Focusing on foundational texts by figures such as Olaudah Equiano, Mary Prince, and Frederick Douglass, scholars have traditionally viewed the New World slave narrative as a literary genre genealogically linked to Protestant spiritual autobiography and the picaresque novel. While over the past decades interdisciplinary Africana studies have increasingly excavated the presence of African Muslims within the archive of slave narratives, less has been done to think through the specifically literary implications of Muslim slave narratives. This material, penned by slaves or their amanuenses in Arabic, English, French, and Portuguese, and distributed quite evenly around the Americas, appearing in Canada, the United States, Panama, Jamaica, Trinidad, and Brazil, lays out a Global South Atlantic field of literary production whose formal and philosophical influences radically reorient the foundational genres and geographies of New World Black literature.

In particular, Arabic sources such as The Thousand and One Nights, the eleventh-century Maqamat of al-Hariri, fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Maghrebi epistles of captivity, and the classical Arabic sira or exemplary life story, in conjunction with Orientalist textual, ethnographic, and mercantile mediations, fashion a literary formation that displaces Protestant

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spiritual autobiography and the Spanish picaresque novel as privileged origin, while asserting greater centrality to the Caribbean basin and the Senegambia region as formal and philosophical engines of the African diasporic literary tradition. Furthermore, the narratives of Job ben Solomon/Ayuba Suleiman Ibrahima Diallo, Prince/Ibrahima Abd al-Rahman Jallo, and Abu Bakr al-Siddiq foreground a liminal time and space constituted by the experience of administrative detention, of the expired visa, of deportation, and of repatriation.

These avant la lettre experiences proffer Muslim slave narratives as generative forebears of transnational, multicultural literature in both England and the United States—anticipating Global South Atlantic literary crossings with multiple diasporic and postcolonial traditions—yet forebears consistently marked in their own time and subsequently by an aggressively racist dialectic of amnesia and surprise. We can also detect in their enduring oscillation between obscurity and legibility, and in our own efforts to assemble the dispersed traces these Global South Atlantic forebears left behind in Brazilian, Canadian, English, Jamaican, Panamanian, Trinidadian, and US newspapers, letters, ledgers, and legal documents, a strategic archival reticence that vexes even as it structures the archive of the Global South Atlantic. The transoceanic subjects who deposited their traces in this archive rendered tangible, against multiple forces of erasure, shared networks of language, trade, education, religion, and discursive self-fashioning; and they also defiantly withdrew, at long last, into an opacity that delimits our own archival task.

The Muslim slave has made scattered appearances in Anglophone fiction. A small selection of nineteenth-century novels explore the figure of the Muslim slave in the United States, from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Dred, A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp (1856) to Joel Chandler Harris’s The Story of Aaron, So Named, the Son of Ben Ali (1896). Alex Haley’s Roots (1976) and Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon (1977) famously stage the recovery of Muslim ancestry for twentieth-century readers. Whereas the former texts rely on an exotic Orientalism that dissociates African Muslims from the mainstream of the African American population, the latter texts attempt to weave Islam into a common, if often reticent and obscured, ancestral fabric. Yet despite their concern with figures genealogically linked to the Arab-Islamic culture of West Africa, neither set of texts formally appropriate Arab-Islamic literature as an intertextual influence.

The punning title of Guadeloupean writer Daniel Maximin’s 1995 novel L’île et une nuit, on the other hand, anticipates a suspenseful night of vernacular storytelling formally linked to Les milles et une nuit. As a hurricane
approaches Guadeloupe, the narrator-protagonist Marie-Gabrielle braces herself for the anticipated storm at dawn by recounting in tale, in song, and on the phone, the story of her life, her island, and her spiritual universe. Maximin figures creolité under the sign of Scheherazade, whose “nocturnal poetics” of survival highlight the discursive and material subordination of this française d’outre-mer (Ghazoul 1996). In narrating New World creolization through Scheherazade, Maximin taps a long-lived imperial incitement to make the African diasporic subject speak, to narrate, to offer a story for a life.

A story for a life: The shadow of Scheherazade’s macabre transaction hangs over enslaved Muslim textuality, in particular, as it intersects with European Orientalist possession of and enthrallment to The Thousand and One Nights. This intersection emerges irresistibly in the story of Job ben Solomon, or Ayuba Suleiman Ibrahima Diallo. Son of a “High Priest” of Bundu, north of the Gambia River, Job belonged to a class of “Muslim clerics with mercantile interests” (Curtin 1967, 37). Sent by his father in 1730 to trade with an English vessel recently docked on the Gambia, specifically to sell two slaves and to buy paper, Job could not come to terms with one Captain Pike and continued on to the other side of the river. After selling his two slaves, he was himself abducted by a band of Mande and sold to the very same Captain Pike he had originally failed to reach terms with. Captain Pike gave Job leave to send to his father for ransom, but as the return trip of the letter-bearing messenger took longer than the ship was to remain in port, Job endured the Middle Passage.

