

Omar Ibn Said

A Spoleto Festival USA Workbook

Artwork by Jonathan Green



This workbook is dedicated to Omar Ibn Said.

About the Artist

Jonathan Green is an African American visual artist who grew up in the Gullah Geechee community in Gardens Corner near Beaufort, South Carolina. Jonathan's paintings reveal the richness of African American culture in the South Carolina countryside and tell the story of how Africans like Omar Ibn Said, managed to maintain their heritage despite their enslavement in the United States.

About Omar Ibn Said

This workbook is about Omar Ibn Said, a man of great resilience and perseverance. Born around 1770 in Futa Toro, a rich land in West Africa that is now in the country of Senegal on the border of Mauritania, Omar was a Muslim scholar who studied the religion of Islam, among other subjects, for more than 25 years. When Omar was 37, he was captured, enslaved, and transported to Charleston, where he was sold at auction. He remained enslaved until he died in 1863. In 1831, Omar wrote his autobiography in Arabic. It is considered the only autobiography written by an enslaved person—while still enslaved—in the United States. Omar's writing contains much about Islam, his religion while he lived in Futa Toro. In fact, many Africans who were enslaved in the United States were Muslim. In his autobiography, Omar makes the point that Christians enslaved and sold him. He also writes of how his owner, Jim Owen, taught him about Jesus.

Today, Omar's autobiography is housed in the Library of Congress. It is an important text because it indicates the high level of education that many Africans earned before they were enslaved. Other Africans enslaved in the United States had been teachers, students, merchants, farmers, warriors, weavers, midwives, and artists. Omar's autobiography demonstrates how one man managed to maintain his rich culture and faith even though he was enslaved by people in a foreign land who did not look like him, speak like him, or share his faith.

About *Omar*, the opera

After reading Omar Ibn Said's autobiography in 2017, organizers at Spoleto Festival USA were inspired to share his critical yet little-known story with a wider audience. After all, people from around the world travel to the Festival, a 17-day celebration of music, dance, and theater in Charleston, South Carolina. Spoleto asked Grammy Award winner Rhiannon Giddens and Michael Abels to co-compose a brand-new opera—a dramatic art form that combines music, singing, and acting—and offer their unique perspectives to honor Omar Ibn Said's story. After four years of hard work and collaboration, the opera *Omar* will have its world premiere during the 2022 season of Spoleto Festival USA, May 27 to June 12.

Omar was born in Futa Toro in West Africa around 1770. It was a rich and fertile state with two harvests each year: rain allowed for a fall harvest, and flooding from the Senegal River allowed for another in the spring. It was full of busy markets where people could buy and sell their goods.

Think back to when you were younger. Write your happiest memory on the lines below.





During his childhood, Omar's older brother, Sheikh Muhammad, taught him how to read and write in Arabic, the language of the religion of Islam. Most people in Futa Toro also spoke a language called Pulaar.

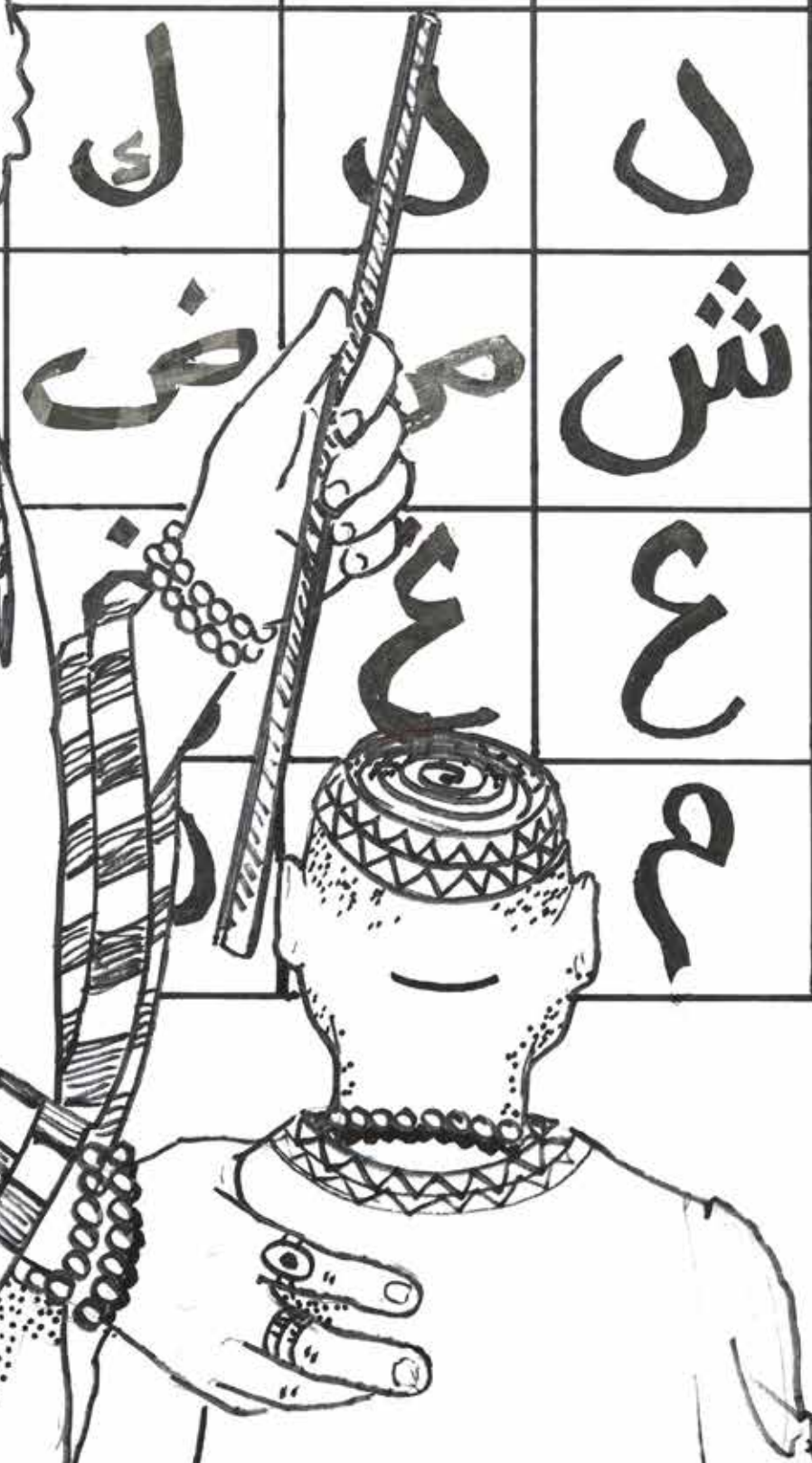
Using the template below, trace Omar Ibn Said's name in Arabic.

