

BLACKNESS IN THE “GREY AREA”: REPRESENTATIONS OF VIRTUOUS LABOR IN  
VENTURE SMITH’S *NARRATIVE*

A Paper  
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty  
of the  
North Dakota State University  
of Agriculture and Applied Science

By  
Rio McKade Bergh

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

Major Department:  
English

April 2019

Fargo, North Dakota

North Dakota State University  
Graduate School

---

**Title**

BLACKNESS IN THE “GREY AREA”: REPRESENTATIONS OF  
VIRTUOUS LABOR IN VENTURE SMITH’S *NARRATIVE*

---

**By**

Rio McKade Bergh

---

The Supervisory Committee certifies that this *disquisition* complies with North Dakota  
State University’s regulations and meets the accepted standards for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS**

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

Dr. Gordon Fraser

---

Co-chair

Dr. Rebecca Weaver-Hightower

---

Co-chair

Dr. Donald F. Johnson

---

Dr. Sean Burt

---

Approved:

4/2/2019

---

Date

Dr. Rebecca Weaver-Hightower

---

Department Chair

## ABSTRACT

Scholarly treatments of Venture Smith, an African man who gained freedom and went on to own land and slaves in the late eighteenth-century United States, almost exclusively consider the 1798 edition of his narrative, ignoring the later 1835 and 1897 editions. I analyze each published narrative, and argue that Smith, as represented in the narratives and other printed materials, functions as an emblematic bourgeois. His economic actions conducted within Franco Moretti's "grey area," when paired with his performance of ascetic labor and virtue, provide the social legitimation necessary for a bourgeois owner class. However, Smith's status as a black man has important implications. Even though he attains nominal freedom, the construction of the narrative and its representation throughout the nineteenth century suggest a cultural imperative to envision the black body as a source of labor and production—I argue that this legacy shapes how we understand Smith, even now.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am lucky. Throughout the process of writing this, I got to explore something older than me by centuries, and yet new. I got to speak with the dead, those long since gone, and yet those whose lives still weave into the fabric of the present. My thanks go out to countless people who have played a part in this process. To the English department at NDSU: thank you. You helped me find my way. To Gordon Fraser: thank you. I first read Venture Smith in your class, and this project started there. Your advice has been helpful beyond belief, and you pushed me to become a better scholar than I otherwise would be. I couldn't have asked for a better adviser. To the many libraries I worked with: thank you. I am grateful for the materials you collect, and for your willingness to share them with me. To my fellow graduate students: thank you. The countless office conversations and continual support mean more than you know. You are all brilliant, wonderful people who will change the lives of those you touch. To my family: thank you. You taught me to love, and to work, and to care. And you teach me now, through time and space. It seems I will continue learning lessons from you, even though the physical distance is greater now. And finally, to Christen: thank you. You make me laugh and find joy. You teach me daily the value of caring intensely about the things we do, and of working on those things, even when it isn't easy to do so. You listen to me complain, and you help me see the silver in the clouds scudding by. You make me better than I would otherwise ever be. And, importantly, you put up with the piles of books and papers, and the countless hours. With the deepest gratitude, I say this: thank you, from the depths of my heart.

## **DEDICATION**

For everyone who looks to the past to try to understand the present.

For the scholars and readers, the shamans conversing with history.

For those who don't give up, no matter the obstacle.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
DEDICATION.....	v
1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
2. THE GREY AREA, BODIES, AND OWNERSHIP.....	7
3. VIRTUOUS LABOR AND THE BOURGEOIS .....	13
4. EMBODIED CAPITALISM AND THE FANTASY OF VENTURE SMITH .....	23
5. BLACK BOURGEOIS.....	30
6. VENTURE SMITH AS “EMBLEMATIC BOURGEOIS” .....	35
WORKS CITED .....	41

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### *How I Came By My Name*

Four casks of rum and a bolt of calico.  
(A quarter of the list price. A terrific deal,  
a steal for the ship's steward who bought a boy  
onboard as two-legged cargo was being loaded  
and stowed.) Four casks of rum and a piece of cloth.  
(For breath, dreams, heartbeat.) The boy who was Broteer  
disappeared. A business venture took his place.  
Same face, same eyes, but inside utterly transformed,  
harmed past healing by the cheapening of human life.  
Breath, dreams, pulse, traded for cloth and alcohol,  
were *capital*. There was *profit* in the pain,  
the chains. *Venture*. There were whole worlds to gain

Marilyn Nelson

---

Scholarly treatments of Venture Smith, an African man who gained freedom and went on to own land and slaves in the late eighteenth-century United States, offer contrasting arguments regarding Smith's agency and ideological background. Several scholars have touched on the disturbing way in which Smith prioritizes the importance of money, even over his own family. When reporting the deaths of both his daughter and son, for instance, Smith laments in particular the loss of money he incurred in each experience, much more than any emotional loss he sustained. For scholars such as David Waldstreicher (243-244), Philip Gould (677), and Paul Gilroy (38), who provide a framework for understanding the narrative in this way, Smith's

relationship with money is suggestive of his complete interpellation into white, capitalist ideology. In opposition to scholars suggesting Smith is party to capitalist ideology, however, several scholars have argued that he resists such ideologies, and that he in fact embodies West African perspectives. Anna Mae Duane offers a reading of Smith's narrative in which she suggests his relationship to money may be partially derived from West African views, arguing that Smith might have viewed the ownership of human beings through the frame of West African pawnship, more similar to temporary indentured servitude than to chattel slavery (193-194). John Sweet likewise suggests that Smith purchased other slaves to help them gain freedom (116-117). In this framework, a focus on money and familial love are not mutually exclusive elements. In a similar vein, Vincent Caretta argues that Smith did not entirely accept the validity of a capitalism that traded in human bodies, and that he in fact maintained his own distinct identity and ideology—one which ran counter to the ideologies surrounding him in early America, and in other slave/freedom narratives (177-178). Robert Desrochers, finally, offers a similar reading in which he suggests the narrative is a subversive, resistant text, but that its message is partially masked by the amanuensis's influence (47-49). These two contrasting veins of scholarship are representative of an argument over whether or not Smith has agency or acts as a controlled subject of his surroundings—or rather, an argument over the relative truthfulness of either case.