Arriving in Maryland, he was set to work on Alexander Tolsey’s tobacco plantation. Unused to physical labor, mocked during his devotions, and “grown in some measure desperate,” his contemporaneous biographer Thomas Bluett writes, Job “resolved to travel at a venture; thinking he might possibly be taken up by some master, who would use him better, or otherwise meet with some lucky accident, to divert or abate his grief, he travelled through the woods, till he came to the County of Kent” (Bluett, in Curtin 1967, 42). Job’s contemporary biographer Douglas Grant notes the particular literary mediation Bluett subjects Job’s broken English tale to; he “introduces Job’s escape as though it was the beginning of a picaresque adventure” that obscures the terror of an unknown wilderness patrolled by bounty-hunting Native Americans and English settlers (Grant 1968, 82). As a curiosity brought out of his jail cell to entertain the county gentlemen in their cups after a day of court, Job wrote and recited lines of Arabic, the lingua franca of West Africa. When he “pronounced the words Allah and Muhammad; by which, and his refusing a glass of wine we offered
him, we perceived he was a Mahometan, but could not imagine of what country he was, or how he got thither; for by his affable carriage, and the easy composure of his countenance, we could perceive he was no common slave” (Bluett, in Curtin 1967, 42).

Here we see one of the first appearances of that dialectic of amnesia and surprise that will mark the histories of African Muslims, in North America in particular, from the eighteenth century to the present. Reading newspaper advertisements for runaway slaves, Michael Gomez argues that throughout the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth, European colonists and their descendants were intimately familiar with the physiological and cultural diversity of African ethnicities (Gomez 1998, 5). Yet in Bluett’s retelling, the gentlemen in Maryland “could not imagine of what country he was, or how he got thither.” Judging by the fact that this group shortly procured the translation services of a Wolof-speaker among the local enslaved population, such information was not so hard to come by. Instead, the repetition of this pattern of ignorance and surprise across centuries suggests that there is some cultural-cognitive block refusing the recognition of African Muslims in the Americas, perhaps rooted in the disjuncture between the status of Islam as a “civilization” and the alleged barbarity of Africans, but to be explored more fully later.

Through the aforementioned Wolof-speaking intermediary, Job revealed the name of his owner, with whom he shortly negotiated better terms on the plantation. Furthermore, by communicating his high station in his native land, he enticed Tolsey and this gathered body of gentlemen to allow him to write once more to his father: “he therefore wrote a letter in Arabick to his father, acquainting him with his misfortunes, hoping he might yet find means to redeem him” (Bluett, in Curtin 1967, 43).

The circulation of this purloined letter would imbricate Job in Orientalist networks of power and pleasure, knowledge and finance. For while addressed to his father in Bundu by care of Captain Pike, the captain’s itineraries consistently failed to line up with the itinerary of the letter, which ended up reaching the deputy governor of the Royal African Company, noted prison-reformer and “philanthropist” James Oglethorpe. Oglethorpe “was so struck by its curiosity and unusual history” that he sent it to John Gagnier, who held Oxford’s Laudian Chair of Arabic. “Oglethorpe,” Grant writes, “was so deeply moved by it and impressed by the sense of its author’s character that he decided without hesitation that such a person could not be left in slavery and must be redeemed . . . In June 1732, Oglethorpe gave his bond for the payment of 45BPS—Job’s purchase price—upon Job being delivered to him in London” (Grant 1968, 85). For
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Henry Louis Gates, the story ends here: “Job Ben Solomon literally wrote his way out of slavery; his literacy, translated into forty-five pounds, was the commodity with which he earned his escape price” (Gates 1989, 13).

Actually, however, as Job recognized at the time, he remained a slave and had merely exchanged Tolsey’s ownership for Oglethorpe’s. The next installment of Job’s narrative turns on reiterated Scheherazadian storytelling performances that would prolong his relative liberty until such time as he could achieve true freedom, a freedom that would be partially enacted by retreating from the prolixity that singled him out among contemporaries and in the archive as “no common slave.”