عُومَرِ بْنِ سَايْدٍ





ا	ب	ت	ث
خ	د	ذ	ر
س	ش	ص	ض
ظ	ع	ف	ق
ل	م	ن	ه



There were schools, books, and large buildings called mosques (masjids) where people went to pray. Like most people in Futa Toro, Omar was Muslim—a follower of the religion of Islam. The holy book of Islam is called the Quran (Koran). Many Muslims pray five times a day.



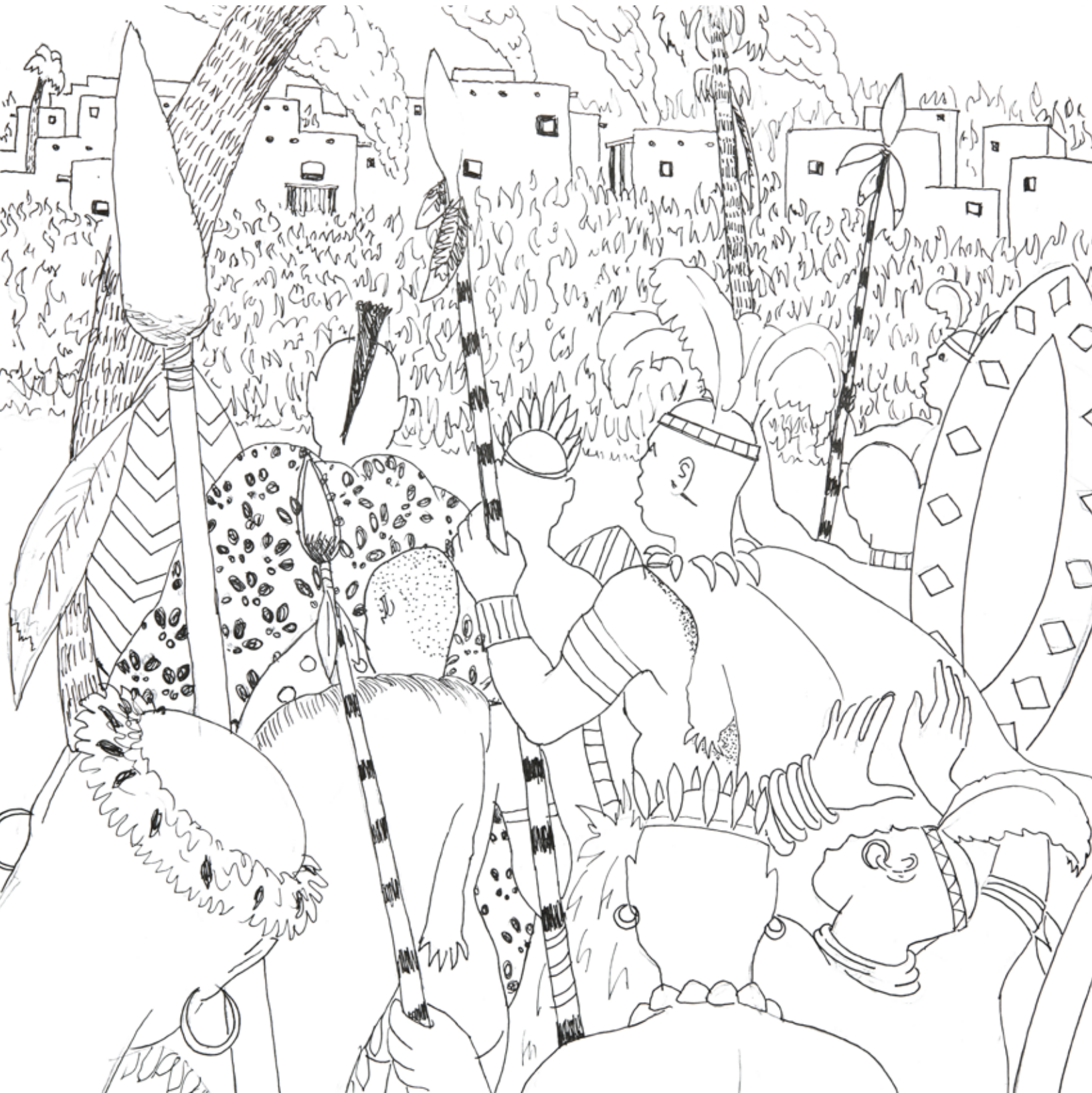
What is the theme or central idea of the story so far?



