and an understanding of what it means to die and be resurrected. I propose that, given the fact that Omar ibn Said was indeed familiar with Islamic teachings, he was thus introduced not only to the concept of life after death, but also to a vocabulary that is able to articulate complex understandings of pain, death, and resurrection.

Yet, this arduous literary training perhaps had still not equipped Omar with the language necessary to express what he has witnessed. This suggests that being familiar with scriptural words and teachings that provide explicit descriptions of torture does not necessarily make one literate in the language of violence and therefore able to articulate instances of violence meted out upon you. Said's silence on the subject is more poignant considering he had been educated for over twenty-five years in Islamic scriptures — meaning that he would have had access to a lexicon used to describe events and images our minds can barely conjure: being resurrected from the dead and the Afterlife, among others. Perhaps Said's silence about the crimes he had witnessed is not because there are no words to describe them, though that is still a possibility, but that these words—however appropriate or graphic they may seem—would not do the crimes justice. This does not mean that it is impossible to speak about the unspeakable or that the Arabic language cannot express the unspeakable inherently or even that Said is unable to. We must also consider that it may be that Said is choosing not to speak or write them.

Here, the lack of testimony that attests to the cruel processes of enslavement is itself a witness to how cruel it likely was. If we know that Omar had access to a lexicon of words that was able to articulate unspeakable things about death, life, and resurrection but still chose to write nothing of this; does it imply that no vocabulary would be able to articulate what he witnessed? We don't have all the facts of Omar's life; we don't know why he wrote this, or who his intended audience was. The only things we know are what he wrote in this arguably quite timid piece of writing. Moreover, there is no description of his birthplace or his life before his abduction, nor is there any explicit condemnation of slavery or any detailed contemplation of his plight.

[111] Welch, 183

Omar ibn Said writes:

جاء في بلادنا جيش كبير قتل الانسان كثير اخذني يمشي{...} البحر باعوا في يد النصراني {...} يمشي إلى الشعبية الكبيرة في البحر الكبير[112]

"There came to our country a big army. It killed many people. It 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. We sailed in the big Sea for a month and a half until we came to a place called Charleston. And in a Christian language, they sold me."[113]

Here, Said does not denounce the practices of abduction and enslavement; however, his entire story, reproduced in Alryyes' *A Muslim*, is imbued with meanings, many of which are hidden beneath the deceptively simple seeming words. There is a subtle criticism of slavery in the passage—for example where he says that he was "sold [...] in a Christian language." This implies that the business of human trafficking is informed by the language spoken of those who practice it. He identifies the language not as English or French but "Christian," which is a quite powerful message leading the reader to understand that Christianity had a huge role to play in the mechanisms of slavery. It could also mean that his own Muslim, African language could not articulate such practices and therefore he could only be sold in a language that is "Christian."[114] He is also creating an ontological difference between himself and his captors by suggesting a certain foreignness to the practices of slavery, and that foreignness is expressed in religion and language, and importantly the connections between them. Finally, penning his life story in Arabic, a Muslim language, so to speak, means that he was placing himself and Islam in opposition to slavery.

"Before I came to the Christian country, my religion is the religion of Mohammad, the prophet of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace," writes Omar, "I used to walk to the masjid before dawn, and to wash my face, head, hands, feet. I [also] used to hold the noon prayers, the afternoon prayers, the sunset prayers, the night prayers."[115] This passage is

[112] I have included two words that appeared illegible to me from the transcript in brackets.
[113] Alryyes, 194
[114] I want to clarify here that this does not mean that Muslims have not also partaken in the practice of slavery, but rather that his own identity as an African Muslim and his understanding of the Arabic language does not account for such practices. See: John Ralph Willis, *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa* (F. Cass, 1985); Mohammed Ennaji and Teresa Lavender Fagan. *Slavery, the State, and Islam* (Cambridge University Press, 2013); Paul E. Lovejoy. *Slavery on the Frontiers of Islam* (Princeton, Markus Wiener, 2004); and Elisabeth McMahon. *Slavery and Emancipation in Islamic East Africa: From Honor to Respectability* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).
[115] Alryyes, 194

especially important because the grammar of the first sentence is quite confusing, especially the verb tenses. This can be seen in the English translation which reproduces this from the Arabic original. On the one hand it seems as though he is saying that before his arrival to the Americas or "the Christian country" he *was* Muslim—implying that that is no longer the case. However, does not use the Arabic construction for the past (*kana*), instead he writes:

قبل ان جاء الى بلد النصراني ديني دين محمد رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم

"Before I came to the Christian county, my religion *is* [Islam]."

While it could be that it is simply an error in grammar; we should not discount the notion that he may have been conveying a hidden or deeper meaning—consciously, unconsciously, or subconsciously. Alaa Alryyes explains that this can be read a form of literary resistance and that this passage is, in actuality, "an indication that indeed his religion was, and is, that of Muhammad."[116] Since he was writing this while still enslaved, he had very little space and liberty to be candid and "truthful" in the way we tend to expect life writing to be, and slave narratives are no exception. It is possible, then, that this is one of the instances where he was using his own choice of words to encode or imply a hidden truth. The truth is that his supposed embrace of Christianity was exaggerated both by his slavers and also himself. I want to briefly explore other possibilities that would account for both his embrace of Christianity and his obvious attachment and even practice of Islam.

First, the Islamic notion of "ahl al-kitab" or people of the Book refers to how "the *Quran* recognizes the special relationship of Jews with God and grants both Jews and Christians a special legal status in Muslim communities as *dhimmis* (protected scriptural minorities), permitting them to practice their faith, defend themselves from external aggressions, and govern their own communities."[117] The Islamic recognition that Jewish and Christian communities are connected to Muslims probably facilitated Said's ease with "embracing" Christianity. Second, the Islamic notion of "taqiyah" which is mentioned and elaborated both in the Qur'an and the hadith. Taqiyah refers to the act of "precautionary denial of religious belief in the face of potential persecution." Essentially, it permits believers to deny their relationship with Islam if it would save their own livelihood, or in the case that any explicit embrace of Islam would put one

[116] Alryyes, 26

[117] "Ahl al-Kitab." in *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* edited by John L. Esposito. (Oxford Islamic Studies Online, 2003)

in danger. Taqiyah allows Muslims to outwardly express belief and commitment to a different religion while still inwardly being committed to Islam. Based on these notions, I speculate or propose that we regard Said's embrace of Christian beliefs as a subtle way of retaining an explicit connection to God. While this short autobiography reveals very little about his life before the abduction, this passage reveals parts of his identity in disguised and subtle ways.

Omar ibn Said's *Life* is not a deeply psychological or even particularly personalized account of enslavement, as we would expect from life writings today. Indeed, it is devoid of any explicit description of his experiences. Nonetheless, there are still instances where he expresses strong reactions to things. When asked whether he should be returned to Charleston where he had just escaped from, he writes, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no, I will not walk to the place called Charleston."[118] It is one of the few instances in this short text that show emotion and that feel explicitly candid. This contrasts to the overall tone of this rather discrete piece of writing, especially given that he otherwise avoids explicit criticism of slavery. The writer gives the reader very little to go on, and we must extrapolate meaning from this text; his adamant refusal to return to his slaver in Charleston is the one exception. Even in this example, however, there is no explicit reasoning for his refusal and the worst of his experiences that might have given rise to it are left to our imagination.

How to Write a Life

The subtlety of Said's experience is strongly contrasted by other slave narratives that follow a more typical pattern. In what follows, I will compare Said's *Life* to Frederick Douglass' *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) as an example of a more traditional practice of truth-telling in a slave narrative. I am comparing the two because I am reading Frederick Douglass' narrative as a traditional slave narrative that positions itself against slavery in very explicit ways and that also shares graphic descriptions of the cruel treatment he endured as a bondaged African — a stark distinction to Said's tentative tone. Douglass' writing offers a poignant and explicit condemnation of slave-making—a privilege offered by his identity as a freed enslaved African. To highlight the distinctions between Douglass' blunt and explicit life writing and Said's tentative, equivocal *Life*, I will compare select passages of the two texts that convey similar underlying truths, through starkly different approaches.

[118] Alryyes, 65.

Where Frederick Douglass writes, "I was [born] a slave and [that] fact was incomprehensible to me,"[119] Said writes, "they sold me in a Christian language."[120] Both of these sentences convey how unfathomable the practice of slave making is and particularly how it is a foreign concept to both. Where Douglass writes "if the reader will not be kind enough to allow me time to grow bigger [...] I will tell him something by-and-by, of slave life as I saw, felt, and heard it on [the plantation];"[121] Said writes "I cannot write my life for I have forgotten much of my talk."[122] These excerpts convey that their life writing is a testament to the crimes and practices they have become witnesses to. The difference here is that Douglass confidently states that he will tell the truth as he has seen and experienced it, whereas Said does not feel as though he could rely on his memory, let alone his "talk" to convey or [transmit] the truth.

Where Douglass writes "[My slaver was] literally insensible to the claims of humanity and could himself commit outrages, deep, dark and nameless,"[123] Said writes "I was afraid to stay with such a wicked man."[124] These excerpts reveal the inability of words to articulate or encapsulate the particular cruelty that they have endured at the hands of white slavers. They both, instead, choose words that articulate the impossibility of the fact, instead of the fact itself. Said's short statement reveals an inability to articulate the inhumane conditions of slavery whereas Douglass' is a more explicit description that, upon closer examination, does not include any graphic account of his slaver's crimes. These two excerpts demonstrate that even when equipped with language as a tool for truth-telling, and even when utilizing the most sophisticated of languages, the truth remains unspeakable. Finally, in writing about their past and personhood, Douglass writes "The reader will pardon so much about the place of my birth, on the score that it is always a fact of some importance to know where a man is born, if, indeed, it be important to know anything about him,"[125] Said writes "My name is Omar Ibn Said; my birthplace is Fut Tur, between the two rivers [or seas]."[126] Douglass' statement on the importance of knowing where one is born as it reveals much of someone's personhood renders Said's simple introductory sentence more powerful. While his *Life* is not necessarily riddled with complex analyses of

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[119] Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. (Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855), 45
[120] Alryyes, 63
[121] Douglass, 51
[122] Alryyes, 59
[123] Douglass, 79
[124] Alryyes, 77
[125] Douglass, 34
[126] Alryyes, 61

slave-making nor is it a comprehensive biography of his lifetime, the simple sentence stating his name and birthplace is crucial to retaining and passing on his personhood.