Bluett, a cleric with the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, traveled with Job from Maryland to England, teaching him English and observing his Muslim practices. He saw him installed in lodgings arranged by Oglethorpe’s factor Henry Hunt, and after a brief trip on his own business he returned to a “very sorrowful” friend: “Mr. Hunt had been applied to by some persons to sell him, who pretended they would send him home; but he feared they would sell him again as a slave, or if they sent him home would expect an unreasonable ransom for him” (Bluett, in Curtin 1967, 44). Job’s tale-bearing prompted Bluett to remove him from these lodgings and to circulate him in the rich merchant circles of Cheshunt, the Orientalist societies of London, and the royal court. In Cheshunt, Job “had the Honour to be sent for by most of the Gentry of that Place, who were mightily pleased with his company, and concerned for his misfortunes” (Bluett, in Curtin 1967, 45). Job’s presence in London, anticipated by the circulation among Orientalists of his Arabic letter to his father, presaged his incorporation into the Gentleman’s Society of Spalding, a preeminent group of intellectuals, antiquarians, and Orientalists including George Sale, translator of the Koran, Sir Hans Sloane, collector of rarities, and Alexander Pope.

Yet even this seemingly advantageous development concealed grave risks for Job’s liberty. Sloane and the others believed that as his owner, the Royal African Company would “behave honourably” toward Job and that “he was, in fact, more secure by being their responsibility” than he would be were he free, and they therefore exerted pressure against efforts to release him from his bond (Grant 1968, 103). Aware of his precarious position, outside of his meetings with scholars and Orientalists, Job tirelessly sent himself out into a world of influential merchants, bankers, and aristocrats who took an interest in the African trade. It is important to remember that Job himself was a merchant, and he played the English desire to gain position over the French in the Senegambian gold and Arabic gum trades to his
advantage (Curtin 1967, 22). Of such social encounters, Bluett records: “In Conversation he was commonly very pleasant; and would every now and then divert the Company with some witty Turn, or pretty Story” (Bluett, in Curtin 1967, 48–49). And in a strange presaging of the fate of Sudan’s lost boys on the fundraising circuit in the West, Grant notes: “He often introduced lions into his conversation, especially when he saw how much they were appreciated” (Grant 1968, 93).\(^3\) Through these narrative seductions, Job soon raised enough funds for the subscription started to purchase his complete freedom from the Royal African Company, with contributors including the Duke of Montague and the Bey of Tunis, reimbursing the Company not only for Job’s purchase price but, outrageously enough, the costs of his upkeep during nearly two years of not-quite-liberty in England.

Both Philip Curtin and Douglas Grant, Job’s preeminent modern biographers, read eighteenth-century interest in Job through the lens of the period’s fascination with the noble savage, especially as embodied in Aphra Behn and Thomas Southerne’s Oroonoko. But whereas Oroonoko militantly sacrifices himself and his beloved in keeping with a tragic code of honor and chastity, Job sustains his relative liberty through acts of refinement, wit, and narrative seduction strongly articulated through Arabic and Islamic traditions (while in England he transcribed from memory three Qur’ans), as well as a keen sense of mercantilism. So while Oroonoko offers one sympathetic European paradigm for the enslaved African in the first half of the eighteenth century, we should remember that at the same moment England was positively stuck on Scheherazade, emblem of a story-cycle trafficked by merchants from East Asia to West Africa, embodying the carnivalesque wisdom literature of the marketplace.

Translations of Antoine Galland’s enormously popular French Les mille et une nuit began to appear in 1706 as The Arabian Nights Entertainment, after which Grub Street editions were continuously republished, and the Orientalist class would certainly have been aware of the on-going French production of Oriental tales including exiled English author Anthony Hamilton’s 1730 Les quatre facardins. It was precisely the Orientalist circles surrounding the Gentleman’s Society of Spalding that pushed hardest to keep Job at hand as a native informant, a Scheherazade harem-ed in Bloomsbury, “to read some of Sir Han’ses stones with [Arabick] characters” and “translating several manuscripts and inscriptions upon medals” (Grant 1968, 100–1; Bluett, in Curtin 1967, 55). On the other hand, with an experienced merchant’s wiles, he lured traders and bankers with promised connections to the interior African trade. He enticed evangelicals and philanthropists with visions of heathens uplifted by means of Western
technology—“a rich gold watch from Her Majesty” and “tools” from the Duke of Montague (Bluett, in Curtin 1967, 57). Job at least persuaded them to allow him to continue serving as a native informant back in his native land, working as a factor for the Royal African Company, and not a very well treated one at that, according to a contentious record in the company’s archives, nickel-and-diming Job once more (Austin 1984, 107). After 1744, no archival trace remains of his connection with the Company, which bankrupt and anachronistic lost its charter in 1750, or with his friends and contacts in England, who by “some witty Turn, or pretty Story . . . were mightily pleased with his company, and concerned for his misfortunes.”