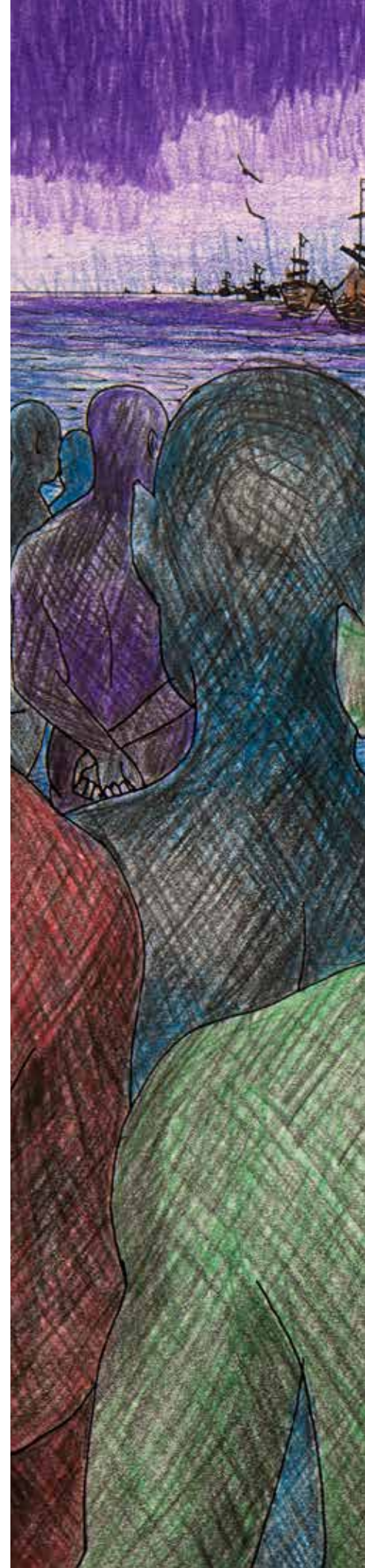
In 1807, Futa Toro was attacked by a foreign army, which killed many people. Although Omar survived, he was captured and enslaved by enemy soldiers.



Which words create meaning and tone in the sentences on page 8?

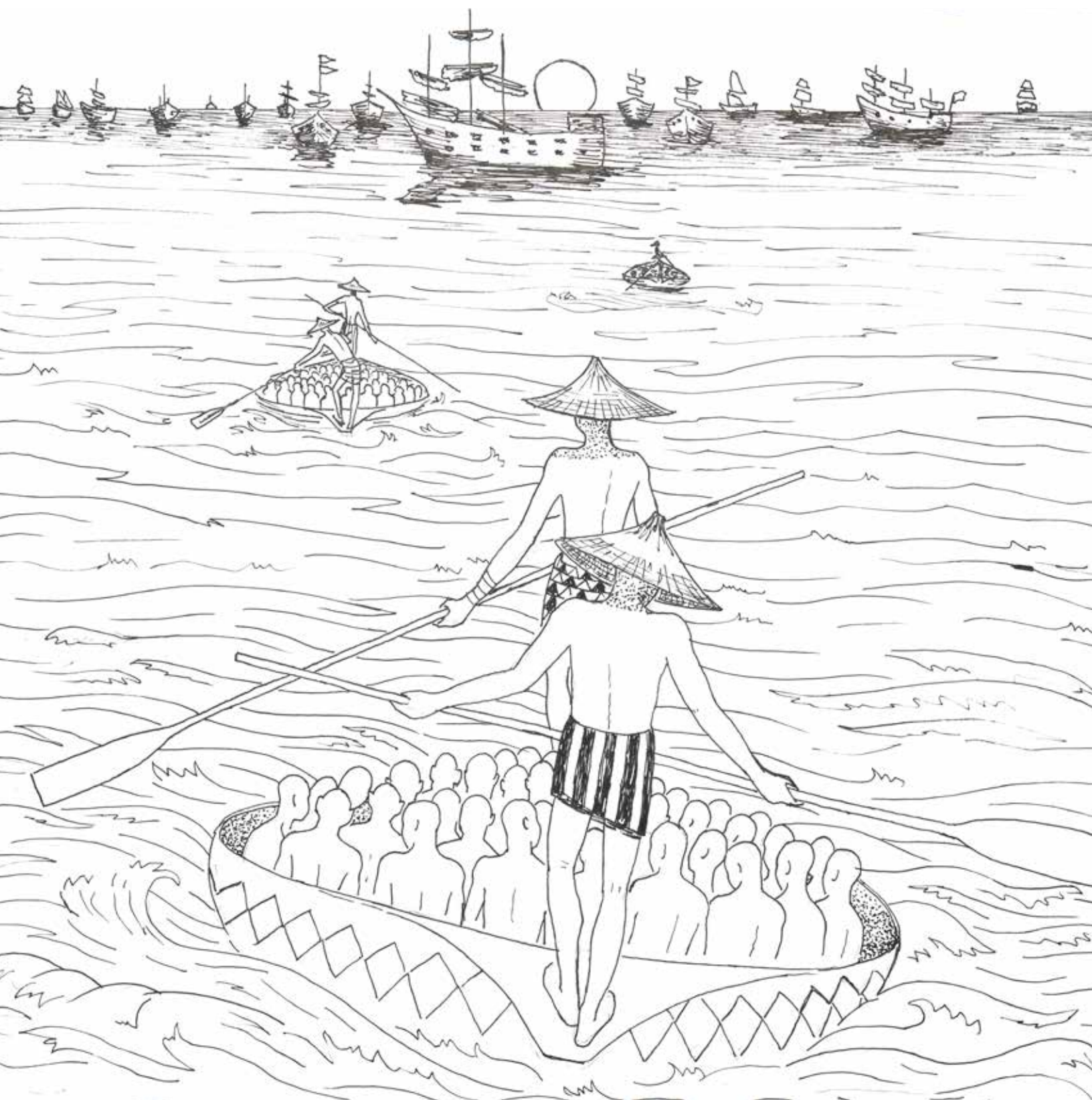


Omar—along with others—was marched to the Atlantic coast where many people were held before being sent to the United States, the Caribbean, and other countries in the Americas.