This comparative reading of two different life writings that deal with similar themes of personhood, preservation, violence, and memory shows that there are different ways of engaging in truth-telling practices. The genre of autobiography is a unique way of highlighting not only the author's own life story but also the lifetime in which they are writing. While the impact of their writing is evident if only for the reader's knowledge that they are written in the context of death, it also reveals how unreliable or slippery the concepts of memory and witnessing are. Indeed, it is for these very reasons that I am also closely analysing Saidiya Hartman's *Lose your Mother*. She explicitly explores the politics of memory and the pitfalls of relying solely on memory as a practice for truth-telling. In the next section, I will explore in more depth and contextualize Omar ibn Said's life writing.

While Said was able to pen his *Life* in a language he spoke and wrote in before his enslavement, many did not have another language to use — meaning that their lives were literally unspeakable in ways that Said's was not. Even though Said was quite arduously educated in Arabic for over twenty-five years of his life and could read and write it at the time he was enslaved — parts of his life were still unspeakable, such as his journey in the Middle Passage, and the cruel treatment he likely endured by his original slaver Johnson, which he only hints at, among others. Perhaps in choosing not to speak or write about these elements of his life, Said rendered them unspeakable himself. However, I am speculating here that it is perhaps because the language he is familiar with does not account for the cruelty he likely endured, witnessed, and felt, that he did not express this.

To better understand some of these dynamics of language and writing, I turn to an interview with Hortense Spillers reflecting on her now famous essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." Spillers shares that she attempted to create a vocabulary that would make sense of, articulate, and disseminate what it means to be Black in the United States by battling a repertoire of violent behavior. She attests to the common failures of language in a time where she was searching for a vocabulary that would fit and articulate her ontological personhood: "the available discourses all seemed to come out of experiences that somehow, when they got to me, did a detour. Or the language broke down. Or it could not speak in

theoretical terms."[127] The concept that language and literacy is not sufficient to articulate ontological personhood, identities, and experiences is reflected in Omar's *Life*. In that sense, language does break down, which is why despite his literacy, Omar fails to articulate the unspeakable. Of course, it is not Omar who fails to speak but rather language that refuses to wield without breaking. It could be that "his talk" simply broke under duress. I argue it broke because it did not bend in the moments where Said would speak. Specifically, he states that because he forgot much of his "talk" which implies that his language will simply not acquiesce and is unable to express certain truths. This does not mean that the truths are not disseminated because the reader can speculate and intuitively understand subliminal messages, as I have done here.

Jared Sexton uses Spillers' analysis of language and its break as a starting point to thinking about the narrative and memory. "How to sustain the language and, moreover, make it speak *in theoretical terms*," he asks, "How to theorize for battles [...] without experiencing a breakdown or detour in language?"[128] Those questions are useful in the context of reading Omar's *Life*, specifically in thinking through how language could help him survive. Does this written document convey and communicate Omar's life? Is it articulated in a way that allows for its preservation or sustainability? Spillers has argued that "in black culture a narrative of antagonism is inscribed in its memory."[129] It is natural and organic for a testimony or narrative to be combative—meaning that the words are battling a set of expectations, their restrictive vessels, or themselves. That language would breakdown or "detour" is expected when attempting to inscribe a narrative of slavery within the memory. That is exactly what Said's *Life* does — it is a combative text that wrestles with the unspoken as much, if not more, than it does with what is written. In my reading of Said's *Life*, what was particularly striking wasn't what he writes but what he doesn't write: experiences from the Middle Passage, his life at the hands of a cruel captor, and a transparent view of his relationship with Christianity.

While it may feel like there is a lot that is unsaid, untold, or unwritten, we can still extrapolate meanings, truths, and messages from Said's *Life*. The things he doesn't write about is

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[127] Jared Sexton. "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word," *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* vol. 29, no. 3 (2016), 4
[128] Sexton, 4-5, my emphasis
[129] Hortense Spillers, *Black, White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 306

itself a testimony to how the crimes he witnessed are unspeakable and, in this way, the reader does not need an extensive or graphic explanation of what Said has endured: our imagination can do the job of understanding.

Saidiya Hartman: Estrangement and Life-Writing

Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* is a multi-genre work that combines autobiographical writings with analyses of historical and contemporary politics. It is a theorization of the world by the way of the self, specifically in the use of the author's own familial and personal history, as well as her travel writing to offer a framework of thinking through and understanding the world. *Lose Your Mother* uses a mix of genres, including memoir, fiction, and historical writing to challenge common conceptions of truth-telling practices, by resisting traditional conceptions of history. Published in 2007, African American professor Saidiya Hartman narrates her journey as she returns to Ghana to visit slave routes in an attempt to understand, uncover, and unbeknownst to her, unlearn what it means to be the descendant of enslaved Africans returning to a homeland. *Lose Your Mother* undermines our assumptions about history, fiction, and memoir, by questioning official documentations and experimenting with ways of preserving truth and memory as authentic retellings of life stories. Through her own journey to Africa, she asks questions about the slave routes of Ghana and her (un)belonging in that specific locality.

In her prologue titled "The Path of Strangers," she discloses conversations that she has had with her parents and grandparents in her attempt to trace her family history. She reveals that her "Poppa," whose mother—Ella—was still a young girl when slavery ended, very rarely spoke of his mother even though Ella's story was both tragic and fascinating. Hartman points out that Ella's life was marked by two essential facts: freedom and slavery. She concludes that "this is what slavery did: it stripped your history to bare facts and precious details."[130] Centering this realization and story in her prologue is a fitting prelude to the rest of her life writing as she then searches for and sometimes, imagines, the story behind the bare facts and precious details. In many ways, *Lose Your Mother* attests to the truth that history alone, without the support of memory and lived experience, is not sufficient to memorialize the nucleus of the truth. On the other hand, memory carries connotations of authenticity and a candid practice of truth-telling.

[130] Hartman, 11

Indeed, Hartman engages in a kind of meta-narrative where she actively utilizes memory — her own and that of a collective — to tell a story, while also pointing out the limitations of this method. She supplements the blanks that memory offers with historical analyses of the world around her.

Lose Your Mother inscribes the sea as an archive in which the Afterlife of slavery continuously floats, sinks, and resurfaces. As the title suggests, Hartman's journey into the slave routes of Ghana involves the loss of a mother figure which scholar Meg Samuelson describes as a way to "foreground the impact of the voyage of slavery on the bonds of kinship."[131] By naming the novel *Lose Your Mother,* Hartman is centering kinship, loss, and possibly—or more importantly—retrieval. There is a paradoxical relationship between the loss suggested in the title and the retrieval that I suggest is also central to her life writing. Hartman herself identifies the "gaps and silences of [her] family [as] not unusual: slavery made the past a mystery, unknown and unspeakable."[132] It was this *loss* that pushed her to embark on a journey of retrieval -- though she discovers later that retrieval was a misnomer: "I realized too late that [...] the routes traveled by strangers were as close to a *mother country* as I would come." She never explicitly says that her journey to the slave routes was a quest to retrieve a mother country, but she does reveal in the passage above that nothing before or since could feel more like a mother country than the slave routes in Ghana. This realization is made more complicated when considering that the birth of her journey stems from her embodiment of and through social death and a realization that if any attempt to retrieve a loss would not occur in the U.S. It also pushes the reader to think about whether retrieval was ever a possibility.

When reading about Hartman's estrangement, the connection to Said's life becomes evident — both his *Life* and his lifetime. Indeed, Said's forced displacement and enslavement birthed what Hartman, in 2007, refers to as her estrangement. His being uprooted has created a future that alienates subjects like Hartman, and this is precisely what she describes in her own life writing. She frames her journey to Ghana first as a return and later as an attempt to find her way home. By visiting the slave routes, she inhabits their Afterlife in a different way—as a stranger to kinship, whereas she had previously lived in what she calls its Afterlife specifically in the conditions that force descendants of enslaved peoples into a condition of "skewed life

[131] Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. (Farrar, Straus, Giroux,2007)
[132] Hartman, 14 (emphasis hers).

chances, premature death and incarceration."[133] Her book *Lose Your Mother* is defined by this kinship and motherhood—or loss thereof—which is juxtaposed with Said's almost complete silence, or blank, on his own kinship. In fact, Said does not center his literal or allegorical mother in his life writing, and we are given almost no information about his kin. Here, the element of unspeakability emerges from their texts in two important ways. Hartman is unable to reckon with an unspeakable past -- which happens to be Omar's life. This is where their two stories coalesce uniquely: Said's *Life* is about trying to articulate something that is unspeakable by both speaking ("No, no, no, no, no, no, no, I will not walk to the place called Charleston")[134] and not speaking (the blank and silences). Hartman's life writing is about reckoning with a past that slavery and the Middle Passage, or Omar's life, that is "unknown and unspeakable."[135]

My Life and My Mother Too (Are Lost at Sea)

In this section, I will return to the earlier principles and analyses of estrangement, death-making, and witnessing. This section is composed of two subsections: "The Physical, the Ontological, and the Estranged" and "T(w)o Witness the Sea." The first is a continuation of the lessons offered in Maya Angelou's 1990's interview published in the *Paris Review*, namely the concept of the physical and how it could facilitate a deeper understanding of life writings. Through this framework, I explore what it means to be physically or ontologically displaced and estranged and how Said and Hartman's life-writing reflect these complicated dynamics. In the second subsection, I return to the sea, once more, as a site of archive that facilitates the ability for subjects, their lives, and life-writings to bear witness to the unspeakable.

The Physical, the Ontological, and the Estranged

When writing about your life, your environment will determine how you write, what you write, and why you write. Once again, Maya Angelou's insights into her process of life writing are useful here, she shares in her interview that she insists that nobody enter the hotel room that she rents out and that all things are taken off the walls in order to write about her life: "I don't want anything in there," she says "I go into the room and I feel as if all my beliefs are suspended.

[133] Meg Samuelson "'Lose Your Mother, Kill Your Child': The Passage of Slavery and Its Afterlife in Narratives by Yvette Christianse and Saidiya Hartman." *English Studies in Africa* vol. 51, no. 2 (2008): 38
[134] Alryyes, 65.
[135] Hartman, 14

Nothing holds me to anything."[136] She states that this process helps her remember how pliable language is, how it can be stretched out to make room for her life. I am using this metaphor to guide parts of my own analysis and to consider how physical space informs Omar ibn Said and Saidiya Hartman's writings.