Maximin, we recall, figures black Antillean speech as the speech of Scheherazade, imposed upon and incited by imperial decree, yet seductively turned toward self-preservation. Calling into being a field of Global South Atlantic narrative production before retreating definitively from the network of connections that would have ensured him a more extensive inscription in the archive, Job ben Solomon’s native education, his itinerant occupation, and Orientalist encounters in bondage insinuate Scheherazadian narrative strategies into the repertoire of New World Black literature, to be perused and appropriated by future narrators, enframers, and creole storytellers such as Maximin and Marie-Gabrielle.

Another Caribbean intellectual, Edward Blyden, would elect another protagonist out of the Arabic tradition as a figure of transatlantic diasporic speech, al-Hariri’s Abu Zayd. Originally hailing from Charlotte Amelie, in the Danish West Indian holding of St. Thomas, Blyden took an early interest in things Semitic, studying Hebrew as a teenager with members of the island’s Sephardic community. After impressing a local Methodist mission with his intelligence, and after being denied the opportunity to pursue divinity studies in the United States, he was sent to Liberia to complete his education at Liberia College, where he was soon ordained and took a professorship in classics. Blyden expanded into Orientalist studies, partly out of a desire to refute racist interpretations of the Bible, and partly out of his encounter with the Arab-Islamic culture of West African Muslims.

The eleventh-century Magamat of al-Hariri (1054–1122) emerges as the most important nonsacred work in the portrait of West African letters offered by Blyden in his many writings. These Magamat, along with those of al-Hamadhani, represent the foundational texts of the maqama tradition in Arabic, and subsequently also in Hebrew, Persian, and Syriac. Written in rhymed, rhythmic prose (saj’), maqamat (often translated as “assemblies” or “settings,” “séances” in French) episodically recount the
travels of rhetorically gifted, roguish trickster figures through the social geography of the Islamic world. Blyden’s fondness for the *Maqamat*, as well as for the West African Muslim culture he gained familiarity with in Liberia, prompted him to incorporate al-Hariri into the Anglophone curriculum of Liberia College, thereby bringing it in line with the Arabic curriculum of the Sahel. During senior exams in 1870, Blyden invited “a learned Muslim from Kankan” to sit in as the students read from the Qur’an and the English translation of the French Orientalist Silvestre de Sacy’s edition of the *Maqamat* of al-Hariri:

> Our Mohammedan visitor happened to have with him the whole of the fifty Makamat in elegant manuscript. He followed the students as they read, repeating after them in an undertone. Of course he could not judge of the translation, as he understood not a word of English. I communicated with him in Arabic. After the students had read I requested him to read the same portion, that they might hear his pronunciation. He read in the musical cantilating manner of the East, and the listener who had travelled in these countries might have fancied himself on the banks of the Nile, or on Mount Lebanon. (Blyden 1871, 69–70)

Blyden’s retelling of the learned Muslim from Kankan’s visit to his classroom allows him to double and redouble the figure of the ambulant, cosmopolitan Muslim that so captured his imagination: from al-Hariri’s hero Abu Zayd traveling throughout the Islamic world; to those “African Moslems” who, Blyden observes, “are continually crossing the continent to Egypt, Arabia, and Syria;” and finally to Blyden’s own repetition of those itineraries, alluded to here but documented more fully in his 1873 travelogue *From West Africa to Palestine* (Blyden 1871, 96). West African participation in the umma, or world Islamic community, fosters for Blyden a vision of mobility and intellectualism whose ancient legacy refutes racist erasures of African historicity and cosmopolitanism. It also fueled his own efforts to reconvene scattered Atlantic trajectories in a contemporary West African cosmopolitanism comprising indigenous elements, emigrants to Liberia and Sierra Leone, and “liberated Africans or returned exiles from Cuba and Brazil” that made up one quarter of the population of Lagos during the years that Blyden shuttled between that city, Freetown, and Monrovia (Lynch 1970, 220).

Additionally, Al-Hariri and his hero Abu Zayd provide Arab-Islamic letters with a figure of piercing social analysis and verbal performativity carried forth to the New World in the memories of enslaved Muslims. An 1871 volume, *The People of Africa*, brought Blyden’s revisionist studies of
biblical and classical antiquity, and his early writings on Islam in West Africa, together with Theodore Dwight’s “Condition and Character of Negroes in Africa,” a survey of enslaved Muslims in the United States originally published in 1864. An antislavery activist and founding member of the American Ethnological Society, Dwight’s work with “Omar-ben-Sayeed, long living in Fayetteville, N.C.” helps us expand Blyden’s constellation of al-Hariri with this field of Global South Atlantic literary production (Dwight 1871, 60). Omar ibn Sa’id (1770–1864), a Fulbe from Futa Toro, would gain significant attention when his “autobiography,” composed in Arabic, circulated widely in the 1830s, ’40s, and ’50s. Interest spiked again when this text appeared in translation in the American Historical Review in 1925.