Because Venture Smith operated at the intersection of West African cultural practices and Atlantic capitalism, it is likely impossible to untangle the complex, interwoven ideologies through which Smith came to understand the economic and affective world in which he lived. In contrast with other scholars, I argue that the version of Smith represented in the pages of his various narratives, published between 1798 and 1897, reveal a clear-eyed view of how money functioned in the early Republic. This version of Smith—the representational version—operates



in what Franco Moretti terms the “grey area”: the ethically unclear area of capitalist deal-making that is very often ignored or glossed over. The “grey area” is marked by opportunistic acts by the bourgeois capitalist in order to exploit opportunities that are not readily available to all (172). These exclusive opportunities allow the bourgeois to gain economic advantage. Notably, these opportunistic acts must also be socially legitimated. For Moretti, one of the most important elements of justification for power lies in establishing a culture of work (43). Applied to Smith’s life, his manipulations within “the grey area” allow for the use of bodies as capital. Smith treats his own body as capital, and also acquires the bodies of others in the service of generating capital—all while maintaining a façade of virtuous labor. This, then, is the hidden secret to his freedom: the accumulation of the labor power of bodies.

I approach *Venture Smith* by examining how his practices run counter to the ways in which they were represented, both by Smith in his narrative, and by printers and editors throughout the long nineteenth century. A close examination of the 1798 text reveals shrewd practices that do not necessarily fit with Smith’s representation. Often, Smith behaved shrewdly, only to have his behavior represented as a straightforward application of virtuous labor, frugality, or honesty. Furthermore, Smith played a complicated political game with identity, allying himself with powerful people when it suited him, and pointing out his differences from those surrounding him when it was convenient. I also address the versions of Smith’s narrative and the materials printed around them as they appeared over the span of the long nineteenth century. This approach is something scholars have not yet done, since current published work almost exclusively considers the original 1798 edition. Approaching the texts in this manner draws out how the narrative evolves over its 1798, 1835, and 1897 editions, and highlights the implications of this evolution. Notably, the body of the narrative remains almost identical over the three

publications—one section is removed in 1835, but is then added again in the 1897 edition. To understand how the representation of Smith changes over this time, then, I attend to the materials surrounding the narratives, including newspaper articles, advertisements, and the comments of editors. In particular, I analyze *Traditions of Venture!*, a pamphlet appended to the 1897 edition. My goal in taking this approach is to understand the cultural work done by representations of Venture Smith in these documents, not necessarily to recuperate and understand Smith as an historical person.

I argue that Smith, as represented in the narrative and other printed materials (especially in 1798), functions as an emblematic bourgeois; his economic actions conducted within “the grey area,” when paired with his performance of ascetic labor and virtue, provide the social legitimation necessary for a bourgeois owner class. However, Smith’s status as a black man has important implications. Even though he attains nominal freedom, the construction of the narrative and its representation throughout the nineteenth century suggest a cultural imperative to envision the black body as a source of labor and production. For editors and printers across the long nineteenth century, the independent black body cannot act as an intellectual force. Furthermore, the black body can only be an economic force through its productive capacity. Smith’s narratives, then, blur the connections between economic success and the shrewd exploitation of other laborers, including enslaved laborers. Smith generates income actively by working, but he also generates income passively by having others work for him, in what seem to be exploitative conditions. Yet Smith, as a black man, is an imperfect model for a capitalist. Thus, instead of drawing attention directly to Smith’s savvy methods of generating revenue, the narratives valorize his capacity for labor and production. Smith smoothly operates within “the grey area,” which is why he shows up repeatedly throughout the nineteenth century, and even

today, as a sort of folk hero able to create wealth out of almost nothing, using physical strength to earn freedom. It hardly matters, for the purposes of this myth, that Smith's actual behavior was marked by shrewdness, an intermittent use of the law, and a willingness to exploit unique opportunities for accumulation. What matters is that Smith's narratives legitimate the figure of the black capitalist through his bodily capacity for labor and production.

Importantly, Smith's representation in the narratives is potentially tripartite, but can be best thought of as dual. Smith, acting as a bourgeois capitalist, represents himself as legitimated by his work, honesty, and frugality—if we take the narrative to be Smith's actual words. Smith's amanuensis who wrote the narrative—often presumed to be Elisha Niles, a schoolteacher and veteran of the Revolutionary War—represents him as the black Benjamin Franklin in the preface to the narrative, legitimated by industry and frugality (and ignoring unique opportunities and exploitation). However, determining which words are Smith's and which are the amanuensis's in the narrative is a near impossibility. I suggest that the representation of Smith in 1798 is best thought of as a composite—regardless of the extent to which Smith or the amanuensis has control of the narrative, he emerges as a bourgeois capitalist, legitimated by industry, honesty, and frugality. (Because of this, I will use “Smith” to refer to this composite authorship throughout the rest of this essay for ease of use, unless I am writing about the preface.) A century later, in the 1897 edition, publishers had reduced Smith to his laboring physicality. These representational projects—these two editions, separated by a century—perform different but related work. The first represents Smith as an exemplar of virtuous labor, but reveals to the skeptical reader a cannier relationship to capitalism. This Smith is described as frugal, but can be understood as shrewd. Like the bourgeois working in the “grey area,” he offers a public-facing performance of frugality, honesty, and hard work, but can be detected behaving shrewdly and

cannily at key moments. The second representational project—the project of the late nineteenth century—simplifies the complexity of the black bourgeois. Legitimizing the accumulation of wealth by a black man requires one thing: a superabundance of labor. Neither frugality nor canniness, abstemiousness nor shrewdness, can legitimate the black bourgeois in 1897. Only labor can legitimate his wealth.

In making this argument, I am suggesting that Smith's narrative operates in a different moral economy than other freedom narratives, and can be better understood within the context of Atlantic capitalism. Because of this, I turn to a consideration of Moretti's "grey area," racial capitalism, and the color line in section two to better understand the context of my analysis. In section three, I consider how we can read Smith's 1798 text against the grain, searching out both how he is represented and how he actually accumulates his wealth. But, throughout this process, I attend to how Smith's accumulation of wealth is socially legitimated, casting him as the black bourgeois. I turn to how the understanding of Smith as the black bourgeois is revised over time in section four. I examine the 1798, 1835, and 1897 editions, along with the materials surrounding them to argue that the complexity of Smith as the black bourgeois is simplified over time. In section five, I further break down the concept of the black bourgeois as it emerges from the narratives, I articulate the difference between the black and white bourgeois, and I consider how the social understanding of the black bourgeois shifts through time. Finally, in section six I discuss the difficulty of reading Smith in the context of "freedom narratives," and I consider the broader implications of the narratives and their evolution.