In both Said and Hartman's life writings, physical space is often intertwined with concepts of kinship and estrangement. Said depicts a foreign, strange land in which people practice a barbaric form of death-making—a land that he inherently does not belong in. His autobiography is imbued with strangeness: from the language he speaks and writes in, to his understanding of the new world. He is estranged. This is true in the sense that he is inhabiting a reality that is unsettling or hard to understand; that the world has become itself an unfamiliar or alien reality; and that he is considered an alien to the world he currently inhabits. In comparison, Saidiya Hartman employs estrangement and her own feelings of strangeness in different but complementary ways. She overwhelmingly refers to this as an ontological state of being: she is and feels like a stranger in her "native" America as well as her ancestral Ghana. In fact, the first words of her book are: "As I disembarked from the bus in Elmina, I heard it. It was sharp and clear, as it rang in the air, and clattered in my ear making me recoil. *Obruni.* A stranger. A foreigner from across the sea."[137]

These opening lines are important because they represent the very first words she hears when she gets off the bus in Elmina, and the word "obruni"— meaning stranger — is not merely a designation of her status as an American tourist but becomes her identity while there. She is identified by natives as a stranger, and she feels like one—though she has embarked on this voyage and journey to do the opposite, to find a kind of home or belonging. This state of being is one that was first produced by the Middle Passage where Stephanie Smallwood describes the voyage as "a perpetual purgatory of virtual kinless" — one that we know has remained to this day as evidenced by Saidiya Hartman's life writing.[138] This becomes increasingly layered when considering Hartman's revelation in the book that she has always felt like an outsider or a stranger in the United States as well.[139] A further connection that could link her estrangement to

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[136] Maya Angelou, interview by George Plimpton. *The Art of Fiction* (Paris Review no. 119, 1990), 3
[137] Hartman, 1
[138] Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 61
[139] She writes "I was born [in a] country, where I also felt like an alien and which in part determined why I had come to Ghana" (4).

Said's is revealed later in this same chapter. She explains that to be a slave is to be a stranger as enslaved Africans were "torn from kin and community, exiled from one's country, dishonored and violated."[140] Here, she portrays someone like Omar as an outsider, torn from kin and country; and when tasked with the impossible burden of writing his life, Omar only writes "my birthplace is Fut Tur, between the two rivers [or seas]."[141]

In this way, Said technically does speak about his birthplace but he also doesn't. He doesn't reveal much about his homeland, perhaps because it would have been painful to do so, perhaps because he simply doesn't remember anything of it; or perhaps he simply did not want to. I propose that we read this single sentence, as a testament to the traumatic experience of being torn from kin and country and how impossible it is to articulate anything other than fact. He is not conveying his life before slavery, he is simply articulating a fact: "my birthplace is Fut Tur, between the two rivers [or seas]."[142] I recall Saidiya Hartman's analysis in her prologue, when thinking about her ancestors and Ella in particular, she says "this is what slavery did: it stripped your history to bare facts and precious details."[143] Whereas the reader might anticipate that Said would describe his home and kin in detail as we might speculate that he longs for it, we are only given a single fact about it. I argue that we can consider his kin and country to be unspeakable, not because he isn't speaking about it (because he does) but because they are reduced to fact and detail, devoid of life and story.

This is where Maya Angelou's warning about words being lifeless comes into play: slavery has ensured that country, kin, and life become lifeless even, or especially, in a life writing. "I will not write the life out of my words," she says, and while I argue that there is lifelessness in the words of country and kin in Said's *Life*, I can still locate the life in it. "My birthplace is Fut Tur, between the two *rivers* [*or seas*]."[144] I am putting rivers, and seas, in italics because I once again return to the sea as a site of life, death, and resurrection. Both Hartman and Said position the sea as a marker for estrangement or kinship. Where Hartman states that she was "a foreigner from across the sea,"[145] Said states that his birthplace is "between two seas."[146]

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[140] Hartman, 5
[141] Alryyes, 34
[142] Alryyes, 34
[143] Hartman, 11
[144] Alryyes, 34
[145] Hartman, 1
[146] Alryyes, 34

Water, or the sea, not only becomes a witness to their loss of kinship, it is also a physical marker of the loss. Here, the physicality of the sea is important, on one hand it makes people into strangers, and on the other hand it marks kinship.

The ability for physical spaces to carry legacies, to produce estrangement and to mark kinship is central in Saidiya Hartman's life writing. Indeed, Hartman's choice to go to Ghana was primarily because she wanted to visit the physical spaces in which enslaved Africans were transported and kept. A critical impetus for her pilgrimage to Ghana is the physical, or the literal — the act of touching the ground of slave routes or touching the walls of slave forts enforces meaning. Hartman reveals that while her visit didn't resolve her questions, it still provided significant clarity —however melancholic. In her text, she reveals that although her pilgrimage did not align with her expectations — it, in fact, disrupted them — it offered her valuable analyses. When she discusses with her friend John her decision to visit Ghana, he pushes for a more [satisfying] answer: "Why Ghana? There are no archives here, there is nothing to discover that hasn't already been written about."[147] However, Hartman isn't interested in writing something new—though she ends up doing just that—she is interested in investigating precisely why it is that so many Black Americans would feel a pull to go "back" to Ghana given that they are not going to a place that has their kin, rather it just estranges you.

In the case of Omar ibn Said's life story, we expect him to express a truth about living in slavery, but he reveals few concrete details about this. On the other hand, Saidiya Hartman pens her book in 2007 and is constrained by fundamentally different physical circumstances in that she is living the Afterlife of slavery. Hartman also, in a way, collapses the conceptual space between the work and the reader or the fourth wall, because we are privy to the process behind her life writing. We know she went to Ghana to write this book that we are currently reading, and this contextual information is important in framing the way we read her work—something that we are not accorded with Said's *Life*. These processes of writing about loss and the physical centers both authors' lives and experiences. The following subsection will highlight the complicated processes of witnessing as they relate to the sea and the archiving of one's life.

[147] Hartman, 27

T(w)o Witness the Sea

The Arabic word for witness comes from the root word sh-h-d and is employed to mean any one of the following: (1) to witness, to be a witness; (2) to experience personally, to see with one's own eyes; (3) to be present in a situation, to attend; (4) to testify, bear witness to, to attest, confirm, certify something; (5) to give testimony, or give evidence, to sign as a witness; and (6) to acknowledge, adjudge, or swear by God. [148] From this root are derived common words such as "shahada" and "shahid"—the former refers to the basic Islamic creed and the latter refers to the act of becoming a martyr. I propose that we consider both life writings as testimonies that bear witness to and provide evidence to a compartmentalized world in which the margin of Otherness is created to [ensure] abject ontological absence of enslaved Africans and their descendants. Naturally, if these texts are considered testimonies, then their authors are effectively witnesses. The title of "witness" means that they are burdened with the impossible task of expressing the truth in the context of death—for Omar—and in the wake of death—for Saidiya.

The sea as a terrain housing buried ghosts, that has marked the journey from life to death for enslaved Africans, is a crucial element in the process of witnessing in the lifetimes of both Omar ibn Said and Saidiya Hartman. Said narrates his life non-linearly in that he positions his abduction by "a big army" as the starting point of his *Life*— not because there is nothing more to his life, because we know that he lived a very rich and full life before his abduction, but rather because his abduction marks the beginning of a different kind of life. He describes the world that follows as his life. In doing so, he positions the sea as a marker of that difference. "[The big army] 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. We sailed in the big Sea for a month and a half until we came to a place called Charleston."[149]

The sea is a crucial component in the transition from Said's life to ontological death—indeed Hartman proposes that "death wasn't a goal [of slavery] just a by-product of commerce [...something that] occurs when life has no normative value, when no humans are involved, when the population is, in effect, seen as already dead."[150] This is why Omar's task of writing his life is so difficult, it is practically impossible to write about one's life when you are seen as already

[148] "Definition of sh-h-d" *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, edited by J. Milton Cowan (Cornell University Press, 1961), 488-489
[149] Alryyes, 34.
[150] Hartman, 31

dead. However, that is also precisely why Omar's identity as a Muslim is key in his ability to remain a witness. In Islam, your testimony as a witness to a crime, a good or bad deed, or any action, will likely be requested after death.[151] Indeed, in Islam, dead people are witnesses to their own lives and to the world they inhabited. It is therefore his Muslim identity that continues to gift Omar with the power and ability to witness and become a witness, long after both his real death and his ontological death.

If Omar ibn Said was a witness to slavery, we could treat his *Life* as a testimony of truth. I return to my previous section where I argue that opening his life writing with Surah al-Mulk is an act that is believed to not only protect its reciter but actually intercede on his behalf to [save him] from torment or punishment in the grave.[152] I am returning to this argument to draw out the physical dimension of this analysis: the similarity between the grave and the conditions of slavery are clear and they could indeed be occurring at the same time. To recall Samera Esmeir's theorization of witnessing, there is a cyclical pace to remembrance—meaning that two different moments across space are connected to one another through the common thread of remembrance. Said transcribing Surah al-Mulk is a mode of remembrance that effectively causes a rift in the time-space continuum. Just as he witnesses the crimes, the Surah witnesses Said's piety and subsequently interferes in his post-life punishment. Since Said writes his manuscript after life, in a moment of witnessing that witnesses and protects the witness, the text and life itself become a time and space bending phenomenon. I want to highlight a specific passage from his manuscript that testifies to his inability to testify. A circular, dizzying process of being unable to testify despite being a witness, articulating the inability to testify which itself becomes a testimony of that which you have witnessed — effectively produces a convoluted document that reveals very little if anything at all about the crimes deserving of witnessing.

> "You asked me to write my life. I cannot write my life for I have forgotten much of my talk [language] as well as the talks of the Arabs. Also I know little grammar and little

[151] In Islam, the afterlife is a seminal and important journey wherein every being will be held accountable to their actions, crimes, and sins. Indeed, it is believed that our very limbs will testify against us. As such, in Islam, part of accountability is only achieved after death, in the afterlife.
"Afterlife." In *The Islamic World: Past and Present*, edited by John L. Esposito. *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*.
[152] See Hadith: "Verily, there is a chapter in the Quran which contains thirty verses. It will intercede on behalf of its reciter until he is forgiven." Wahion-Yoha, "Surah Al-Mulk Benefits That Every Muslim Should Know" *Quran Teacher Academy* (Blog, June 27, 2021), https://quranteacheracademy.com/blog/surah-al-mulk-benefits-and-virtues-muslim/

vocabulary. O my brothers, I ask you in the name of Allah, not to blame me for my eye is weak and so is my body."[153]

In contrast to Omar in *Life*, the sea coaxes realizations, and truths from Saidiya in *Lose Your Mother*. She often gazes at the movement of the sea as though in a trance where she can reflect on the past from her standing in the present. While visiting her friends Kohain and Chessy in Ghana, she shuts out mundane conversation, "With my eyes shut," she writes, "the ocean sounded louder and even more threatening."[154] Hartman immerses the reader in the physical experience of the ocean and hints at the fact that the water isn't just water—it is also a grave and it is much "larger [here] than on the other side."[155] She demonstrates how the sea is experienced differently by different people and that its loud crashing isn't a soothing sound—in fact she confesses that at night it is so loud she can hardly sleep. I argue that the ocean is comparable to the cries of toddlers keeping up their parents at night, it is comparable to a grave of a relative that one might visit, it is comparable to a vast, angry entity that crashes onto the earth, and it is comparable to a witness crying out their testimony. In this way, Hartman hears the ocean witness the unspeakable things that Said indeed does not speak on: the Middle Passage.