Ibn Sa’id had received extensive education in Arabic before being captured and sold into New World slavery. His letter of 1819 reproduces from memory extensive selections from the Qur’an and the oeuvre of al-Hariri (Hunwick 2003–4, 63–65). His autobiographical letter of 1831 also employs numerous tropes from the epistolary captivity narrative genre prevalent in the Maghreb in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which as Nabil Matar shows in Europe through Arab Eyes, draws extensively on al-Hariri’s maqamat (Matar 2009, 245). Like those captives, ibn Sa’id fashions himself as “someone who went every year to the holy war against the infidels” and who remains “in the Christian land . . . by reason of great necessity” (Hunwick 2003–4, 63). Furthermore, ibn Sa’id’s flight from “a small, weak, and wicked man called Johnson, a complete infidel, who had no fear of God at all;” his subsequent arrest and time “in the great house (which, in the Christian language, they called jail);” and his ultimate deliverance into the hands of Jim Owen, “who never beats me, nor scolds me,” uncannily echoes that of the pícaro Lazarillo de Tormes, whose itinerary took him from the house of a very un-Christian priest to the jail cell from which he offered his life story in an appeal for legal clemency (Dwight 1871, 60–61). As mentioned earlier, scholars have long read the slave narrative as an heir of the picaresque novel, a genealogy accounted for by the place of such texts as Pilgrim’s Progress in Anglo-American, Protestant literacy as well as the problematic narrative frames imposed by white amanuenses such as Thomas Bluett. However, the West African context of ibn Sa’id’s education directs us to the well-documented descent of the picaresque from Arabic maqamat. Ismail el-Outmani for example charts how the “roguish wanderings [apicaradas andanzas]” of the maqamat in al-Andalus “fostered the subversiveness of the picaresque,” a subversiveness accreted in ibn Sa’id’s employment of choice Qur’anic suras to subtly
denounce slavery and demand liberation (El-Outman 1994, 106). Ala Alryyes, for example, suggests that ibn Sa'id's recitation of Surat al-Mulk in the opening of his 1831 narrative denies the legitimacy of slavery: “The *sura* contends that it is God who is the owner of all and everything” (Alryyes 2011, 18).

Dwight and the American Colonization Society were eager to recruit Africans with knowledge of the interior for the success of their mission in Liberia. Yet despite their intervention, and the national renown ibn Sa'id achieved through his Arabic writings, the Owen family refused to manumit him. In this, James Owen resembles Thomas Foster, the owner of another West African Muslim in bondage who achieved national fame in the early nineteenth-century United States, Ibrahima Abd al-Rahman Jallo, also called Prince. In fact, Alryyes wonders whether the same *Surat al-Mulk* with which ibn Sa'id opened his 1831 autobiographical letter might not have worked its way into one of the foundational tracts of African American letters through Abd al-Rahman. Echoing the *sura*, David Walker’s 1828 *Appeal*, a millennial denunciation of slavery, claims that “God Almighty is the sole proprietor” (Alryyes 2011, 18). Alryyes speculates about possible conversations the two men may have had when Walker served as Second Marshal at the Boston gala in honor of Abd al-Rahman, recently released from three decades of bondage in Natchez, Mississippi and en route, as we will see, back to Africa.

Abd al-Rahman’s story, bringing him from the royal house of Futa Jallon to servitude in Natchez, Mississippi, then back to the shores of Africa after a year-long tour of the northern US states, will offer once more a network of Orientalist desires and misrecognitions that allow “Prince” to spin Scheherazadian seductions into the fact of liberation and repatriation. If in the case of Job ben Solomon, the debate over his status *qua* liberty and self-ownership while awaiting repatriation in England raged in small quarters, the heated political context of a nation headed toward civil war raised the stakes of Abd al-Rahman’s status in the interim period between his release from bondage in Natchez and his transport to Liberia. Through the lens of his denunciation in the Southern press as a violator of the contractual terms of his “right of passage,” we can see African Muslims as archival figures presaging the suspect foreigner working on an expired visa, the lifelong undocumented resident trying to salvage the unity of his multigenerational family while under the sword of imminent deportation.