Omar and the other captives were loaded onto small boats and made to board large wooden slave ships.



The trip across the Atlantic Ocean was dangerous. Omar and the others were chained together in the hull of the ship with little room to move, and many died during the journey.



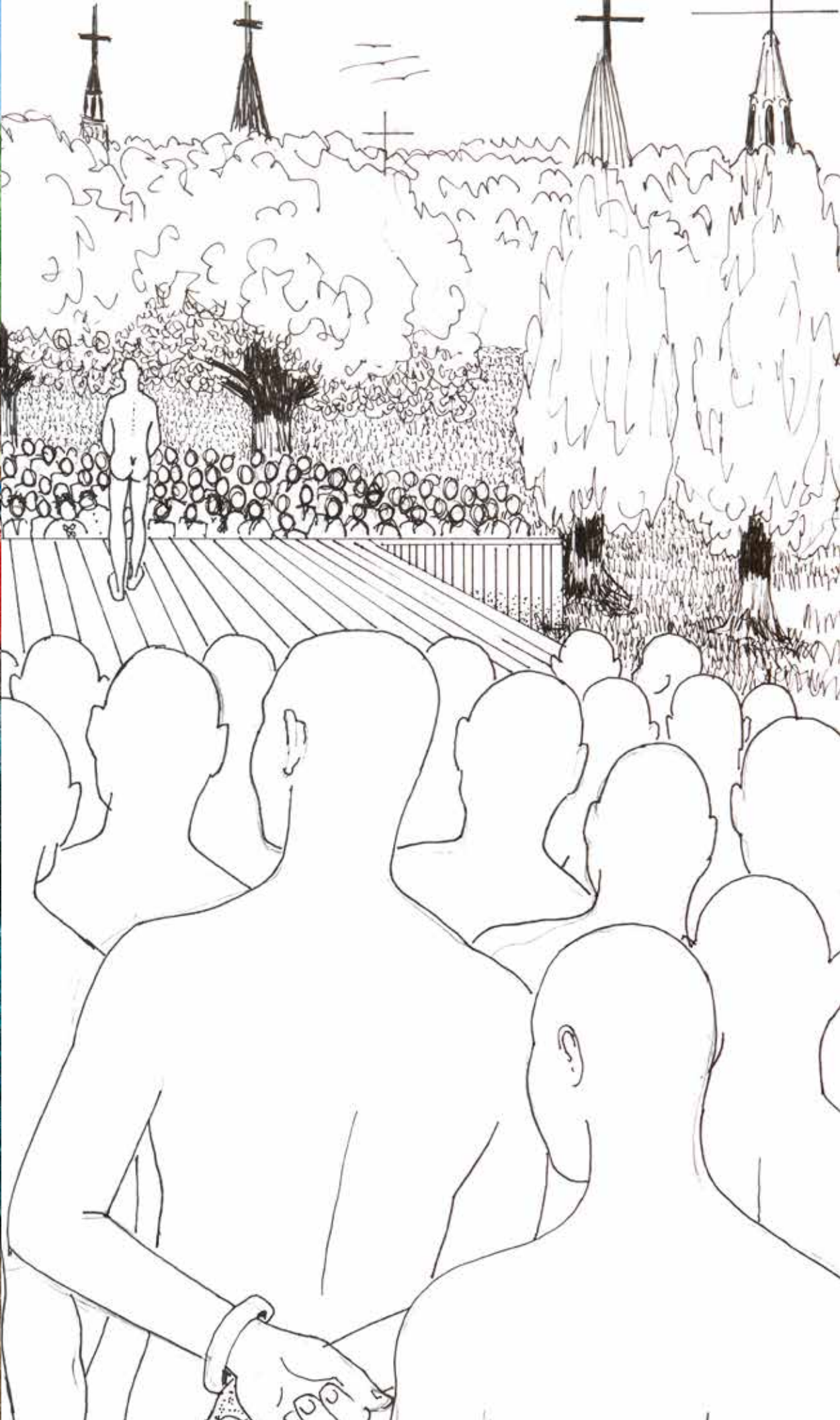
How do the settings from page 13 and 14 impact your understanding of Omar's story so far?



After a month at sea, the ship docked at Gadsden's Wharf in Charleston, South Carolina. Omar was taken to a slave auction where he was purchased by a man named Johnson. Although Omar was a person with thoughts, feelings, and a family back home in Futa Toro, the law considered him the property of somebody else.

Use evidence from the text and the images to write an objective statement that summarizes Omar's experiences up to this point in the story.





Omar and other enslaved people were forced to harvest Carolina gold rice on Johnson's plantation. Though Johnson never worked in his fields, he continued to get rich while Omar suffered in Charleston's sweltering summer heat.

Based on the text, what does the word "forced" most likely mean?