## 2. THE GREY AREA, BODIES, AND OWNERSHIP

Before transitioning to the analysis of Smith, it may be useful to explore how “the grey area” functions for the nineteenth-century bourgeois. At first glance, Smith’s narrative seems like a perfect match for Max Weber’s framework of the “spirit of capitalism.” Weber argues that the acquisitive desire of humans in general is not new (56-58), but he suggests that the “spirit of capitalism” (*geist des kapitalismus*) is distinguished from simple capitalist practices because within it, “man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life” (53). Weber locates the origin of this feeling in ascetic Protestant thought in the seventeenth century. This ascetic ideology, crystallized by Benjamin Franklin, meant that “the earning of money within the modern economic order is, so long as it is done legally, the result and expression of virtue and proficiency in a calling.... And in truth this peculiar idea... of one’s duty in a calling, is what is most characteristic of the social ethic of capitalistic culture, and is in a sense the fundamental basis of it” (53-54). The key to the “spirit of capitalism” is that the purpose is not accumulation for comfort. It is accumulation for accumulation’s sake, which is cast as a virtue. Smith—as represented in the narrative versions of his life—fits well in this framework, particularly because he is framed by the pamphlets as a paragon of industry and frugality. Readers cannot deny how hard Smith works. However, it is worth noting that hard work itself isn’t the only thing treated as a virtue. After all, many enslaved people no doubt worked as hard as Smith. Rather, the narrative also valorizes Smith for doing the seemingly impossible by starting with nothing more than his own racially marked body, and, by the end of his life, attaining personal freedom and property ownership. Furthermore, his economic success is not entirely a product of abstemious labor. The narrative and historical scholarship reveal

practices that are morally ambiguous; Smith is shrewd and able to take advantage of opportunities, despite the narrative's insistence upon his self-abnegating virtue.

The actions required of Smith to attain his freedom and economic success, like the actions of Moretti's successful bourgeois capitalist, are not entirely "fair," but they must be represented as such to be socially legitimate. According to Moretti, bourgeois capitalist accumulation "becomes easily ruthless; but, and this is important, ruthless, unfair, equivocal, murky—yet seldom actually *illegal*" (171). Although the practices of bourgeois capitalists might be murky, the bourgeois represents them as socially legitimate. "The grey area" is home to a network of fuzzy practices, "machinations, manipulation, no good conscience, flexible morality.... Within it, an 'irreconcilable contradiction between two moralities'" (174). Although the competing moralities might be irreconcilable, that doesn't preclude a concerted effort to hide the contradiction. For Moretti, the bourgeoisie's social justification relies on a network of factors, but most firmly on honesty; "honesty is for this class what honour had been for the aristocracy; etymologically, it even derives from honour" (173). The bourgeois, then, is caught between two competing goals: on the one hand, accumulation must be sought, and can be attained best through opportunistic means; but on the other hand, accumulation must be socially legitimate. Legitimation for an owner class must be provided in some manner—birth and nobility no longer apply, but something must replace them. Enter the ideals that must paper over the potentially illegitimate means of accumulating wealth within the "grey area": honesty, usefulness, industry, and frugality. In the narrative, Smith prizes these qualities, as does the amanuensis who constructed the narrative and its preface.

It is important to note that while Venture Smith succeeded in accumulating capital and becoming a businessman, he lived at a time when his own body placed him in the category of

“things owned.” Gaining subjectivity therefore required precise political maneuvering on his part. Cedric Robinson notes that the development of Western societies—including the development of capitalism—hinged on ideas of difference (10). Capitalism, then, is not an objective, disinterested system. It is founded on ideas of difference that preemptively establish what an individual can (ordinarily) achieve within the system. Robinson goes on to argue that slavery is integral to the development of capitalism, claiming that the result of slave labor was capital accumulation powering a wide variety of industries (120). Extending the line of thinking generated by Robinson, Edward Baptist argues that slavery is not, as sometimes imagined, an isolated, backwards part of American history. Rather, it was intrinsic to capitalism’s development. Baptist’s work is illustrative of a larger turn within studies of slavery, in which scholars are considering the interplay between slavery and the development of nineteenth-century capitalism. According to Baptist, “free people gained new kinds of modern power. The sweat and blood of the growing system, a network of individuals and families and labor camps that grew bigger with each passing year, fueled massive economic change” (xxiv). Of particular note is the fact that *free people* gained new kinds of power. Even Venture Smith, after securing his own freedom through capital, found a way of gaining power through the economic domination of others’ bodies. Racial ideas permeated society, resulting in a system where black bodies labored and produced goods, while white bodies accumulated capital. And yet there were momentary, unique fissures in the system—opportunities not available to all but available, contingently, to some. Smith’s ability to function as a black man who owned black men constituted just one of these opportunities.

The system of racial capitalism was in the process of calcifying throughout the nineteenth century, which influenced views of ownership related to a black elite social class. Early in the

nineteenth century, a few black capitalists owned land and people. While such ownership was not particularly common, Smith was not entirely unique. The case of John Carruthers Stanly, for instance, foregrounds issues of black elite class formation. Stanly, of North Carolina, gained his freedom just after Smith's death at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and went on to own land and slaves, becoming a prominent planter in the port city of New Bern (Schweninger 159-160). Similarly to Smith, Stanly was successful in large part due to his close relationships with white businessmen, (Schweninger 160, 176, 184). Stanly also benefited from a reputation like that of Smith's, being described as "a peaceable citizen, and industrious by every laudable endeavor in the acquisition of wealth, fame, and reputation" (quoted in Schweninger 184). While at the beginning of the nineteenth century black elite ownership was permissible when treated as the result of exemplary circumstances or individuals, by the latter half of the century, this black ownership represented a threat to (white) social cohesion after emancipation, and further represented the possibility of a rising black middle class.