In 1788, a twenty-six-year-old Abd al-Rahman led a military expedition to protect the borders of Futa Jallon, the emergent state ruled by his father, Sori. After an initial victory, he and his men were captured in a surprise
attack and sold into slavery. After transport to Dominica, he ended up on the plantation of the aforementioned Thomas Foster. Abd al-Rahman maintained a strict Muslim dietary code, refraining from pork and alcohol, and also became known for his ethical comportment and leadership. With much of the plantation labor under Abd al-Rahman’s direction, Foster’s plantation flourished and he became one of the leading men of Natchez. Then in 1807, nearly twenty-years since his capture, something extraordinary happened in the streets of Natchez. Abd al-Rahman spotted a one-eyed Irishman, Dr. John Coates Cox, a ship’s surgeon who had fallen ill while hunting on the West African shore in 1781. He was taken in by the aforementioned Sori, king of Futa Jallon. For six months, Dr. Cox convalesced, befriended the royal family, and even took a local wife, before he desired to return to his family in Ireland. Upon seeing Abd al-Rahman in the streets of Natchez, he immediately pressed Thomas Foster to sell him, yet according to Thomas Gallaudet, one of Abd al-Rahman’s friends, benefactors, and biographers, “His master doubted whether his freedom would increase his happiness” (Gallaudet, quoted in Alford 2007, 104). His twentieth-century biographer Terry Alford counters that perhaps it was Foster’s happiness that was at issue, for through Abd al-Rahman’s leadership, the plantation was thriving: “Ibrahima,” he concludes, “had made himself invaluable” (Alford 2007, 71).

Nearly twenty years later, Abd al-Rahman would push for his freedom once again through his friendship with Colonel Andrew Marschalk, publisher of the Mississippi State Gazette. Marschalk sent an appeal to the Mississippi senator Thomas Reed on behalf of Abd al-Rahman, mistakenly claiming that he belonged to “the royal family of Morocco,” and he enclosed a letter in Arabic written by Abd al-Rahman to his family (Austin 1984, 198). Reed forwarded Marschalk and Abd al-Rahman’s letters to the State Department, which forwarded them to Thomas Mullowny, the United States consul in Tangier. In order to maintain good diplomatic relations with the King of Morocco, Mullowny recommended to Secretary of State Henry Clay that Abd al-Rahman be purchased and sent home, to which he as well as President John Quincy Adams consented. Thomas Foster subsequently agreed to manumit Abd al-Rahman, under the condition, as Henry Clay writes, “that Prince shall not be permitted to enjoy his liberty in this country, but be sent to his own free from expense to Mr. Foster” (Austin 1984, 198–199). Yet, bailing on his wife, his five children, and his eight grandchildren was not exactly what Abd al-Rahman had in mind. As Gallaudet would write, “Cheering as his situation was, his delight was mingled with the deepest anguish. What was personal freedom when
such social ties prevented his enjoying it? His very freedom was almost a curse” (Gallaudet quoted in Alford 2007, 108–109).

Abd al-Rahman explained, in person, to Secretary Clay and President Adams that he was not Moroccan, but Fulbe, and that he requested passage to Liberia, only three hundred miles from Futa Jallon’s capital city of Timbo. The statesmen acceded and authorized a passport for him and his wife Isabella. The government of the United States had previously agreed to the expense of returning Prince to Africa, authorizing Cyrus Griffin, who succeeded Marschall as Abd al-Rahman’s tireless advocate and amanuensis, “to defray the expenses of decently, but plainly clothing him . . . and those incident to his voyage and journey to this place . . . to draw upon [Secretary Clay], at sight, for a sum not exceeding two hundred dollars” (Austin 1984, 196–197). With their new knowledge of his origins, they would not make any further provisions for his transatlantic journey, or for the liberation of his American family. Thus begins Abd al-Rahman’s campaign to raise the $8,500 the American Colonization Society thought it would take to purchase from Foster his entire family and equip themselves for their resettlement in Liberia. With the funds approved by Secretary Clay, Griffin had acquired for Abd al-Rahman a colorful Moorish outfit for the steamer ride to Cincinnati, and thence on to Washington, D.C. This outfit would only be the most visible misrecognition of Abd al-Rahman. As he plotted the liberation of his family and their return to Africa, this “Unfortunate Moor” and “King of Timbuctoo” would ply many of the same strategies as Job ben Solomon (Alford 2007, 115). From the satisfaction of Orientalist desires to the fulfillment of Christian evangelism, Abd al-Rahman would reflect back to audiences their exotic fantasies and religious certainties.