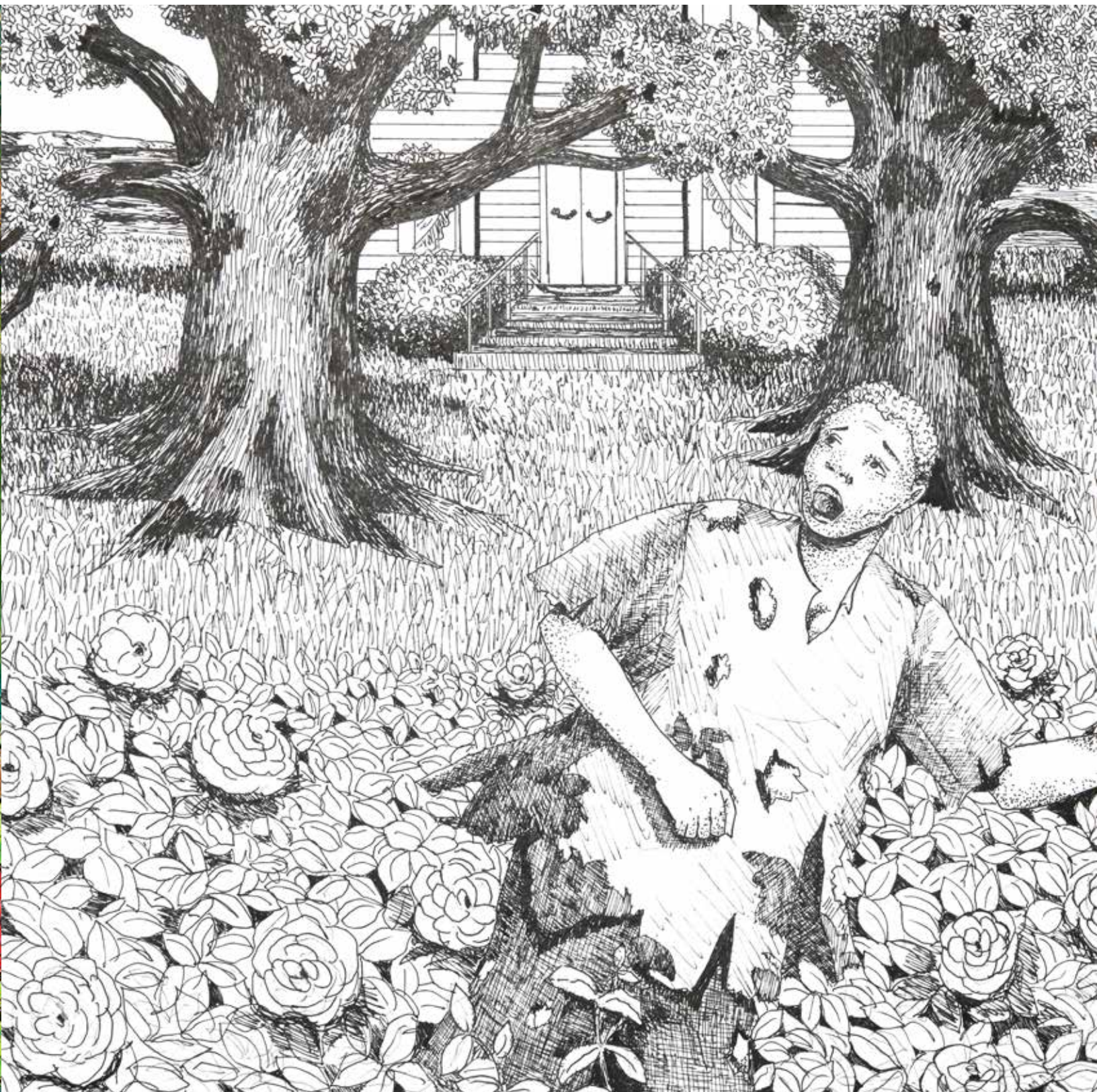




According to Omar, Johnson was a small, weak, and wicked man. Omar said he was afraid to remain with a man who committed so many evil acts, so he ran away.