Racial distinctions calcified, with the result that a black owner class was almost an impossibility. Notably, Frederick Douglass frames this situation as emblematic of the "color line," saying that years after slavery black men "ought by this time to have contradicted the degrading qualities which slavery formerly ascribed to him. All very true as to the letter, but utterly false as to the spirit. Slavery is indeed gone, but its shadow still lingers over the country and poisons more or less the moral atmosphere of all sections of the republic" (573). W.E.B. Du Bois makes explicit what he and Douglass mean by the concept of the color line. Only six percent of the black population owned land in 1898, and Du Bois attributed this to the fact that they received no support from the white population—like Smith and Stanly had—after emancipation, and were forced to constantly contend with debt (473-474). Black indebtedness



allowed white landowners to point to “the scarred and wretched land; the ruined mansions, the worn-out soil and mortgaged acres, and [say], This is Negro freedom!” (470). It is within this system that Venture Smith must be understood in his attempt to gain his freedom and claim some agency in his own life. It is within this same system that the later 1897 representations of Smith and their attempts to reduce him to a laboring black body must also be understood.

Considering how Smith’s position as a black capitalist would be rendered impossible soon after the period during which he lived, it is surprising that recent scholarship on Smith recapitulates elements of the nineteenth-century mythology through which he was understood. Consider, for instance, the 2010 scholarly essay collection, *Venture Smith and the Business of Slavery and Freedom*, which grew from a significant interdisciplinary undertaking by scholars of history, literature, and even genetics. While this scholarship is fresh and vital, it nonetheless occasionally glorifies the idea of Smith as self-made laborer, as a fair-dealing, abstemious producer, earner, and saver. Here, it is worth quoting at length from James Horton’s foreword to the collection:

Smith’s story is also the iconic story of a self-made man who struggled against the greatest of odds to become a successful entrepreneur. This volume tells that story through the extraordinary life of a man one cannot help but admire. It sets the stage for his own moving account of his life. Venture’s autobiography reveals him to be a man of talent and determination, as committed to American Values as any of the founders, and more committed to seeing the nation fulfill its grand goal of universal human freedom and opportunity. (xi)

Framing Smith as a “successful entrepreneur” glosses the fact that Smith’s success often stemmed from walking on the fuzzy boundary of the law, and from exploiting other people.

Furthermore, the appeals to “American values” or the commitment to universal human freedom are specious. After all, reading Smith’s values is a near impossibility. Perhaps he was a cold, cruel capitalist. Maybe he was helping people to freedom. There is ample room in the text for both interpretations.

### 3. VIRTUOUS LABOR AND THE BOURGEOIS

Before he was known as Venture Smith, Broteer Furro's introduction to the economic system of white European Americans was marked by violence. He recalls witnessing the death of his father, a local elite in West Africa, at the hands of slavers who tortured him to try to find out where his money was. He refused to give in, and as Smith notes, "he thus died without informing his enemies of the place where his money lay. I saw him while he was thus tortured to death. The shocking scene is to this day fresh in my mind, and I have often been overcome while thinking on it" (11). The violent transaction Broteer witnesses seems to contradict the idea of Smith's interpellation into white capitalist economics. It hardly seems likely that Smith would wholly embrace an economic system that he knows, from his very introduction to it, is intricately tied to the domination, commodification, and exploitation of bodies. Smith recognizes this explicitly in his narrative, when he says in response to the question of why his previous master wanted to sell him, that "I could not give him the reason, unless it was to convert me into cash, and speculate with me as with other commodities" (21-22). Smith recognizes that this is how life is determined in early America. From his very first interactions with the economic system he becomes embedded in, Smith is aware of how it is tied to the domination of other people, and he participates in this system.

Although Smith might recognize the economic system of early America was balanced on the backs of humans, others at the time were less likely to acknowledge it, or, if they did, they tended to minimize its importance to the developing American economy. The printed materials surrounding Smith's narrative demonstrate this pattern of eliding slavery, focusing instead on Smith's "pattern of honesty, prudence, and industry" (iv), as noted in the preface to the 1798 narrative. In an advertisement for the narrative by its publisher, Charles Holt, Smith is described

as singular in his embodiment: “Venture is a negro remarkable for size, strength, industry, fidelity, and frugality” (Advertisement). Furthermore, the later 1897 edition of the narrative was paired with *Traditions of Venture!*, stories that glorified Smith’s physical abilities and ability to work. Both texts valorize a similar set of virtues, particularly the virtues of industry and honesty, or, in this case, its racially loaded corollary, “fidelity.” As Moretti explains, the bourgeois capitalist legitimates his ownership and power through these virtues. According to Moretti, this legitimation hinging on honesty also encompassed another set of traits: “energy, first of all; self-restraint; intellectual clarity; commercial honesty; a strong sense of goals” (16). Importantly, these traits can be performative. Moretti gives the example of *Robinson Crusoe* where even though Crusoe’s wealth at the end of the novel comes from the exploitation of slaves, his rights to it are not questioned because of the huge amounts of work he put in while on the island—“work has become *the new principle of legitimation of social power*” (30). Following after this pattern, Venture Smith is continually framed by these qualities, always performing the “ascetic imperative of modern production” (Moretti 51). Yet the emphasis changes over time. In 1798, Smith is legitimated by the virtues of the owner class, and one can still detect his shrewdness. In 1897, by contrast, his energy and superabundance of labor take center stage. Explicitly, the contents of the narratives and framing materials leave room for more than just the valorization of labor and frugality.

The two preceding examples demonstrate a disconnect between Smith’s acknowledgement of human capital as a method to succeed economically, and the need to hide the exploitation of that human capital. This is the gap that Smith must negotiate, and he manages to do so by operating in the “grey area,” cannily taking advantage of unique opportunities and downplaying his acts of advantage taking. In the narrative, Smith demonstrates an awareness of

the fact that, while race may be a powerful factor shaping social life, it is the control of capital (and bodies) that lends an individual power. Smith recounts that when he tried to escape with three other fellow slaves, Heddy (an Irishman and one of the slaves) attempted to abscond with their supplies. Realizing this, Smith notified authorities and had Heddy recaptured, at which point he returned with his companions (or, perhaps, captives) to their master. Smith blamed the attempt on Heddy, and returned to work. Heddy went to jail (17-18). This moment suggests Smith's clear-eyed awareness of how physical control over bodies relates to power. Even though Heddy is white, Smith uses his canniness to exchange Heddy and deftly get himself out of a sticky situation in which he might have been punished for trying to escape. Smith would rather be free than a slave, but when the escape plan fails, he recognizes the importance of being in a favored position and grasps his opportunity. Furthermore, the situation demonstrates a recurring theme important to Smith (and to Moretti's bourgeois capitalist): trust. Smith grasps the morally ambiguous opportunity (he was, after all, attempting to escape) and turns it to his advantage in order to curry favor and earn the trust of his master.