My analysis of the life writings of Hartman and Said uses the sea to better understand the process of witnessing and remembering, because the sea carries the secrets and truths of the Middle Passage. While I have highlighted the sea's receptive properties and its ability to retain, preserve, and pass on the memories of those who witnessed the Middle Passage, I have come to conclude that this does not necessarily render legible or audible that which is unspeakable.

Conclusion

The state of unspeakability is created by cruel conditions of violence and death-making. I argue that one of the purer or undistilled states of unspeakability is the Middle Passage's unforgiving journey over the Atlantic. This chapter, "To Build a Life around the Word and the World" puts two life writings -- Saidiya Hartman's multigenre, auto-theory work *Lose Your Mother* (2007) and Ala Alryyes' edition of the only surviving slave narrative in Arabic *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar ibn Said* (2011) -- in dialogue with one another from which I extrapolate

[153] Alrayyes, 61
[154] Hartman, 107
[155] Hartman, 107-8

lessons, analyses, and truths. The first section of the chapter "Life Writing and Slave Narratives," I locate within the genres of life-writing and slave narratives. I use Maya Angelou's insights into her own process of life-writing as a framework of thinking through and understanding both objects of study as an amalgamation of memory, language, and truth-telling. I introduce Angelou's expression of "writing words into the ground and writing the life out of it," which I return to throughout the chapter. I place significance on this [metaphor] as it complicates our understanding of life-writings: texts that are meant to convey a life (and subsequently, death) could potentially be written with lifeless words, or alternatively, words that are full of life. This is one of the many threads that weave together language as an elusive, but necessary tool for truth and life as a subject of writing that necessarily invokes death, especially in the context of Hartman and Said's lives and life writings. I close this first section with a brief contextualization of slave narratives as a literary genre and its relationship with truth-telling, specifically in that slave narratives were often mediated by captors or white norther emancipators.

The second section, composed of three subsections, is titled "Life, the Unspeakable, and Islamic Resistance" closely analyses Omar ibn Said's *Life,* specifically through questions of language, unspeakability, the role of Islam in resistance, the sea, and witnessing. The first subsection provides a brief biography of Omar which allows me to elaborate on the conception of unspeakability wherein Said literally does not speak on important life markers such as the Middle Passage or the cruel treatment he likely endured by the hands of white captors, but how it also uses subliminal ways to convey messages that he does not explicitly articulate. The second subsection explores some of these subliminal messages which he conveys through Islamic texts. First, with his use of the bismillah as an opening for his *Life* which display an attachment to his Muslim identity, a determination to retain his identity by practicing a standard writing style in Arabic, and a marker that this manuscript symbolizes an important journey. Second, with his use of Surah al-Mulk which I propose is a language of intervention, specifically in that it is tradition to recite the Surah every day because it is believed it will intercede and protect its reciters from punishment in the grave.

I provide a close reading and analysis of the Surah and what it means for Said to pen it as an introduction to his *Life*. The last subsection explores the tentative language in Said's manuscript which illustrates the unspeakability of his life. I use Islamic understandings of life, death, and resurrection to argue that Said was familiar with and had access to a vocabulary that

articulates complex understandings of death and life; yet the blanks in his manuscript are stark. Here, I explore specific examples in his manuscript where Said says one thing to communicate a truth that he never explicitly pens. I then contrast his *Life* with a more traditional slave narrative, Frederick Douglass' *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855). Reading side-by-side select passages from both narratives allows me to highlight truths that both authors convey -- Said in a tentative implicit way and Douglass in an explicit graphic way.

In the third section I introduce Saidiya Hartman's life narrative in more detail including the impetus for her journey to the slave routes in Ghana, specifically as an attempt to understand, uncover, and eventually unlearn, what it means to be the descendant of enslaved Africans returning to a homeland. I specifically analyse the way in which she uses her own familial and ancestral stories to argue that part of the Afterlife of slavery is how it strips individual and collective histories until they become lifeless facts. Here, I introduce Hartman's concept of estrangement and connect them to the unspeakability of slavery, the sea, and kinship.

The last section is a return to earlier principles of death-making, witnessing, and language. I begin by comparing the different kinds of estrangement that Hartman and Said embody and articulate. I also deliberate the ways in which the physical space of the sea becomes a marker for and a bridge between estrangement and kinship. I connect the sea as an archive of stories to the process of witnessing that both Hartman and Said practice. It is fitting to close my chapter with an analysis of the sea once more, as I continuously return to it as a repository for truths, messages, and lives precisely because it is within it that the Middle Passage continues to resurface. It is during this journey that unspeakable crimes were committed by captors and that were witnessed by the captives who underwent what Stephanie Smallwood calls the "transition from captive to commodity."[156]

This chapter argues that Said and Hartman's life writings are necessarily imbued with death. In Islam, death marks the end of the worldly life and the beginning of the Afterlife. Death is the movement from one world to another—a movement similar to the one between the Middle Passage and the Afterlife of slavery. The Afterlife of slavery persists today in the forms of what Hartman calls "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" — conditions created by the Middle Passage.[157] In a way,

[156] Smallwood, 33
[157] Hartman, 5-6

Said experiences the treacherous movement from one world to another but is unable to speak about it. Then, almost two centuries later, Saidiya Hartman revisits the slave routes and forts that he was probably held in and tells part of the story for him.

Chapter 4: *They Ask for Life, We Give Them Only the Sea*

> They ask for water we give them sea/ they ask for bread we give them sea/ they ask for life we give them only the sea.
>
> — M. Nourbese Philip, "Zong!"

I opened my thesis with Sylviane Diouf's assertion in *Servants of Allah* that even though Islam which was brought by enslaved West Africans did not survive slavery, traces of it remain in the cultures, histories, and practices of their descendants today. I broadened the scope of my analysis by asking not in what ways has Islam survived slavery, but rather *what exactly has Islam inherited from slavery*? Throughout my thesis, I analyze how which Islam's ability to mount a resistance to the Middle Passage has made it versed in articulating the unspeakable. The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate how Islam, when operating within sites of estrangement and under conditions of confinement, has the capacity to resist depersonalization and to disrupt the production of the unspeakability. To further elaborate this argument, I will use the modern carceral system in North America as a brief case study.

I have taken the title of this chapter, "They Ask For Life, We Give Them Only Water" from M. Nourbese Philip's *Zong!*, a work I discuss in some detail above and which is extracted here as an epigraph. In creating and representing the way memory, poetry, and fiction coalesce, Philip uses repetition to emphasize the overpowering role of the sea in the estrangement and displacement of enslaved Africans. Water, bread, and life act as repositories for the sea; a desire and need that is ultimately not met and is in fact drowned by the sea. Thus, Philip suggests that the sea may be comparable to forms of sustenance such as water and bread, but ultimately cannot sustain life. As I argue throughout this thesis, we intuitively understand water to be an equivalent of life; but in the context of the Middle Passage the water cannot sustain life. Saidiya Hartman notes that this is exactly what slavery does, it kills all that which is alive, it strips individuals of their stories, and it strips life from people. I want to use this imagery of asking for life but instead being given water to guide our understanding of what Islam has inherited from slavery. Here I propose applying Philip's logic and create the following analogy: they ask for liberation, we give them Islam. They ask for documentation, we give them Islam. They ask for witnesses, we give them Islam. Here, I am using her grammar and structure to understand the ways in which Islam

offers ways of liberation, documentation, and witnessing in spite of the fact that, in the words of Sylviane Diouf, the Islam of enslaved Africans "[did] not survive" slavery.

In this chapter, I will offer an analysis of Islam as it is currently expressed and practiced within the carceral system in North America. I focus on prisons, because they are sites of confinement, estrangement, isolation, and depersonalization in North America today in which Islam plays a prominent role. In the first section, "Legacies of Islam and the Middle Passage," I will synthesize the work of historians who explore the Afterlife of slavery and how it is sustained today, in relation to the North American carceral system. I will also elaborate on the ways in which Islam, while perhaps not having "survived slavery" directly or in all of its African traditions, has trickled down to everyday practices of Islam, within prison settings. The purpose of this section is to read side-by-side the different kinds of legacies, of Islam and the Middle Passage, that are produced and maintained today. In the second section, "They Ask for Documentation, We Give Them Islam," I will explore how the concept of the silence or blank—specifically as this appears in and produced by the Middle Passage—operates today within the carceral system in North America. Whereas Diouf highlights a significant silence and absence of documentation of African Muslims who were captured, kidnapped, and enslaved; incarcerated Muslims utilize silence as a weapon against the hyper surveillance of their movements.

The third section is titled "They Ask for Witnesses, We Give Them Islam." Here, I explore the ways in which incarcerated Muslims utilize the space of courtrooms as sites where they can offer their testimonies, become witnesses of their own lives and the carceral system as well as articulate their liberation. I will put this in dialogue with my own analysis of witnessing within the Middle Passage which I offered in the previous chapters. Reading the movement of witnessing in both these contexts will offer us an understanding of how Islam can disrupt systems of silencing while also practicing it. In my conclusion "They Ask for Liberation, We Give them Islam," I will explore the parallels between Islam as a vehicle to rebel during slavery and Islam as a vehicle to rebel within the carceral system in North America. These analyses cannot and do not attempt to fully compare the two systems. The carceral system is indeed a reflection of and produced by slavery. The reason for this comparison is rather to further analyse, probe, and speculate about some of the continuities of the role of Islam for African people/s and to map out further some of the contours of how we can understand this.