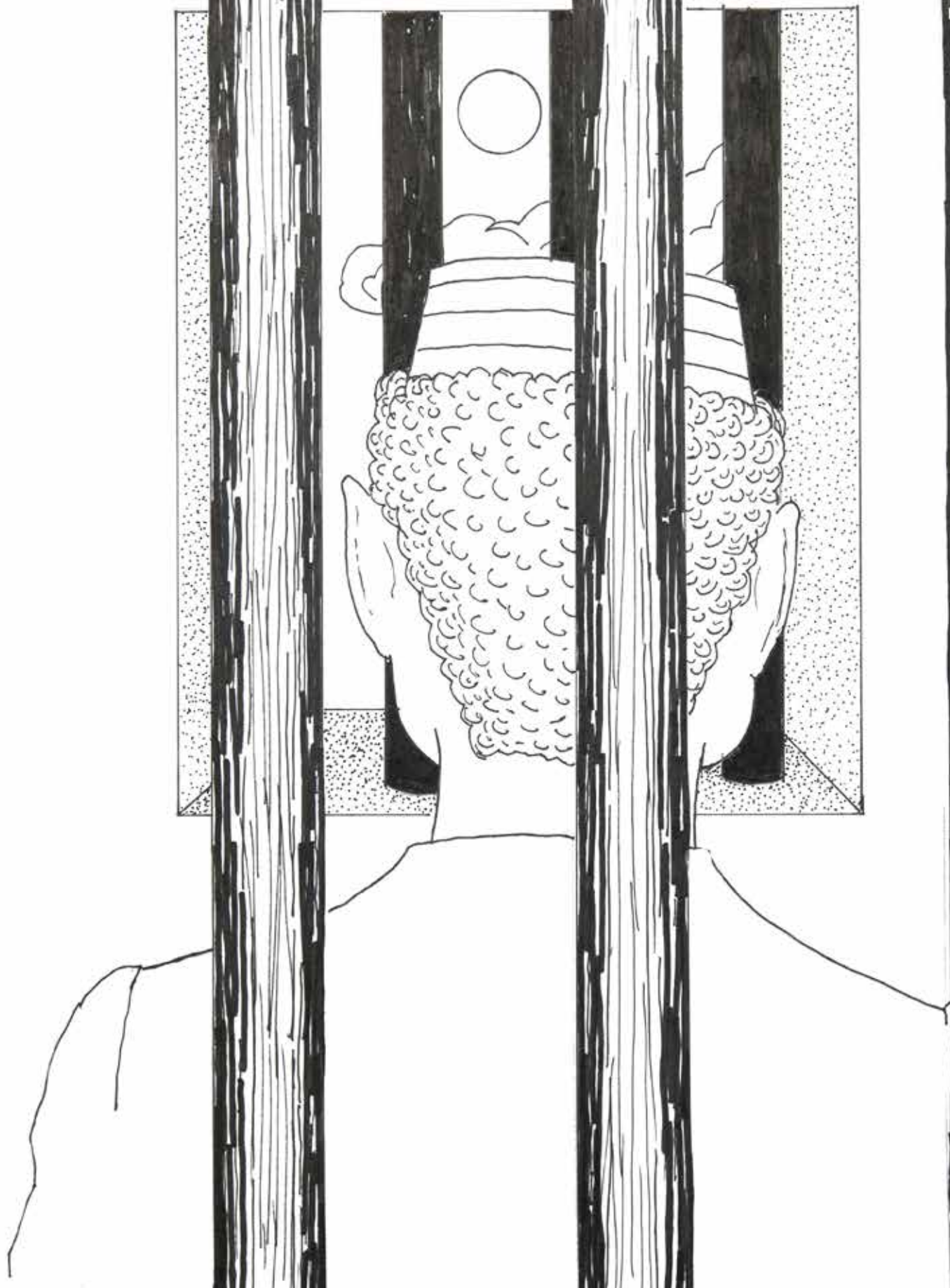


In addition to running away, what other ways did enslaved people resist slavery?



For a month, he remained free and walked from Charleston to Fayetteville, North Carolina, where he was recaptured and thrown in jail.

How does the setting of Omar in jail contribute to the mood and development of the plot of the story?



Omar began writing verses from the Quran on the walls of his cell in Arabic with a piece of charcoal. One man said he would buy Omar and take him back to Charleston. Omar said, "No, no, no." Afterwards, another man named Jim Owen took Omar to his plantation where he remained enslaved for the rest of his life.



In addition to Omar, can you name two other historical figures jailed for their fights for freedom?



When Omar arrived at the Owen plantation, faith was still very important to him. He was given a Quran and a Bible written in Arabic.

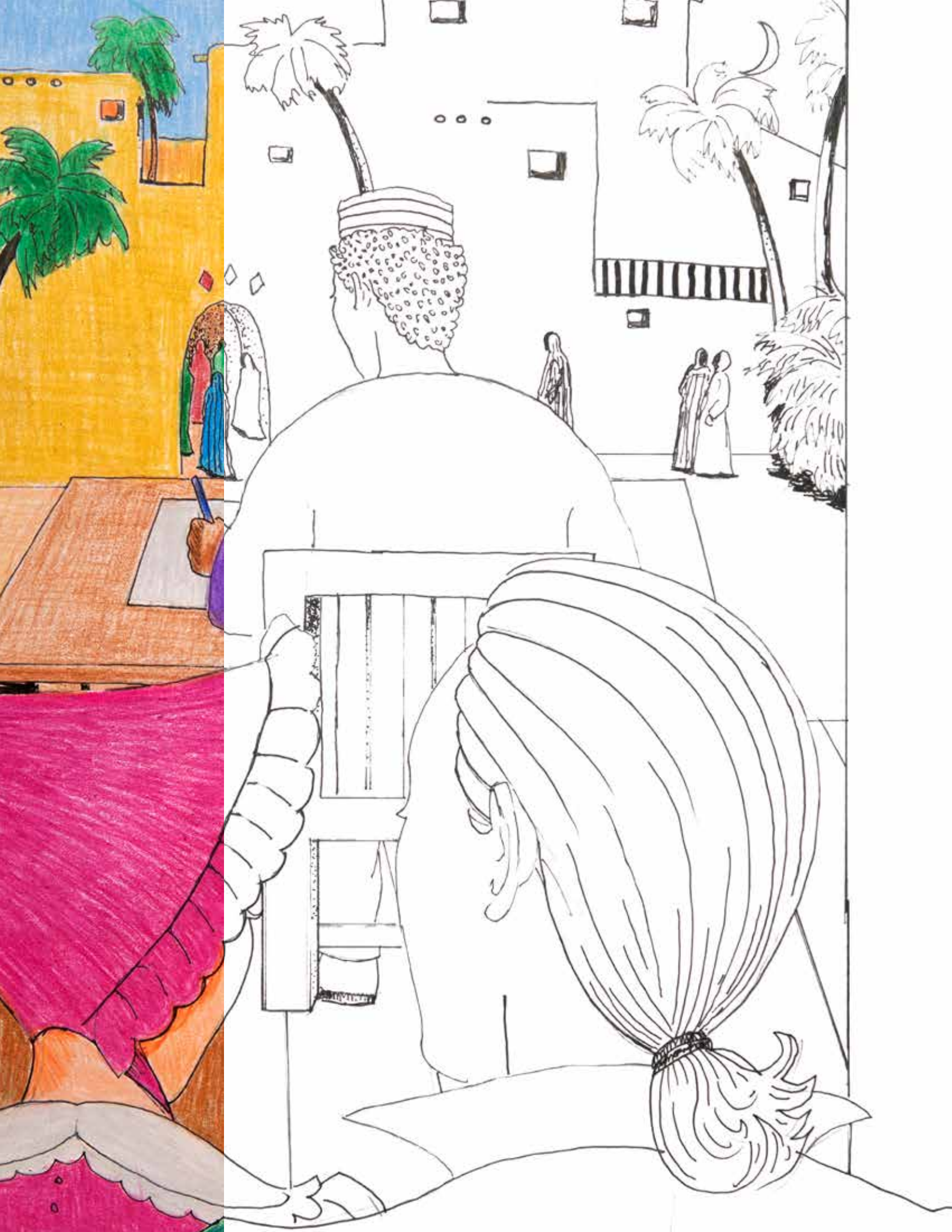
Do you think Omar influenced the family at the Owen plantation?