Repeatedly, Smith's actions serve to enforce the values of a capitalist society on the eve of the industrial revolution, and also demonstrate his ability to obey the letter of the law while twisting unique situations to his advantage—a fine demonstration of bourgeois values. Smith offers an account of when a hired black man tried to run away from him without paying his debts, saying “I procured a warrant, took him, and requested him to go to Justice Throop's of his own accord, but he refusing, I took him on my shoulders, and carried him there, distant about two miles” (28-29). Debt rules all, and, in this instance, Smith demonstrates that the only link to freedom (even the freedom of walking) is found in capital, which allows one to take ownership of one's own body—or, in this case, the bodies of others. Furthermore, the episode demonstrates

Smith's willingness to take advantage of others to gain his reimbursement within the bounds of the law. In another instance before attaining his freedom, Smith resisted his abusive white master. He tells of intervening in a conflict between his mistress and his wife, when he threw his mistress's horsewhip in the fire (18-19). Afterward, Smith's master beat him with a club, at which point Smith took the club from him and carried it to the Justice of the Peace to complain, which resulted in the Justice asking Smith's master "for what he treated his slave thus hastily and unjustly, and told him what would be the consequence if he continued the same treatment towards me" (19). While this could appear emancipatory in some ways, it also serves to highlight Smith's canny legalism. By burning the whip, Smith forced a situation in which Smith's master used a club to beat him. But this beating was not legal under Connecticut law, allowing Smith to turn the situation to his advantage (Smith, Zephaniah 28). Smith acts in his best interest while obeying the letter of the law.

Even though Smith exploits opportunities to his advantage, the narrative offers a socially legitimating performance of frugality and industry that runs throughout Smith's life. In the first page of the narrative, Smith is immediately characterized by his physical characteristics—he describes himself as "descended from a very large, tall and stout race of beings, much larger than the generality of people in other parts of the globe, being commonly considerable above six feet in height" (5). Immediately after this, he describes tending a flock of sheep at only five years of age (6). At the very outset of the narrative, readers are primed to think of Smith in relation to his physical abilities. This is reiterated when Smith is captured by slavers—he describes being forced to march over four hundred miles, saying "I was obliged to carry on my head a large flat stone used for grinding our corn, weighing as I should suppose, as much as 25 pounds; besides victuals, mat and cooking utensils. Though I was pretty large and stout of my age, yet these

burthens were very grievous to me, being only about six years and an half old” (11). Once he is sold in the American colonies, Smith recounts the “hard tasks imposed on [him]” (15).

Importantly, Smith’s labor is characterized as hard or exploitative when he is enslaved—the labor is grievous, with little reward. Smith recounts working for his freedom, noting that “in that six month’s time I cut and corded four hundred cords of wood, besides threshing out seventy-five bushels of grain, and received of my wages only twenty pounds” (24). Nevertheless, Smith is able to purchase his freedom, perhaps because of his ascetic lifestyle. After attaining freedom, the characterization of labor shifts. Smith describes working for other people, but the labor is no longer hard or grievous. It is still superabundant—Smith cords several thousand cords of wood—but he characterizes this work positively, saying “many other singular and wonderful labors I performed in cutting wood there” (25). In addition to crediting his labor, Smith gives credit for his success to his asceticism, noting that he wore homespun, avoided gatherings with his friends, shunned luxuries, and did not drink (25-26). Physicality and labor weave throughout the narrative, linking Smith with the energy and industry (not to mention frugality) that serve to legitimate the bourgeois.

Underneath Smith’s performance of industry and frugality, though, it seems he is exploiting opportunities to invest in the bodies of others. As a black man in early America, Smith’s body itself was capital, but by striking agreements with his various masters, Smith was able to put in additional labor on his own time (providing he gave part of the profit to his masters). The narrative provides several pages narrating the extensive amounts of work he completes in order to do this (22-24). Through this process, Smith managed to purchase his freedom at the age of thirty-six, before continuing the same process to begin accumulating the bodies of others. After attaining his own freedom, Smith purchased his own sons first,

presumably to help him work and generate capital, since before buying the freedom of Meg (his wife), he says “I purchased a negro man, for no other reason than to oblige him, and gave for him sixty pounds” (26). However, we might question whether or not Smith had “no other reason,” since instantly after this, he tells us of the money he lost when the man ran away (26). In this case, Smith highlights his own industry and frugality (and he frames his purchase of the other black man as generosity), but this glosses over his canny use of resources. After generating relatively small amounts of capital, Smith invests in a high-return investment: enslaved bodies. He never refers to these men as slaves, and it is not entirely clear how he treated these men, but presumably Smith was not the easiest man to work for, judging by his frequent references to how much money he loses when they almost inevitably run away—for unstated reasons. These repeated escapes and escape attempts suggest Smith was more similar to a white enslaver than we might otherwise expect.

Nevertheless, Smith’s economic stability—no matter how it is achieved—was a necessity for navigating the social context of early Republican America. This can be best illustrated through an example that Smith would have been intimately familiar with. Smith helped Sawney Anderson, a black man, to freedom. Anderson in turn loaned money to Cuff Chesebrough, another free black man, so Chesebrough could purchase his wife, Rose. But when Anderson needed funds, he sued Chesebrough to recover the loan, which resulted in Chesebrough losing his house, and Rose losing her freedom, as she was sold into slavery once again (Sweet 116-117). Complicity to some extent is a requirement for any sort of freedom within the economic climate of early Republican America. In stark contrast with Chesebrough’s story, Smith recounts that he “became possessed of another dwelling-house, and my temporal affairs were in a pretty prosperous condition. This and my industry was what alone saved me from being expelled that



part of the island in which I resided, as an act was passed by the select-men of the place, that all negroes residing there should be expelled” (27). Smith’s personal freedom is threatened, but he avoids the fate of Chesebrough. Importantly, he claims industry and wealth save him, not his intelligence or business savvy. However, this could be contestable, and some scholars suggest that Smith’s connections to powerful white men in the community, such as colonel Smith, account for his stability (Kazanjian 63). Although Smith prioritizes his industry, it seems his social connections and wealth are integral factor in his freedom—wealth that is, incidentally, often generated by means other than industry alone.