Legacies of Islam and the Middle Passage

This section introduces two kinds of afterlives or legacies: that of Islam and that of the Middle Passage. In the first subsection I will provide a synthesis of works by historians who investigate systems of power and how they are rooted in practices of slavery. This prefaces my investigation of the North American carceral system today as a legacy of slavery and the Middle Passage. In the second subsection, I aim to illustrate how Islam, as practiced by enslaved Africans, has trickled down to the everyday practices of their descendants -- creating a legacy that is subtle but nonetheless present. I am putting these two legacies in dialogue with one another to illustrate the ways in which the world today is a reflection and an amalgamation of the remnants of slavery. On one hand, the legacy of Islam as a vehicle to resist slave-making and a way to retain identity is preserved today in various ways, which I will explore specifically in the locality of prisons in North America. On the other hand, the legacy of slavery operates in and persists within the systems of power the continue to subjugate and negate Black people, namely the prison industrial complex.

The Middle Passage

What marks the Afterlife of the Middle Passage is its continued haunting of every structure that operates within the confines of the world today: specifically, its ability to be everywhere, at different points in time and space simultaneously. This Afterlife, as noted by Saidiya Hartman, is everywhere and it is embodied by Black people today.[158] These embodiments are inherited, dispensed, and passed on from one generation to another, in a subjugated, haunted state of existence. Hartman is clear in her use of the term "afterlife" to mark the distinction between a legal end of slave-making and the continued subjugation of Black people through other means, specifically through the building and maintenance of systems of power—one of which is the carceral system. The scholarship dedicated to analysing how systems of sexuality, law, nationhood, and incarceration in North America all replicate the Afterlife in various ways is growing and I will present a synthesis and analysis of it in what follows.

[158] She specifically states "I, too, am the afterlife" (6) but she also reveals conversations with her brother where she argued that "our lives are still disfigured by slavery [...we are still] haunted by stories of the past that no longer [serves] us" (73).

Scholars have traced the link between slavery and racism in the regulation of the movement of Black and racialized peoples in many ways.[159] The movement of escape or fleeing from slavery has significantly shaped North American migration policies in the late nineteenth century — ensuring a regulation of movement that is racially coded. Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez provides a historical analysis of border regulation in the United States specifically as being rooted in the aftermath of anti-imperial and anti-slavery rebellions in the early nineteenth century. Formerly enslaved Africans fleeing Saint Domingue, for example, were labeled as a threat and considered suspicious.[160] Their newly earned status as free men or women threatened the established social and political systems because free African men and women were perceived as having the potential to undermine national and local security. This is specifically due to the assumption that "their revolutionary engagement [gave….] potential to incite revolt against racism."[161] Thus, free men and women crossing the border quickly led to a series of migration regulations across North America that were explicitly advancing structural racism, racial differentiation, and neo-colonial systems of violence. For example, an 1803 federal statute prohibited: "the importation of foreign Blacks into [the Southern States]."[162] These migration policies have all contributed to the production and upholding of a political and social order that is designed to exclude, ostracize, and unrecognize Black subjects in North America.

The migration laws that sought and continue to seek regulation, control, and policing are based on notions of kinship and estrangement — concepts that both Hartman and Said's life writings tackle. Said is forcibly imported onto alien ground and is literally estranged from his kin. He is treated as an object divorced from any citizenship; Hartman is the product of familial and national estrangement including both her ancestral history and kin and also the nation of which she is technically a citizen. Both Said and Hartman are operating within forced and/or coerced migratory experiences that are fundamentally shaped by familial estrangement, alienated identities, and ontological death. It is these same processes upon which North American understandings of citizenship, legal systems, and political thought are based. Indeed, migration

[159] See the works of Rinaldo Walcott, Idil Abdillahi, Tiya Miles, Edward Baptist, Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, Angela Davis, William J. Wilson, Randall L. Kennedy, Annette Gordon-Reed, and Mary Frances Berry.
[160] Encarnacion Gutierrez Rodriguez, "The Coloniality of Migration and the 'Refugee Crisis': On the Asylum-Migration Nexus, the Transatlantic White European Settler Colonialism-Migration and Racial Capitalism." *Refuge* 34, no. 1 (2018): 23
[161] Rodriguez, 23
[162] Rodriguez, 23-24

regulation, border creation and control, as well as institutionalized thingification are all methods of ensuring that people are categorized as either citizen or alien — the latter of which oscillates between estrangement and entrapment.

Further examples of migration laws and policies can be traced back to slavery in the context of Canadian migration law. Sharryn Aiken and Simone Browne, for example, have written extensively on the roots of racist and discriminatory policies.[163] Aiken's intervention is important because it demonstrates how those Canadian legislative regimes were produced to alienate and divest communities from their rights. Indeed, Canadian immigration policy was produced with the intention of "[divesting] the indigenous population of their sparsely populated 'wild lands' and rendering those lands productive as quickly as possible."[164] She points out that though Canada is one of the very few countries that actively "plans and promotes immigration, [managing and controlling] who gets in remains central to the government's agenda."[165]

The Canadian governmental system is predicated on exclusion and disenfranchisement — the targets of which change over time. Aiken argues that though we have progressed from legislative and immigration law being based explicitly in racism and racist principles — for example, racially explicit exclusion in the nineteenth century — harm continues to be done through the neo-racist stratification which remains embedded in the very fabric of Canadian law. This is crucial for the work of this thesis because it demonstrates how Black people, Muslims, and of course therefore Black Muslims, are excluded from the Canadian legal system in ways reminiscent of the exclusionary practices of the Middle Passage.[166]

Simone Brown has also written extensively on border regulation and its roots in slavery, investigating Canadian complicity in enslavement as well as the legacies of slavery that persist today. In *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, Brown writes that the history of border regulation and identification documents can be traced back to the Transatlantic Slave

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[163] See also the works of Wahiba Abu-Ras, Zulema Suarez, Muneer Ahmad and Sarah B. Kaufman

[164]Sharryn J. Aiken "Manufacturing 'Terrorists': Refugees, National Security, and Canadian Law." *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 54-73 (2000): 55

[165] Aiken, 57

[166] For more on racism and the law as a vehicle to advance structural racism see Sherene Razack's *Casting Out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics* (University of Toronto Press, 2007). A thorough analysis of race, racism, and discrimination in the framework of Canadian law, policy, and constitutional adjudication, Sherene Razack investigates the way in which Muslim subjects are excluded from Canadian law and citizenship. She identifies the promotion of surveillance, incarceration, torture, and bombing as symptoms of the war on 'terror' is part of a wider pattern of dehumanizing Muslims within the legal, social, political, and cultural spheres.

Trade.[167] She specifically argues that the ledger, called "the Book of Negroes," was used to monitor Black movement from the U.S to Canada.[168] The itemization of Black people is an example of how official and legitimate forms of documentation did not account for life, but rather treated them as commodities to be monitored, regulated, and controlled. Browne's conclusion is partly to point how state citizenship, notions of land and ownership, and nationhood have been predicated on the depersonalization of Black people.

The scholarship dedicated to situating the prison as a legacy of slavery is too extensive to capture and synthesize it all in this short chapter. As such, I will give an overview of only some key material to provide a basic understanding of the North American carceral system as a reproduction and continuation of slavery.[169] I draw on Joshua Price's *Prison and Social Death* (2015) and Angela Davis' *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (2003) as essential texts. Price makes a link between criminality and captivity specifically in that the enslaved shares many qualities with a prisoner through the concepts of citizenship: "The slave was not quite American, not quite a citizen; the slave was something of a foreigner, but a foreigner who was not due any regard, nor someone protected by laws the same way a citizen is [...] When the prisoner is perceived as an enemy, then domestic social organization contains elements of war within it."[170]

This passage reveals how both prisoner and captive operate outside of national citizenship which also characterizes the shift from slavery and its abolition. Indeed, the production of social death simply migrated from chattel slavery to the criminal justice system. Price argues that "if the end of slavery made it impossible to hold human beings any longer as private property, the birth of the penitentiary made it possible to hold human beings as public property."[171] He shows that the penitentiary became an institution that would allow for the subjugation of subjects whom the state did not want its laws to protect. It was one of many tools, including migration and regulation control, discussed above, to limit the political or social freedom of Black people. This is a subtle legacy, or as Angela Davis puts it "the prison reveals

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[167] Simone Browne, *Dark Matters* (Duke University Press, 2015): 549.
The novel I am referring to is Lawrence Hill's *Book of Negroes* is a speculation on the historical document of the same name kept by British naval officers to document, police, and control the movement of Black people fleeing to Canada. The book itself fits into my argument of using fiction and storytelling to tell a story and truth.
[168] Browne, 550.
[169] See also the works of Mary Ellen Curtin, Alex Lichtenstein, Julia Sudbury, Eve Goldberg, Kim Shayo Buchanan, Kemba Smith (in Rickie Solinger's collection), and Caleb Smith.
[170] Joshua M. Price, *Prison and Social Death* (Rutgers University Press, 2015), 81
[171] Price, 81

congealed forms of antiblack racism that operate in clandestine ways [...] that are rarely recognized as racist."[172] The penitentiary system was seen as a progressive form of punishment and though it was criticized by antislavery advocates it was still regarded as a rehabilitative center. Davis argues that the ideologies and practices that governed slavery was a precedent for how penitentiary centers would operate.[173] In fact, in the southern states, penitentiary centers were developed almost immediately after the abolition of slavery to "legally restrict the possibilities of freedom for newly released slaves."[174]

Price closes one of his chapters in *Prison and Social Death* by describing in detail a haunting scene where there are men, most of whom are Black, in a single file surrounded by an empty green field. They are all wearing the same outfit, with kerchiefs on their bowed heads carrying shoves, hoes, or spades. They are being monitored by a guard close by. He writes that, "the scene could be 1950, or 1850, 1750, or even, perhaps 1650" but he reveals that this scene is actually the opening shot of a documentary made in 1988 about the Louisiana State Penitentiary titled *The Farm*. From these origins we are currently met with the socio-political conditions of North America which exceptionalizes and "others," and depersonalizes Black people -- a process rooted in slavery.

What Price, Davis and others show is that today's systems of state power and control in North America not only reflect the Afterlife of slavery but actively perpetuate it. While the strategies of racist and sexist subjugation may have evolved in our contemporary systems, they remain alive and can be identified as the direct legacies of slavery. The carceral system is a saturated microcosm of this legacy and reflects slavery's practices in that it "facilitates sexual violence against captive people, group humiliation, and the rending of kin."[175] It is within this context that Saidiya Hartman's writing emerges and within which Said's life was lived. In the following subsection, I will offer a synthesis and analysis of the legacies of Islam as it was practiced by enslaved African Muslims like Omar ibn Said to link this to today's carceral system in North America.