Though Omar remained enslaved, he was not made to do hard work in the fields. He was asked to write his own story, which he did in Arabic, thinking all the while of his home. He also wrote several pages in Arabic, which were passages from the Quran. In 1819, he wrote to John Owen, Jim Owen's brother, that he longed to see Africa again.

Write a summary of Omar's story using key details from this workbook.



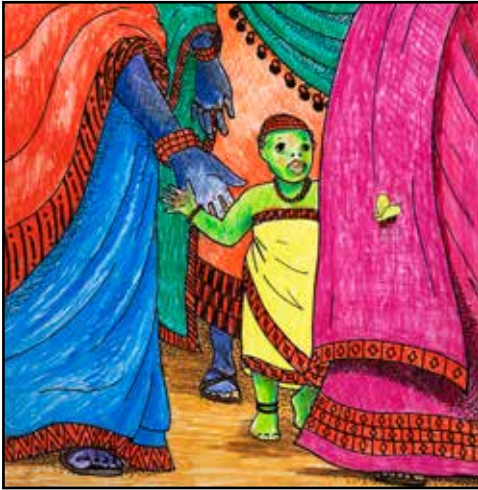


Omar died at the age of 93 shortly before the end of the Civil War, which brought freedom to enslaved people across the country. He was buried in Bladen County, North Carolina.

What do you imagine Omar was thinking about in this picture?