Gathered audiences, affected by the wondrous and sentimental tale of Abd al-Rahman’s life, would fill subscription books with their pledges, emoting in newspaper accounts of this “romantic and extraordinary case” (Alford 2007, 115). Similarly, major players in the American Colonization Society such as the wealthy merchant Arthur Tappan saw in Abd al-Rahman’s royal connections the potential to broker a political engagement between Liberia and Futa Jallon, the development of commercial relations that would surely ensue, and ultimately the extensive conversions to Christianity that such commerce would foster. “It is more than probable,” he wrote of the opportunity that Abd al-Rahman presented, “that within two years, we should hear of a thriving commerce with the whole of that vast interior . . . and what is of more weight still with the Christian and Philanthropist, a way would be opened for the entrance of Charity and the Chris-
tian Religion” (Austin 1984, 178). Abd al-Rahman, as he gained knowledge of the ideology of the American Colonization Society, tailored his message to convince them that their investment of time, ink, and money would pay off. In an outrageous falsehood matched only by the ignorance it was expected to meet, he writes in an open letter, “When I left my country almost all the young people followed the Christian religion. Whether they continue to follow it, I know not. When I take home the two books [you have given me], the Arabic Testament [Bible] and [an Arabic tract on the truth of Christianity], I think they will follow the Christians. I hope when I go home to tell them the Christian way, and that they will go by it” (Austin 1984, 157). While Abd al-Rahman regularly recounted tales of his youth in the royal court, and his Islamic education in Timbo and Timbuktu, he fashioned his experience of slavery, for white audiences especially, as one that led to an earnest desire to raise the banner of Commerce and Christianity.

Often, though, the tenor of the gatherings on the fundraising circuit differed significantly between white and Black audiences. As the right-wing Andrew Jackson’s presidential ambitions gained traction in the South, reports of Abd al-Rahman’s speaking engagements in African American communities, purportedly sponsored by President Adams and Secretary Clay, led to a firestorm in the Southern press. “Read the toasts drank at the dinner given to this said negro in the city of Boston! Read them, Frenchmen of Louisiana, and remember St. Domingo! Read them Americans of Louisiana, and remember the Frenchmen of Hayti!” screamed one New Orleans editorial (Austin 1984, 215). “This slave of Mr. Foster is travelling through the United States, with the passport of Mr. Clay in his pocket, the stipulations of the contract with the slave’s master to the contrary notwithstanding” (Austin 1984, 218). While this latter editorialist perhaps speaks to the letter of the agreement brokered between Thomas Foster and the US government by Marschalk and Griffin, he clearly has no interest in the motivation behind Abd al-Rahman’s travels, namely to raise money for the liberation and African journey of his entire family. The hysteria in the southern press over Abd al-Rahman’s abuse of his “right of passage,” resonates particularly strongly from the vantage-point of a twenty-first century moment when the US government is deporting record numbers of undocumented, foreign-born residents after decades in the country and despite their extensive multigenerational family ties (Human Rights Watch 2009; Ercolani 2013).

As a slave, Abd al-Rahman had “earned by faithfulness and residence the right for his children never to be ironed and dragged away” (Alford 2007, 97). And yet now these southern Jacksonians demand that the price
of his freedom, “his contract” and his “passport” back to Africa, should be precisely this earned right to keep his family together. In this reaction to the specter of Abd al-Rahman’s free passage around the United States, we can sense an early archival appearance of the arbitrary, asymmetrical enforcement of immigration and visa laws, exacting a price from second-class “citizens” even as they are escorted to the door.