Islam and enslaved African Muslims

[172] Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete* (Seven Stories Press, 2013), 25
[173] Davis, 28
[174] Davis, 29
[175] Price, 89

Sylviane Diouf asserts that Islam did not survive slavery in its traditional form and speculates that this might account for the lack of scholarship on Islam and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. She takes her analysis further and lists many reasons why Islam did not "survive," one of which was its inability to grow vertically. Here, she explains that Islam was not transmitted to practicing Muslims' children because slavery prevented the perpetuation of enslaved families. Other reasons include language barriers and differences in culture or religions among enslaved Africans; low fertility rates; high infant and adult mortality rates; and the imbalance between the number of African males and females deported from the continent.[176] She, nevertheless, highlights the impact of Islam's legacy in today's Black North American and Caribbean cultures. [177] Diouf documents some of the ways that Muslim Africans resisted their bondage, despite being torn from family and kin. "They continued to pray, fast, be charitable, read, write, help one another, sing their lonesome tunes."[178] And, as we know, they continued to write their lives, recite interventionary Surahs, write bismillah atop their life writings, and most importantly they continued to witness.

In her book, *Servants of Allah,* Diouf outlines the role of Islam in the daily lives of African Muslim slaves. Though slaves were forced into horrible and inhumane conditions, Islam became a source of faith for many of them as they still dedicated themselves to upholding the five pillars of Islam in some form or the other. In fact, Diouf argues that though they had to keep their faith secret, they also maintained certain values that are religious in nature, such as their 'choice' of garments—they mainly all wore white, their names, their silver rings and bracelets for protection, and their literacy. She notes that "[some Muslims] were using their Arabic literacy to discreetly write religious and secular manuscripts in which they clearly identified themselves as Muslims."[179] Thus, African Muslims maintained their faith both privately—in that they secretly recited surahs, prayed, or wrote in Arabic—and publicly—in that they wore white garments and silver jewelry in ways that distinguished them from other non-Muslim Africans.

Diouf then traces modern practices, beliefs, and rituals in Black American communities to Islam. She offers examples of Black Americans who revealed that their southern grand-parents or great-grandparents had instructed them to wash their feet before praying, before going to bed,

[176] Diouf, 252-53
[177] Diouf, 251-252
[178] Diouf, 283
[179] Diouf, 258

and before going to church. She notes that this habit or practice is linked, "to the Muslims' ablutions. The memory was there, but the ritual had transformed. Muslims do not wear shoes in mosques and since Christians do in their places of worship, [they] acted in accordance with their religion but still kept in mind the principles (clean feet) learned by Muslim forebears."[180] The habit of washing your feet before entering a place of worship is transmitted from one generation to the next without much of an explanation—in that the practice was not explicitly framed as part of Islam or their Muslim lineage or heritage. The act itself is evidence of Islam leaving traces in the practices and habits of descendants, but the lack of context is also a legacy of Islam. Part of being Muslim and enslaved meant not explicitly communicating the origins of these practices and silently passing them on.

Language is another recipient of the legacy of Islam. Arabic expressions and words were the subjects of songs in the plantations and later found their way in the genres of jazz and blues.

> Muslims have a repertoire of religious songs and recitations from the Qur'an, consisting of the chanting of the *Surahs* [...] The traits that distinguish it are found in the call to prayer, which the muezzin sings five times a day, every day of the year. It is a simple melody with long, decorated, swooping notes [...] This style has influenced the traditional music of West African Muslims, who have incorporated these techniques and the melodic element particular to Islamic music into their creations.[181]

She analyses the rhythm and elongated notes that are produced both in the reading of the Qur'an and the call to prayer to investigate the roots of contemporary blues. Through the works of Samuel Charters, a Blues expert who produced a study called *The Roots of the Blues: An African Search*, Diouf notes the musical particularities of the blues which confirm the speculation that it is indeed a genre that uses the same vocal and instrumental techniques as African Islamic-derived music. Thus, while Islam has not survived slavery in the explicit transmittance of Islamic traditions and beliefs named as such, it has survived in the culture and music of descendants today -- one of which is music.

There are various legacies today that can be traced back to Islam. Music, habits, and practices in contemporary Black American culture is heavily influenced by the Islam that traveled over the Atlantic. While Islam has penetrated the everyday habits of subsequent

[180] Diouf, 280
[181] Diouf, 272

generations, the Middle Passage and slavery can also be found today as it effectively penetrates structures as well. It is no coincidence that Islam would leave traces in people, their stories, and life whereas the Middle Passage would leave its traces in structures, systems, and power.

They Ask for Documentation, We Give them Islam

When investigating the legacies of Islam post-slavery, Diouf writes "it is remarkable that among the thousands of slave testimonies recorded in the United States, there is nothing but silence concerning the Muslims: no description of their particular rituals, comments about their habits, mention of their religion or of their eagerness to share it."[182] She explains that a reason for that may be that practitioners simply did not speak about the particularities of Islam to their non-Muslim counterparts. Here, she references the 1837 autobiography of Charles Ball, a man who escaped slavery, where he recounts in detail the story of an enslaved man who used to pray five times a day in a language he did not recognize. She cites the following passage from his autobiography: "I knew several [Africans] who must have been, from what I have since learned, Mohamedans, though at that time I had never heard of the religion of Mohamed."[183]

She extrapolates from this and draws several conclusions. The first is that Muslims did not share details of their religion nor were they invested in spreading their religion by facilitating conversions among other enslaved Africans. The second assumption she makes is that enslaved African Muslims were more invested and interested in maintaining their own religious identity and chose to devote their time and energy to practicing religious tasks. Finally, she extrapolates that the intentional silence that Muslims practiced could be a precautionary measure in fear that captors would retaliate against the spread of Islam by enslaved Africans.

All these reasons and many more, some of which I highlighted in the previous section, contribute to why there are so many silences regarding the lives and stories of enslaved African Muslims and may account for the absence of an Islamic legacy. However, the practice of intentional silence became a legacy of Islam. Approximately one hundred and twenty-three years later, during the sixties and seventies in the United States, the media systematically misrepresented the Nation of Islam (NOI) and Islam more broadly. In response to this, Muslims in the NOI repeated that "Those who say don't know, and those who know don't say." Garrett

[182] Diouf, 256
[183] Diouf, 256

Felber, scholar on twentieth-century Black American social movements and the carceral state, published a book by the same name—*Those Who Know Don't Say: The Nation of Islam, the Black Freedom Movement, and the Carceral State*—in which he maps various Muslim organizing within the framework of Black liberation as situated in the carceral system. Felber explains that the aphorism refers to the fact that, at the time, a number of journalists, scholars, and state officials had effectively positioned themselves as experts on Islam to account for its impressive spread across the country. He also notes that the phrase references how, "Muslims in the NOI who engaged in an anti-colonial, antiracist, and anti-carceral religious movement despite the external labels assigned to them often remained strategically silent regarding their political engagement."[184] I propose that we consider this silence which Muslims in the NOI collectively engaged in as a further legacy of Islam.

Felber's book is an investigation into what he terms to be the "dialectics of discipline" which played out intensely in prisons, courtrooms, and the public, especially in the height of hyper surveillance of Black and Muslim subjects during the Black Freedom Movement in the United States. Felber categorizes the silence that is practiced and encapsulated by the words he uses as his book's title as a mode of self-discipline practiced both on the individual and collective levels. The rapid politicization and radicalization of prisoners via the spread of Islam in carceral systems produced a web of state surveillance which monitored, registered, and documented Muslim rituals and daily life.[185] Thus, the silence of Muslim prisoners was strategic and [beneficial], but most importantly it sought to maintain a dual reputation for incarcerated Muslims, once again echoing something that Diouf notes was occurring during slavery. Prior to the hyper surveillance which emerged with the rise of Black Nationalism and then intensified with the War on Terror, incarcerated Muslims were "rarely mentioned; [and if] they were noticed at all, they seemed to be regarded with curiosity [...] and reported to have been [the] best prisoners in every respect."[186] This reputation as being the model prisoners—partly due to the self-discipline and immaculate or modest dress—existed alongside a more radical reputation. In

[184] Garrett Felber, *Those Who Know Don't Say: The Nation of Islam, the Black Freedom Movement, and the Carceral State* (University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 8
[185] Felber, 54
[186] Felber, 24-25

fact, incarcerated Muslims often organized and led "protests, hunger strikes, sit-ins, takeovers of solitary confinement, and organized prison litigation."[187]

This dual identity of embodying a modest identity that made them invisible while also being at the forefront of rebellions or resistance that made them hyper visible is facilitated by this silence. I am drawing on Diouf's analysis of enslaved African Muslims as retaining their identity silently through "their dress, diet, names, rituals, schools, and imported religious items and books" [188] while also maintaining a strong sense of community. Both contexts of enslavement and incarceration replicate conditions of estrangement which allow subjects to embody both discipline but also a strong sense of justice. Indeed, just as Diouf analyses the tentative ways in which enslaved African Muslims retained their identities she also notes that they were at the forefront of slave rebellions.[189] In emphasizing the role of Islam in the disobedience or rebelliousness that legislators would later seek to correct, Diouf writes:

> Islam was a galvanizing force [that] reinforced a sense of self-worth in human beings who were brutalized and constantly humiliated [...] To be a Muslim meant to be part of a close-knit upwardly mobile community that looked after its members, offered them diverse activities and services, and was charitable and well organized. It was a world in itself [...] that did not depend on the slaveholders' view of the world.[190]

I am highlighting this passage in particular because it is at the crux of why Islam was so important to enslaved Africans in retaining individual identities beyond their enslavement and how it informed their rebellions and resistance. It is not surprising then that decades later, on the same land where captives were brutalized and dehumanized, which is currently governed by racist and oppressive political and ideological systems, Islam would retain such a role. Indeed, incarcerated Muslim people and communities have provided "classes, mentorship programs, study groups, and "manhood training" that teach inmates respect for women, responsible sexual behavior, drug prevention, and life-management skills."[191]

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[187] Felber, 53-54
[188] Diouf, 282
[189] Diouf, 211
[190] Diouf, 210
[191] Hisham Aidi, "Jihadis in the Hood: Race, Urban Islam, and the War on Terror" in *Warfare in the American Homeland: Policing and Prison in a Penal Democracy* edited by James Joy, et al. (Duke University Press, 2007), 227

I am drawing comparisons between enslaved African Muslims' relationship with Islam and incarcerated Muslims' relationship with Islam more than ten decades later in order to illustrate how Islam has inherited the ability to be silent and articulate simultaneously. In both contexts, being Muslim is a lifestyle that incorporates modest dress, discipline, and model behavior while also being an impetus for liberation and resistance. Embodying and practicing silence as a mode of protection means that there is very little documentation on Muslim communities that were enslaved and why despite the overflow of media and press representation on incarcerated Muslims, these depictions were seen as inauthentic.