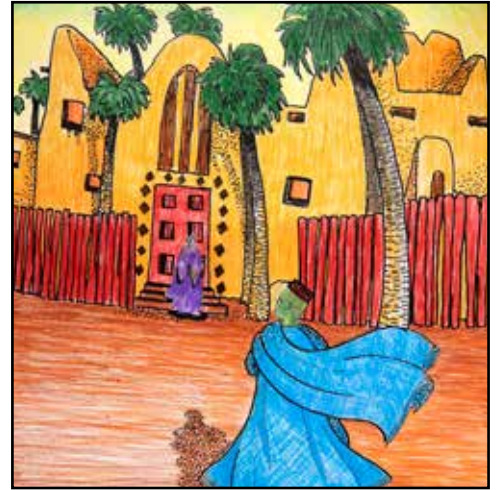
Artwork by Jonathan Green



Omar as a Baby



Omar Learning Arabic Characters



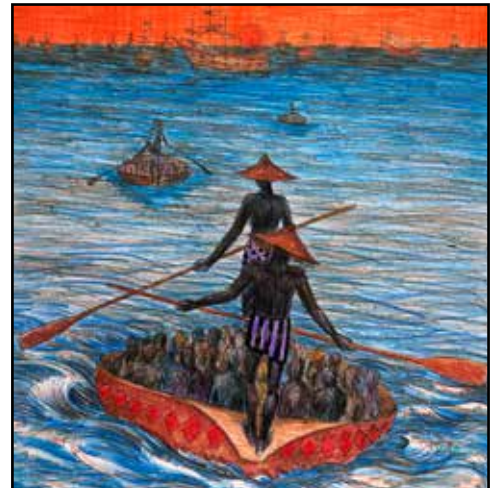
Omar Approaching the Mosque



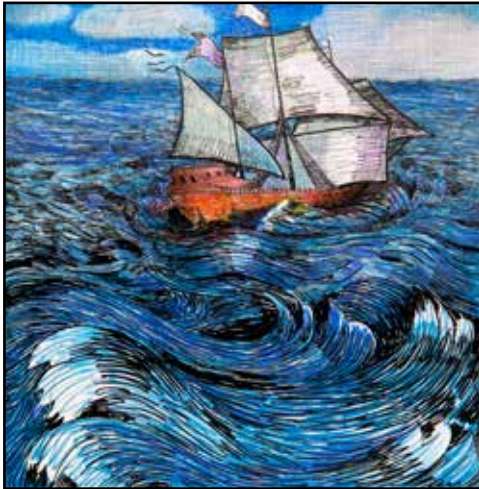
Omar Approaching a Village



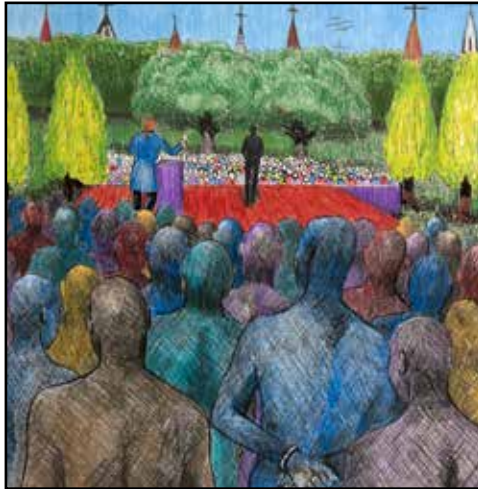
Omar and Others Marching to Ships



Omar Captured with Others Going to a Ship



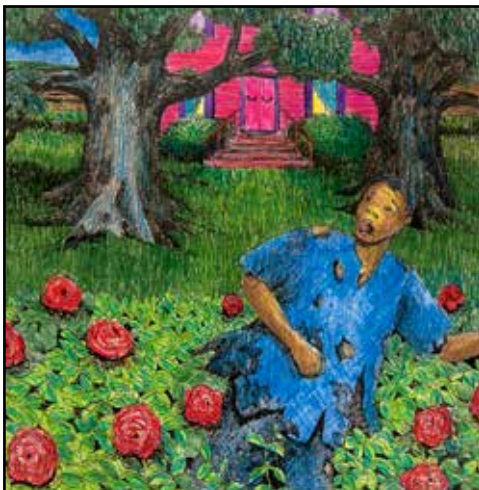
A Ship Taking Omar and Other Captive Africans to Sea



Omar and Others at Auction



Omar's Tasks with Others Taking Harvested Plantation Rice to a Flat Boat



Omar Fleeing a Plantation



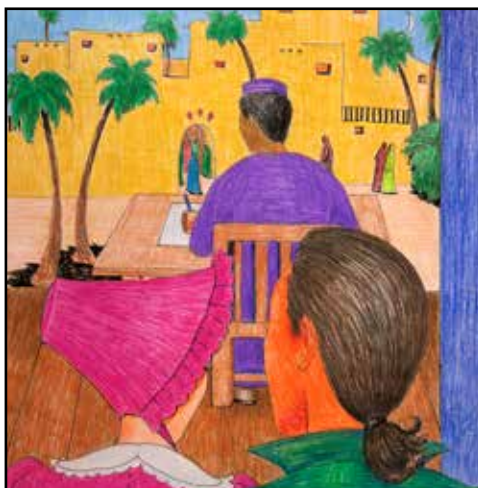
Omar in Jail



Mr. Owen Speaking with Omar



Omar in Prayer



Omar Writing at Desk



Omar Looking Out Over Garden

Glossary

Arabic – a language commonly spoken in the Middle East and Northern Africa

Autobiography – an account of a person’s life written by that person

Bible – the collection of sacred writings of the Christian religion, comprising the Old and New Testaments

Christian – a follower of Christianity

Christianity – a religion or faith whose followers believe in God as the sole deity and in Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost

Civil War – a war in the United States that began in 1861 after decades of simmering tensions between northern and southern states over slavery, states’ rights, and westward expansion; and ended in 1865

Enslaved – the circumstance of a person who has been purchased as the legal property of another and aggressively forced into obedience. Historians in recent years have begun to use the word “enslaved” and not “slave,” which has historically been used to define a person rather than their condition.

Gadsden’s Wharf – the place where ships bringing enslaved Africans to Charleston in the early 19th century docked; it stretched between Calhoun and Laurens streets and from today’s harbor to East Bay Street.

Gullah Geechee – a unique, creole language spoken in the coastal areas of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida by descendants of Africans who were enslaved on the rice, indigo, and Sea Island cotton plantations of the lower Atlantic coast; many came from the rice-growing region of West Africa and the nature of their enslavement on isolated island and coastal plantations created a unique culture with deep African retentions that are clearly visible in the Gullah Geechee people’s distinctive arts, crafts, foodways, music, and language.

Heritage – something that is handed down from the past as a tradition

Hull – the frame or body of a ship or boat exclusive of masts, yards, sails, and rigging

Islam – a religion or faith whose followers believe in Allah (God) as the sole deity and in Muhammad as his prophet

Library of Congress – the largest library in the world, with millions of books, recordings, photographs, newspapers, maps, and manuscripts in its collections

Madrasah – a Muslim school that is often part of a mosque as seen on page 4 of the workbook

Mosque – a building used for public worship by Muslims; also called a Masjid

Muslim – a follower of Islam

Plantation – a large farm in the southern United States that typically included a large house with many acres of land that profited from cash crops such as rice, cotton, and indigo using free labor from enslaved people

Pulaar – a language spoken by Fula ethnic groups of West Africa

Quran – sacred Arabic writings accepted by Muslims as revelations made to Muhammad by Allah (God) through the angel Gabriel; also spelled Koran and Qur'an

Slavery – the legal practice of a person owning another person as property and violently enforcing them to labor or work against their will; most scholars conclude that slavery began in what is now the United States in 1619 and ended in 1865.

Arabic Alphabet

ا ب ت ث ج ح خ
alif bā tā thā jīm hā khā

د ذ ر ز س ش ص
dāl thāl rā zāy sīn shīn sād

ض ط ظ ع غ ف ق
dād tā zā ayn ghayn fā qāf

ك ل م ن ه و ي
kāf lām mīm nūn hā wāw yā

Arabic Numerals

٠ ١ ٢ ٣ ٤ ٥
sifr waahid ithnaan thalaatha arba'a khamisa
0 1 2 3 4 5

٦ ٧ ٨ ٩ ١٠
sitta saba'a thamaaniya tisa'a ishra
6 7 8 9 10

Topics and Questions for Classroom Discussion

1. How might using this workbook to read Omar's story be different from seeing an opera or film about his life?

2. This workbook is intended to increase your understanding of key themes from the true story of Omar Ibn Said. Which pages best support the themes of faith, resilience, resistance, and injustice?

3. What is Omar's argument or claim? How does he develop his claim?

4. Describe a viewpoint other than Omar's from the text.

5. I used to think _____. Now I think _____.

Special Thanks

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