Nonetheless, things worked out for Abd al-Rahman’s family. Enough money was raised to purchase them from the Foster family, and Ibrahima and Isabella’s children and grandchildren followed their parents’ ship the Harriet to Liberia in 1829 aboard the Carolinian. Sadly, Abd al-Rahman died in Liberia before reaching Timbo. However, from the moment his ship “hove in sight of Cape Mesurado . . . Ibrahima recommenced the practice of Islam. His friends in the United States were surprised and irritated” (Alford 2007, 183). That Abd al-Rahman’s commitments fell aside once near the shores of Africa serves to index the unevenness structuring his negotiations with US power, from the terms of his “contract” to the expectations of the American Colonization Society. Similarly, Job ben Solomon had also enticed his Anglo-American listeners with promises of uplift and the interior trade, only to slip discretely back into Fulbe life after a brief, contentious tenure with the Royal African Company. Lest we bemoan these Scheherazadian betrayals, we will remember that Job ben Solomon shortly disappeared from the records of the Royal African Company, the Gentleman’s Society of Spalding (aside from a death notice in 1773), and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel; and Austin points out that “Abdul Rahahman was not long remembered, even in the American Colonization Society Reports. A review of the year included mention of the Carolinian’s cargo in general, its long voyage, and its ‘unusual mortality’—but nothing on Rahahman’s descendants” (Austin 1984, 239–40). These African Muslims, causes célèbres in their day, shortly disappeared from the mainstream of collective Anglo-American memory. In this, they hew to that pattern of amnesia and surprise structuring the discourse on African Muslims in New World slavery. Not only were first-hand witnesses to their lives struck with amazement that these bearers of Arab-Islamic knowledge and literacy be Black, but latter-day audiences as well revert to the same tenor of doubt and surprise. Allan Austin cites James Michener’s amnesiac, politically motivated criticism of Roots that Kunta Kinte’s religious affiliation “is an unjustified sop to contemporary developments rather than true reflection of the past” (Austin 1984, 4). Perhaps out of misconceptions like these, Moustafa Bayoumi, prefacing his investigation of the Panamanian manuscript of Sheikh Sana See, can still
write, “New World African Arabic has barely received its due scholarly scrutiny” (Bayoumi 2003, 61). Bayoumi is particularly interested in how to archivally process, against historiographical forces that render African Islamic script and scribes invisible or outside the purview of modernity, this finely rendered excerpt from a meditative text of the West African Qadiriyya Brotherhood that languished in a Virginia attic for nearly 140 years. The disappearance of this manuscript symbolically echoes the rerouted and purloined letters of Job ben Solomon, Abd al-Rahman, and Omar ibn Sa‘id. This reiterated experience of rerouted and purloined textuality, however, suggests a supplemental, angular approach to the dialectic of amnesia and surprise critically outlined thus far.

Rather than cast African Muslims in the roles of overlooked and written-over players on the historical stage, perhaps we may cast them as agents of archival reticence who figure the dispersed, resistant, and decentered archive of the Global South Atlantic. We will thus end this speculative genealogical excavation into the Arab-Islamic and Orientalist sources of African diasporic literature with a somewhat uncanny repetition out of the archive of Abu Bakr al-Siddiq of Timbuktu, Jamaica, and, perhaps, Timbuktu once more. Like Job ben Solomon one hundred years before him, penning his own narrative in Arabic, Abu Bakr enticed the Special Magistrate Richard Madden, resident in Jamaica during the “apprenticeship” interlude before Emancipation, into repatriating him as a guide and factor, this time in John Davidson’s expedition to Timbuktu. Beginning with his paternal grandfather’s generation, Abu Bakr narrates a sweeping drama of filial devotion, rivalry, and reconciliation, drawing upon tropes from the classical Arabic *sira*, or exemplary life story, to establish his own prestige in the land to which the expedition is destined (cf. Alryyes 2011, 26, 36). Like Job ben Solomon, though, Abu Bakr al-Siddiq soon vanished from the archive. His greatest advocate, Sir Richard Madden, “newly appointed Commissioner of Inquiry on the state of British forts on the Gold Coast, distributed leaflets for circulation into the interior, offering one hundred dollars reward for information about Abu Bakr’s whereabouts.” Eventually, “The British vice-consul at Mogadore received word from a man recently returned by caravan from Timbuktu that since Abu Bakr as-Siddiq reached Jenne nothing further had been heard of him” (Curtin 1967, 156).

These unanswered British leaflets, casting about West Africa for Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, reconfigure the near erasure of his enslaved coreligionists. For while, like Scheherazade, power incited and imposed upon their speech, once free, they were at liberty to purloin themselves, to steal away and disappear into the interior, to refuse to be interpellated. So beyond
amnesia-and-surprise constituting only an act of racist and historiographical aggression, perhaps it is also a beleaguered reaction to the power of the verbal, textual, and archival reticence of these African Muslims, a reticence that carries with it a sigh of relief and discursive release. And perhaps we, dispersed archivists of the Global South Atlantic, must heed this sigh, by insisting that our own efforts to recover and reconstruct this oceanic overlay pause at the opaque silences of sea and Sahel to which these subjects retreated.

NOTES


2. One notable exception is Judy (1993), which reads Anglophone slave narratives alongside the Bilali Muhammad Document, also known as Ben Ali’s Diary, an Islamic legal treatise written in Arabic and Pulaar on Sapelo Island, Georgia, in order to critique the Romantic paradigm of disciplinary literary knowledge and its universalist, humanist foundations. For the role of Muslims and Islam in US literature and culture, without a particular focus on Arabic language and literature, see Marr (2006).

3. For lions and Sudanese lost boys, see Eggers (2006, xiii).

4. This discussion of Blyden’s encounter with Arabic in Liberia overlaps with, but also explores different aspects of, my book Sounding the Break: African American and Caribbean Routes of World Literature (Frydman 2014, 1–7).