Smith’s pattern of purchases suggests that his investments in other black men were related to monetary gain. In one telling passage, Smith glibly says “next after my wife, I purchased a negro man for four hundred dollars. But he having an inclination to return to his old master, I therefore let him go. Shortly after I purchased another negro man for twenty-five pounds, whom I parted with shortly after” (27). Almost no rationale is provided for the purchases or subsequent departures, but it is perhaps telling that they all occurred before Smith purchased his daughter for forty-four pounds (27). Smith explicitly references hiring or purchasing a total of nine men throughout the narrative, although the actual number is perhaps much higher, since he mentions hiring an undetermined number of men to navigate “a sloop of about thirty tons burthen” (27) and he also notes owning a fleet of over twenty vessels over the course of his life, which likely required assistance (29). Nonetheless, Smith builds a case for his success centered around his frugality and industry. His ownership of others (and the financial gain which resulted) is relegated to gaps in the narrative, although the process was likely lucrative judging by the amount of money Smith put into such efforts. Hard work is not the only road to success. Smith understands that bodies are capital, and capital accumulates.

In addition to sidelining his ownership of others, the narrative further bolsters the case that Smith's success is due to his personal qualities of industry, honesty, and frugality by frequently referencing the ways in which he is cheated and loses money on his business ventures. Nonetheless, these business ventures undoubtedly made him money, judging by the fact that he owned at least twenty "boats, canoes, and sail vessels... employed in the fishing and trafficking business" (29). Regardless, the representations of these ventures are unerringly negative. Smith tells of taking a whale boat to purchase some clams, at which time "this Webb stole my boat, and went in her to Connecticut river, and sold her cargo for his own benefit," and then proceeded to extort money from Smith to recover the boat (29). Immediately after this, Smith recounts the tale of being sued to pay for a mistake that someone else made in dropping a hogshead of molasses overboard, regarding which he says "such a proceeding... whatever it may be called in a christian land, would in my native country have been branded as a crime equal to highway robbery. But Captain Hart was a *white gentleman*, and I a *poor African*, therefore it was all right, and good enough for the black dog" (30). It is worth pointing out that in this statement, Smith distances himself from the "Christian land" he resides in, suggesting that he does not necessarily agree with its ideals, or with the ways in which it operates, even if he must find a way (industrious, virtuous labor, we are led to believe) to live and operate within it. Furthermore, giving such examples of being swindled by dishonest businessmen explicitly pairs Smith with the "grey area's" ideal of honesty. The narrative establishes a pattern of attributing Smith's success to his industry and ability to work, while almost no mention is made of the many men he hired (or perhaps enslaved) to run his businesses, and his businesses are almost exclusively paired with the losses he sustained through them—not the successes. This approach emblemizes the legitimation of Moretti's bourgeois owner class. They are legitimated by

industry and honesty while the other facets of their accumulative endeavors are pushed to the background.

Still, navigating the encounter with Captain Hart displays more than Smith's ability to frame experiences in ways that bolster his reputation for honesty. The encounter also shows his canny navigation of the emergent racial and national climate surrounding him. David Kazanjian argues that Hart understood Smith as a stranger, and "seems to remind Smith that they also do not share an emerging, U.S. national identity.... Hart rejects Smith's effort to produce substantial freedom through engagement in the formal and abstract equality of capitalist exchange" (65). In 1781, at the time of the incident, ideas of racial and national identity were not solidified. Even though Hart perhaps held some racial bias against Smith, and some ideas about what counts as national belonging, the narrative suggests that Smith is aware of this. Even though he knows his original name of Broteer Furro, Smith keeps the name of "Venture," given to him by his first master. He keeps a name that Kazanjian notes was "used in the Atlantic zone during this period to name sailors' efforts to trade and earn for themselves. In Smith's efforts to claim the very term that also marked his own enslavement, to articulate freedom with a word that always means slavery—venture—we see the paradox within which Smith writes his life" (61). "Venture," then, keeps his first name, which can be read as a signal of being able to accrue capital. He also keeps the last name of "Smith," which can be read as gratitude for the man from whom Smith purchased his freedom. However, Smith's choices in names can also be read as something canner—an effort to avoid things that would mark him as a "stranger" and inhibit his ability to work within the economic sphere of the early Republic.

In addition to his choices in name, Smith's actions and business transactions demonstrate a further willingness to integrate with and make exceptions for the economic situation

surrounding him. While he expressed a distrust of whaling expeditions later in his life (26), earlier in his life, Smith agreed to go on a whaling voyage for Oliver Smith. Robert Forbes, David Richardson, and Chandler Saint suggest that even though the indignity of being associated with untrustworthy whaling men would have been prohibitive for Smith, he conceded to go since he felt beholden to Oliver Smith (perhaps for being willing to enter into a deal to free him), and knew he could trust him (72). Smith highlights his own trustworthiness in recounting one of his first experiences in North America, when he refused to give up his master's keys (even though his master's father demanded them), which resulted in his master saying that "his young Venture was so faithful that he never would have been able to have taken the keys from him but by violence; that he should not fear to trust him with his whole fortune, for that he had been in his native place so habituated to keeping his word, that he would sacrifice even his life to maintain it" (15). The final page of Smith's narrative also demonstrates his integration into the business community surrounding him. Five men from the community signed the narrative to attest to its truthfulness, but they weren't just any men; Smith had business connections with many of them, and had worked for and with them throughout his life (Blevins 148). His final resting place is further suggestive of his integration into the community; his burial represents "admission as a ranking member of the Yankee establishment, solemnized by his interment... in a prime plot close to the meetinghouse, marked with expensive and expertly carved headstones" (Forbes, Richardson, and Saint 76). In fact, the headstone itself is a tribute to the impact Smith had on the community—the artist departed from his usual headstone pattern, giving Smith's distinctly African features (Tulimieri 254-256). Smith's efforts seem as if they are tied to fitting into the society surrounding him by the accumulation of material goods to demonstrate his worth and trustworthiness to a materially-focused society.