Neither community necessarily explicitly spoke about Islam in the way we might expect them to, but it nonetheless informs their own identities and ability to articulate liberation. As a practicing Muslim, an enslaved person could not accept bondage or anything less than freedom and as an incarcerated Muslim, they could not accept discriminatory, racist, and Islamophobic retaliation from state officials, prison guards, or the press. I am making these comparisons not to compare the slave trade with incarceration, though these comparisons have already been made. I am reading side-by-side two different spaces and times where Islam carried possibilities to resist against unspeakable acts of violence and against unspeakability itself. Where enslaved and incarcerated communities are estranged from their respective homes and are witnesses to unspeakable violence, they are also themselves deemed by the society around them unspeakable. They thus become inaudible, disaffected, and invisible subjects. Islam in these contexts then becomes a vehicle of resistance, identity, community, and strength.

They Ask for Witnesses, We Give them Islam

As demonstrated in the life writing of Omar Ibn Said, and even under conditions of abjection and bondage, silence is not permanent. Indeed, Said uses subtext and Islamic texts to convey messages that he does not or cannot explicitly write. Said's life writing practices an intentional or strategic silence wherein he deliberately refuses to or simply chooses not to speak on certain events that we know he must have experienced, namely the Middle Passage, either to convey how unspeakable the journey was or simply because he did not want to. My analyses work to challenge the misconception that for the world to know something, we must be offered testimonies by witnesses. Here, I recall my analyses of witnessing above wherein I use Islam as a framework to better understand how it operates. Specifically, I focus on the belief that all things

will be known in the Afterlife and all living things will testify to all deeds, both good and bad, that have occurred on earth. In this sense, under Islam, every living thing is a witness and will be compelled to testify in the Afterlife.

My analysis of witnessing during the Middle Passage above then is a premise for the analyses that follow. If, we are currently living in the Afterlife of slavery (as the works of M. Nourbese Philips, Maya Angelou, Saidiya Hartman, and Christina Sharpe show): would that not mean that currently all living things are compelled to testify to the truth? This is precisely the impetus for how incarcerated Muslims in the sixties and seventies used the courtroom as a battlefield for their liberation and their testimonies as a vehicle for the truth. Garret Felber's analysis of the dialectics of discipline includes an in-depth examination of Muslim prisoners' writ writing and testimonial evidence as a means of articulating their identities but also as a means of fighting against the carceral system. I locate the act of testifying as rooted in slavery and the Middle Passage more broadly, specifically in the way that being a witness and having the ability to testify against something is a radical protest against the systems of violence.

Felber quotes a number of incarcerated Muslims, and also Muslims outside of the carceral system, who compared the relationship between the incarcerated witness and the court as a battleground. Using the metaphor of war—wherein the court is a battlefield and prisoner, and prison administrators are engaged in combat—is a powerful way of framing a seemingly bureaucratic process. It also allows us to better understand how testimonies are weapons, not just a legal necessity. "Muslim testimony broke through the long silence around prisoners' constitutional rights," writes Felber when analysing the radical transformation that Muslim prisoners set in motion when they began using the court as a political platform to make critiques of American racial liberal democracy and the carceral system.[192] Gelber introduces a specific trial as an example to better analyse the way in which the concept of witnessing in the carceral system replicates the conditions of Islam and the Middle Passage.

In Queens, New York in 1958, police detectives arrived at Malcolm X's doorstep when he was absent and forced their way into the duplex he shared with his wife and other Muslim tenants. The detectives falsely identified themselves as FBI agents and employed brute force to enter the house. They broke the window glass, stuck their gun in the door, and fired point blank grazing one of the tenant's legs. They then broke into each room including Malcolm's office.

[192] Felber, 83

They knocked one of the tenants down, kicked him in the groin and side, and tore his clothes off. Felber explains that by the time the arrests were made, over forty Muslims and members of the NOI had already arrived at the precinct station where they held a silent protest outside. I propose we treat this silence as an inherited form of protest from the Middle Passage, employed in the contemporary period. The trial for this case of police brutality opened in March of 1959 and it was documented that every day the courtroom was "filled in an orderly fashion by NOI members [who were distinguished] by their closely shaven heads, white shirts, and scarlet ties and the women by the white kerchiefs over their heads."[193] Even more remarkable, Felber notes "was the [NOI's] disciplined control of the courtroom as a physical space." He points to the nearly four hundred protesters who were also gathered outside the courthouse in complete silence and cites local media and press who described the sight as "disturbingly calm."

Another important distinction is that the NOI brought their own stenographer to record the court's proceedings in addition to presenting stacks of evidence such as "photographs, scale drawings of the home drawn [...] and even the green door which once hung at the front of their home and bears the marks of struggle and gunfire."[194] Felber situates this court case as being one of the first of many wherein physical testimonies are used as a strategy to put police violence on display. This same strategy was used in protest with the assassination of Fred Hampton in his apartment in West Side Chicago. The Black Panthers documented via videography the blood-soaked mattress and the bullet riddled wall behind his bed and this video was used as physical evidence to testify to his assassination.

My analysis of witnessing in the Middle Passage in earlier chapters emphasized the role of the Afterlife as being a precipitator for the testimonial offerings of all living things. In this way, the Afterlife produces testimonies and witnesses that would otherwise be silent in life. I am extending this argument to the contemporary moment, given that we are currently still living in the Afterlife of slavery, to reveal the ways in which testimonies were indeed produced and instrumentalized to get at the truth.

They Ask for Liberation, We Give Them Islam

[193] Felber, 99
[194] Felber, 99

In this final section of the chapter, I explore how Islam offers a vision of liberation, specifically within the site of the carceral system. Hisham Aidi's piece, "Jihadis in the Hood: Race, Urban Islam, and the War on Terror," lays the groundwork for thinking through Islam as a form of resistance and a threat to nation-states. Aidi uses two key events to structure his essay--the first is the capture of John Walker Lindh, a Black nationalist-turned-Taliban fighter, and the arrest of Brooklyn-born Puerto Rican former gang member José Padilla who converted to Islam while incarcerated.[195] Aidi explains the role of Islam in forming and fomenting resistance under conditions of total surveillance, entrapment, and immobility. As I show in Chapter One of this thesis, these are the same conditions — among many others — that helped shape, produce, and maintain the Middle Passage. Aidi opens his article by addressing the fallacy that Muslim states and Islamist group have historically targeted Black Americans "to lobby the U.S government or to recruit them in wars overseas."[196] He explains that this is a tactic to further alienate and position Islam and their practioners, as a direct oppositionary to the U.S and its values. Aidi notes the irony in this statement specifically since it is the "wretched social and economic conditions of the inner city, and in the face of government apathy [that] Muslim organizations [operate] in the ghetto and prisons deliver materially."[197]

Aidi, as well as numerous others, including, famously, Malcolm X, have stated, that Islam has a way of appealing to disenfranchised communities. This is partly why, according to John Curtin and Paul Carvalho's 2007 documentary *Islam Behind Bars*, "in prisons, across the United States, Britain and Canada, Islam is the fastest growing religion behind bars. In U.S. jails, almost half of all inmates are black and a third of those black prisoners are now Muslim."[198] Islam often becomes a gravitational force toward which disenfranchised people move in prisons. When speaking on why Black Latino youths and adults feel directionless, Hisham Aidi specifies the conditions of estrangement that these communities feel: "Estranged from the United States, and in the case of Latinos from their parents' homelands, many minority youths search for a

[195] Aidi, 219
[196] Aidi, 223
[197] Aidi, 226
[198] *Islam Behind Bars,* directed by John Curtin, Paul Carvalho, Produced by Kaos Productions Inc. (Filmakers Library, 2007)

sense of community and identity in a quest that has increasingly led them to the other side of the Atlantic, to the Islamic world."[199]

This passage is important to understanding the gravitational pull of Islam for several reasons. First, Aidi's use of the word "estrangement" recalls Saidiya Hartman's use of the same word, and the same sentiment expressed by Omar ibn Said. Both of their life writings emphasize the role of estrangement in their own lives; Hartman as feeling estranged from her land and Said as being estranged from his kin. Indeed, estrangement is a condition of the Middle Passage that has continued to be perpetuated today, as seen in Aidi's own study. Second, Aidi's reference to the Atlantic is relevant to what I have been arguing throughout this thesis. While he is not referring to the Black Atlantic or the Middle Passage specifically, the symbolism is potent, nonetheless. He suggests that subjects who feel estranged and seek a sense of community or identity are often led to the other side of the Atlantic. In the case of Black Americans, like Saidiya Hartman, it is the Atlantic that provoked their estrangement and it seems fitting that they must return to it to seek belonging. In fact, that is precisely what Hartman ends up doing and narrating in *Lose your Mother*; though in a way she does not find the kinship she was looking for. She does, however, find a deeper understanding of the world as it operates upon the axis of the unspeakable.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate the ways in which Islam -- when operating in conditions of confinement -- has the capacity to resist depersonalization and disrupt the unspeakability. I use Sylviane Diouf's assertion in *Servants of Allah* that Islam did not survive slavery to elaborate some of the ways we could identify how Islam today retains the transcendent capacity to resist. I use the carceral system as a site of investigation. The first section of this chapter, "Legacies of Islam and the Middle Passage," introduces the carceral system as a legacy of the Middle Passage and the ability for Muslims under this system to resist as a legacy of Islam. I propose that there are two different mechanisms of the production of this legacy that occur simultaneously. On one hand, we have the Middle Passage which has effectively laid the groundwork upon which structures of power are built—meaning that they replicate and mirror the conditions of estrangement, abjection, and depersonalization that were first produced by the

[199] Aidi, 225

Middle Passage. On the other hand, we have Islam as practiced by captives to retain their identities, to rebel and to resist. This use of Islam has also produced a mechanism of legacy production that is triggered when it finds itself in similar conditions. This legacy of witnessing, documenting, and liberating is not passed down to or retained by structures, but to individuals, to collectives, and to ontologies.