#### 4. EMBODIED CAPITALISM AND THE FANTASY OF VENTURE SMITH

Smith's representation within the 1798 narrative highlights his qualities of industry and frugality, while eliding the morally fuzzy elements of his accumulation. Reading against the grain reveals Smith's legalism (in burning the whip when he knows the law forbids a beating by club), his shrewdness (in turning in a co-conspirator when the possibility of escape was lost), and his willingness to use the tools of debt and accumulation (in buying human beings). Yet it is clear from the printed versions of Smith's narrative that printers and editors did not seek to reveal their subject's canniness. Instead, they present Smith as an exemplary, honest laborer. In 1798, Charles Holt of New London Connecticut published Smith's narrative, as told by Smith to an amanuensis. Of particular note is the fact that the writer of the preface praises Smith's life and accomplishments, casting him as a "Franklin and a Washington in a state of nature, or rather in a state of slavery," worthy of emulation by black individuals and perhaps "some white people would not find themselves degraded by imitating such an example" (4). In particular, the preface highlights Smith's qualities of "honesty, prudence and industry" (4). The 1798 advertisements for the narrative repeat these qualities, adding references to his size and strength. Despite the presence of a few references to his physical abilities, these early representations seem to reflect a treatment of Smith as the black bourgeois. He is obviously successful in the narrative, but in the framing materials and throughout the narrative itself, the redeeming qualities of Moretti's bourgeois operating in the "grey area" are repeatedly highlighted and alluded to.

Examining the advertisements surrounding Smith's narrative reveals an attempted erasure of his shrewdness—an erasure emblematic of representations of bourgeois capitalists, and one that continued into later editions of the narrative—that allowed him to thrive in the economic milieu of the early Republic. The narrative itself touches on some of his accomplishments, but it

largely glosses his integration with the business community brought to light in recent historical scholarship. Further, it glosses just how shrewd Smith needed to be in order to succeed. A few poetic lines in the 1798 advertisements for the narrative are illustrative of the attitude regarding Smith's accomplishments: "descended from a royal race, benevolent and brave; on Afric's *savage plains* a prince, in this *free land* a slave" (advertisement). While the advertisement might acknowledge Smith's prince-like qualities, it highlights his status as a slave, even though he is a free man. Additionally, the qualities the advertisement notes are not Smith's shrewdness or intelligence. They are instead his "size, strength, industry, fidelity, and frugality." Fitting, for "Afric's prince," and fitting, too, for Moretti's bourgeois. As a whole, the advertisements and preface seem to demonstrate a concerted effort to avoid the ways in which Smith operated, revealed by the narrative and recent scholarship. His methods were shrewd, and not entirely about fair dealing—not fitting at all with the descriptions provided by publishers and editors. Smith operates in the "grey area." However, the representations of his actions are suggestive of the legitimation of the bourgeois, erasing shrewdness and foregrounding honesty, industry, and trustworthiness.

While the erasure of Smith's canniness remains consistent in the later editions of the narrative, the 1897 edition takes additional steps to erase the idea of Smith as a black bourgeois capitalist, instead presenting him as an exceptional laborer (and therefore a pattern for other black individuals to follow). While black capitalists like Smith—or Stanly, of North Carolina—could own land and slaves in the eighteenth century, the calcification of the color line and the possibility of a black owner class at the end of the nineteenth century provided strong motivation for an anxious white population to frame Smith as a laborer, rather than as an example of frugality and savviness to emulate. Perhaps because of this, the later 1897 edition of the narrative

was paired and sold with *Traditions of Venture!*, a collection of stories that glorified Smith's physical abilities and his ability to work. The noteworthy aspect of the publication is that it does not focus on Smith's business acumen, his intelligence, or his savvy dealings. Instead, it focuses on the black body's ability to produce labor. *Traditions of Venture!* is a form of cultural repression and obsession at the end of the nineteenth century, under which Smith is reduced down to an ideal of what the black body is supposed to be: honest, prudent, industrious, faithful. He is able to live frugally, and, above all else, to produce astonishing amounts of labor.

Indeed, labor functioned throughout the narrative's publication history as the primary nexus through which Smith was understood. At the end of the original 1798 narrative, Smith laments that his sons have failed to follow in his footsteps, citing the amount of money he paid for them, and the fact that his joy would be full if only they were more like him—presumably in their economic endeavors (31). This passage disappears in the 1835 narrative (which was published by some of his descendants), and only reappears in the 1897 version, nearly a full century after the original, accompanied by a note from J. S. Stewart, the editor, in which he hypothesizes that it was edited out of the 1835 version because Smith's descendants had by that time established themselves as worthy of public approbation (29). And yet, when the sons are again included in the narrative, they are included as laborers. *Traditions of Venture!*, appended to the 1897 narrative, contains stories of Venture's achievements, but it also contains stories of the achievements of his sons. The stories highlight their size and strength, the ability to carry stone that others "could not believe were carried aboard by two men alone" (38), their agricultural achievements, and the strength of their own sons (38-39). These claims illustrate Stewart's desire to represent a specific version of the black body; Smith's descendants are temporarily edited out of historical (and/or literary) record, at least until they are able to demonstrate their strength,

their ability to labor, and also their willingness to physically throw other black men off of their property for the offence of stealing from their fields (39). Success in their world is tied not to shrewdness or luck, but to physical ability, and the ability to control other bodies.

*Traditions of Venture!* was ostensibly constructed as a project to demonstrate the truthfulness of Smith's narrative, since H.M. Selden, the compiler, writes, "the reader of this new edition will find much in confirmation of the truthfulness of Venture's statements" (31). Nonetheless, it is worth noting the document's focus on Smith's physicality. Selden states that the new edition meets the demand of readers who wanted to know more about the man who "was well known for his abnormal strength, industry and goodly character" (31), which conveniently glosses the fact that the man of goodly character wasn't afraid to physically dominate those who got in his way or tried to escape paying him the money they owed. Furthermore, *Traditions of Venture!* does little to establish Smith's character, but instead focuses entirely on his strength and industry. His size is mentioned repeatedly throughout the text (he is over six feet tall, over three hundred pounds, and measures six feet around the waist, which is apparently important to know (32)), and the document repeats multiple feats of strength, including carrying a tierce of salt weighing an estimated four hundred pounds (32-33), the weight of his axe (nine pounds), with which he could chop more wood than anyone else (33-35), and the fact that he lifted the hind legs of oxen to weigh them after his sight failed (33-34). Even in his death, physicality mattered; the text draws attention to just how big his pallbearers were (mostly over six feet tall) and their many complaints about how heavy Smith was (36). In short, *Traditions of Venture!* serves as less of a truth-establishing document, and more as an expression of the cultural value held by a black body at the end of the nineteenth century: it should be powerful, and able to labor. Most importantly, it should not disrupt the status quo.