I begin by synthesizing and analysing the works of Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Sharryn Aiken, Simone Browne, Joshua Price, and Angela Davis all of which investigate, outline, and analyse the ways in which our contemporary understanding and systems of regulation, migration, control, citizenship, and criminality are rooted in slavery. This serves as a premise for my use of the carceral system as a site of analysis for this chapter. Next, I return to Sylviane Diouf's *Servants of Allah* to briefly show how her analysis of Islamic legacies are seen today in the everyday lives of enslaved Africans' descendants. She argues that clothing, silver rings, ablutions, and the adhan have all become legacies of Islam. She gives examples of Black Americans whose grandparents or great-grandparents practiced forms or versions of Islamic practices without necessarily presenting it as such. These examples and analyses serve my own argument that Islam's legacies are often silently retained and passed on -- an instrumentalization of the unspeakability I analyse throughout the thesis

In the second section, "They Ask for Documentation, We Give Them Islam," I explore the movement of documentation and its silences from slavery to incarceration. I use Diouf's work to identify how enslaved African Muslim engaged in strategic silence to be inconspicuous and to be able to practice their religion without fear of repercussion from their captors. This produces what Diouf describes as a remarkable silence concerning enslaved Muslims in the thousands of slave testimonies recorded in the United States. Despite this documented silence, enslaved Muslims did stand out every now and then, specifically in their leading of various rebellions. I juxtapose enslaved Africans' practice of silence as a weapon with the documentation and practice of silence that incarcerated Muslims engage in, in the contemporary. Operating almost in parallel with one another, incarcerated Muslims repeated the phrase "those who know don't say" to refer to the practice of intentional silence to strategically protect themselves and their communities. I also analyse the way in which incarcerated Muslims were seen both as model prisoners, specifically in their attire and well-mannered behavior which is reminiscent of the how enslaved Muslims would distinguish themselves from their non-Muslim counterparts, as

well as being at the forefront of rebellions or resistance. This dual, contradicting identity was embodied by enslaved Muslims and is also embodied by incarcerated Muslims today.

The third section titled “They Ask for Witnesses, We Give Them Islam” illustrates the use of testimonies, physical evidence, and witnesses by the Nation of Islam and by incarcerated Muslims as a legacy of Islam as it operated in the Middle Passage. I recall my previous analysis of witnessing which in an Islamic framework would compel all living things to testify to all that which remained unknown, unspeakable, or inaudible in our lifetimes. I situate incarcerated Muslims as currently inhabiting the Afterlife of slavery, it then follows that they would be compelled to testify. Garrett Felber offers an example of a court case in 1958 New York which exemplifies the practice of collective silence, the use of physical evidence, and the instrumentalizing of the court as a space of liberation. Finally, the last section “They Ask for Liberation, We Give Them Islam,” I conclude that Islam becomes a gravitational pull for the incarcerated, the bondaged, and the oppressed both within the Middle Passage and beyond.

Conclusion

After reading, analysing, and working with many different writings about the Middle Passage, I find myself returning to, thinking about, and contemplating the sea as an archive once more. While my initial enchantment with the sea as a site was always transformative and personal, I am now contemplating it through the many concepts that I explore throughout this thesis. I can see more clearly now how the water, while seemingly weightless, actually holds the weight of many lives and lifetimes.

I was initially drawn to Saidiya Hartman's investigation of the sea and the Middle Passage because of its format as a book that blends the genres of memoir, novel, and historical text in unique ways. While I learned, felt, and thought just as much when engaging with the other scholars, poets, and historians' works, I could not deny the personal impact of life writing or autobiographies as a vehicle to tell histories and stories. Hartman's life writing to me is compelling, ethereal, and deep. This is precisely where my first intervention is located: the particular value of life writing as a vehicle for truth-telling. I argue that in a context of extreme death and violence, life resists traditional forms of documentation that are usually utilized and are better captured through individual life stories. This led me to work with other life writings by Maya Angelou, Frederick Douglass, and of course, Omar ibn Said. While I touch on all of these life writings in my analyses here, I chose Omar ibn Said's short Arabic manuscript titled *Omar's Life*, as a major site of investigation, because in addition to its unique presence in the scholarship of autobiographical writings, I found its obvious connections to Islam compelling. It also pushed me to revisit Hartman's life writing with a fresh perspective — one that urged me to look for the role of spirituality and the mystical as a vehicle for the unspeakable.

It is within the comparison between Hartman's and Said's work where Islam becomes a marker for speakability that my second intervention in this thesis is located. Islam gave enslaved subjects such as Omar ibn Said the words with which to speak about life and death — and unspeakability — in that Islam's porous state allows it to inherit and later become a marker of unspeakeable subjects. These interventions, combined, all work to meet my purpose of establishing connections, dialogues, and points of tensions between life writings as testimonies for the unspeakable and Islam as a way of challenging unspeakability. Putting Saidiya Hartman's multi-genre work in dialogue with Omar ibn Said's short Arabic manuscript written one hundred

and seventy-six years before, allows me to draw out and contemplate the Afterlife of the Middle Passage whilst also centering the sea as a site that facilitated and resisted it.

Chapter One, "Islam, Slavery, and Unspeakability" lays the theoretical and methodological groundwork for the rest of the study. In it, I outline my methodological approach which includes literary analyses, syntheses of scholarship, and contextualized close readings of my objects of study. I begin by offering definitions for terms that I use throughout my thesis such as "unspeakability," which I have defined here as something too horrible to speak about as well as something that is literally unspoken; "death-making," defined as that which invokes the production of or acceleration of death as related to slave-making; and "life-making" as a paradigm that treats life writings, spirituality, and forms of resistance as producing and preserving life itself. I also provide a synthesis of works that document slavery and the Middle Passage through the works of Sylviane Diouf, Stephanie Smallwood, Derek Walcott, Toni Morisson, and discuss theoretical interventions by Heonik Kwon and Samera Esmeir. Through this scholarship, I aim to challenge the idea that the truth could only be legible or disseminated through documentation that is deemed "official" or "legitimate." Instead, I argue that the truth is often better understood through testimonies, speculation, and fiction.

Chapter Two, titled "The Sea, the Sea, the Sea," opens with an extract from Derek Walcott's poem titled "The Sea is History" which exemplifies many of its ideas. In this chapter, I position the sea as witness to crimes that we will never concretely know of, as a mass grave, as a site of movement, and as a bridge between life and death. I begin by offering a molecular breakdown of water to build a metaphor of bondage and resistance. Using the principle of unification as a reference, my analysis of intermolecular and intramolecular bonds helps frame water as a vehicle that resists the Middle Passage. The rest of the chapter emphasizes the role of imagination and speculation as a means of extracting life from lifeless documentation. I do this through an analysis of M. Nourbese Philip's *Zong!* — a collection of poems composed exclusively from the words in the *Gregson v Gilbert* court transcript documenting the crimes that occurred on the Zong slave ship. Philip's *Zong!* reveals the role of imagination and speculation in uncovering the truth of things that are unspeakable in other ways—like the Middle Passage. In this chapter, I provide an analysis of her poetry and how it ties into the politics of remembrance, storytelling, and truth. I connect this to Islamic understandings of witnessing to complicate our

understandings of who or what can be a witness to crimes and how their testimonies can be accessed when the witnesses cannot speak.

Chapter Three, "To Build a Life around the Word and the World" contains the central literary and textual analyses of my thesis. In this chapter, I closely examine what kind of truths, lives, and stories life writings can offer us. Here, I provide a close reading of Saidiya Hartman's multigenre work, *Lose your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007); and Ala Alryyes' edition of Omar ibn Said's life narrative, *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar ibn Said* (2011), which includes a contextual prelude by the editor. Both these life writings preserve life stories that have previously either resisted official documentation or deemed unworthy of documentation while also producing and being produced by unspeakability in that they both fail to speak on or are unable to speak on certain truths.

I begin by providing important context to Omar ibn Said's life as a Muslim West African scholar who lived in Futa Toro and his forced capture and enslavement in the Americas. His identity as a Muslim is important because it is through the spread of Islam that Said is literate and therefore can write his life. I closely analyse and speculate the meaning of opening his life writing with the words *bismillah al-rahman al-rahim* and continuing with surah al-Mulk. I argue that they are choices that resist slavery and subjugation. I also analyse the role of language in the articulation of truth, specifically by placing his life writing in the genre of slave narratives and complicating what it means for something to be authentic or truthful in these contexts. I argue that as a literary genre, slave narratives are often explicit and graphic as opposed to Said's signature tentative and suggestive language. The second half of the chapter is focused on making connections between this and Saidiya Hartman's *Lose your Mother* by analysing the role of kinship, estrangement, and belonging in both texts. I close the chapter by highlighting the many ways that both life writings invoke the sea in their attempts to make legible or audible that which is unspeakable.

Chapter Four, is titled "They Ask for Life, We Give them Only the Sea" — a line borrowed from M. Nourbese Philip's *Zong!*. This short chapter is an examination of the material ways in which the Afterlife of the Middle Passage persists to this day. I begin by providing a synthesis of works that explore the legacies of slavery through structures of law, migration, and incarceration by providing a brief synthesis of work by Simone Browne, Sharryn J. Aiken, Saidiya Hartman, and Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez Their works analyse migration

regulations as racially coded, structurally racist systems that stem from the Middle Passage. I then follow by analysing the prison industrial complex as singular mechanism that to this day perpetuates and reflects the Afterlife of slavery through the works of Joshua M. Price, Angela Y. Davis, and Garrett Felber. I conclude my analysis by pointing out that enslaved and incarcerated communities, while not comparable, are both estranged from their respective homes and are witnesses to unspeakable violence, while also themselves being viewed as unspeakable, in that they are inaudible, disaffected, and invisible. In that way, Islam becomes a vehicle for resistance, identity, and truth.

I propose that treating the sea as an archive might allow us to find truths, stories, and lives that have long been buried, silenced, and forgotten. Saidiya Hartman and Omar ibn Said's life writings are only two examples of the ways the sea can hold a human life. Hartman's sense of loss and estrangement while visiting the slave routes is interrupted by the sound of the ocean and her own imagination. Indeed, when the sound of the ocean overwhelms her system, her mind almost immediately remembers and recounts the story of a slave ship wherein a young, enslaved woman was murdered. The ocean coaxes stories out of Hartman and pushes her to imagine. In contrast, Said does not speak of the sea, despite having undergone a presumably unspeakable voyage during the Middle Passage, except for a single line "There came to a country a big army [...] it took me and walked me to the big Sea [...] we sailed in the big Sea for a month and a half." The emphasis on the sea being big without any other detail about a voyage known to be perilous suggests that Said is deliberately avoiding speaking about the sea. Despite this, the sea still becomes a marker for his life before his ontological death, and eventually his physical death.

The sea contains lives, lifetimes, and stories — many of which have been written down, speculated about, fictionalized, and imagined. This thesis is but one of the many explorations beyond and within the waters that have marked, shaped, and facilitated death and life.

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