Furthermore, the examples of labor within *Traditions of Venture!* represent Smith as someone who primarily labors for other people, almost entirely ignoring his business dealings. Although the document consists almost entirely of references to Smith's strength, these are framed in the context of Smith working for others—he chops wood for other people, he threshes grain for other people, and he performs feats of strength for the amazement of other people. At only one point in the document is Smith presented as a businessman, but even in this case, his physical qualities are highlighted. The document includes a story of Smith renting out his scow to two men so they can haul the wood that they cut, but the focal point of the story is Smith's involvement: “when they went to get the scow she was well up on the beach. They thought it impossible to get her off.... They led [Smith] to the water's edge. Father said the timbers fairly cracked as [Smith's] great hands touched the scow. She swept into the water like a bird on the wing” (33). In the only moment in *Traditions* in which Smith could be represented as a businessman, he is represented as a figure of heroic strength. He remains as an image of the black body: waiting to perform impossible feats of strength and labor endlessly, at the request of others.

Physical labor's centrality in *Traditions of Venture!* places the text squarely in line with late nineteenth-century views of black labor that served to solidify racially determined class status, perpetuating the system of black indebtedness derided by W.E.B. Du Bois. Post-emancipation, free black individuals faced new forms of exploitation. While no longer enslaved, black individuals had to deal with a racial caste system described—in the tellingly titled *White Land, Black Labor*—as an inflexible system where all white populations held higher standing than what was supposed to be a black laboring class (Flynn 1-2). Dealing with exploitative wages and unreasonable living costs meant that “prosperity was not an option, for the policies of

landowners created an unnecessarily dense poverty for the great mass of black labor” (Flynn 4). Even those advocating for the advancement of free black individuals allowed for the systematic exploitation of labor. In *The Future of the American Negro*, Booker T. Washington writes that “the Negro in America is different from most people for whom missionary effort is made, in that he works. He is not ashamed or afraid of work. When hard, constant work is required, ask any Southern white man, and he will tell you that in this the Negro has no superior. He is not given to strikes or to lockouts” (171). In noting the unwillingness to strike, Washington makes the case that black populations are amenable to exploitative labor, and in directing readers to ask “any Southern white man,” he implicitly casts white men as owners, and black men as laborers. Furthermore, in a 1912 article written for *The Continent* (with a mainly white readership) titled “Negro Leaders Have Kept Racial Peace,” Washington notes that black leaders trained by white individuals “kept a steady hand on the masses of the colored people” (34). The implication is of limited mobility—while some black individuals will advance socially, the masses remain as a labor force. Under this view of black labor at the end of the nineteenth century, *Traditions of Venture!* is a compelling narrative. The shift from 1798 is subtle—from industry and frugality as socially legitimating, to industry alone as socially legitimating. However, the absence of frugality in *Traditions*, combined with the importance placed on physical labor, aligns the text with views that help perpetuate a system of exploitative labor and black indebtedness.

The changing representations of Smith reveal a longstanding effort to elide the attributes that enabled his success—luck, canniness, and periodic ruthlessness. *Traditions of Venture!* does not do the work Selden claims it does, and instead draws attention to Smith’s physical ability, framing him as an anomaly. The fantasy of Venture Smith, then, existed as a construction by editors and publishers of a man who epitomized what a black body should be at the end of the

nineteenth century, a fantasy that was recapitulated in later treatments of Smith, and that serves to mask the reading of Smith as a bourgeois capitalist that becomes evident when reading the original narrative against the grain.

## 5. BLACK BOURGEOIS

Although the “black bourgeois” might hold a position of social and economic power, the black bourgeois and the white bourgeois did not perform the same social function. They existed in parallel positions. The white and black bourgeois both own land, profit from capital, and demonstrate phenomenal economic success, but on a social level, the black bourgeois is dependent on the white bourgeois. The white bourgeois can be successful in himself, and can be legitimated based on his qualities (integrity, honesty), but the black bourgeois is legitimated first by labor, and second by the qualities of integrity and honesty. Smith is representative of this. The writer of the preface to the 1798 narrative reflects on the importance of Smith’s life, writing that “the reader is here presented with an account, not of a renowned politician or warrior, but of an untutored African slave, brought into this Christian country at eight years of age, wholly destitute of all education but what he received in common with other domesticated animals, enjoying no advantages that could lead him to suppose himself superior to the beasts” (iii). And even though Smith has no educational advantage, the writer claims that “had his education been suited to his genius, he might have been an ornament and an honor to human nature. It may perhaps, not be unpleasing to see the efforts of a great mind wholly uncultivated, enfeebled and depressed by slavery, and struggling under every disadvantage” (iii). Despite all of Smith’s accomplishments and the wealth he holds, it seems that he is characterized by lack—both his lack of education, and the loss of his physical ability. The writer compares Smith to an enslaved Franklin or Washington, and goes on to note that he still “exhibits traces of native ingenuity and good sense,” even though he is partly broken by the infirmities of old age (iv). The black bourgeois does not have an old age with respectability and comfort borne of his labor. He is broken, destitute, plagued by hardships and infirmities, only exhibiting “traces” of former glory.

Furthermore, the qualities that socially legitimate the bourgeois are repeated in name, but framed differently for the black bourgeois. The final page of the narrative is a certification provided by local white elites, in which they say “Venture hath sustained the character of a faithful servant, and that of a temperate, honest and industrious man, and being ever intent on obtaining his freedom, he was indulged by his masters... to purchase his freedom” (32). The black bourgeois remains a faithful servant. He is a laborer first, a businessman with temperate thought, honesty, and industry second. With his strength gone, he is a shadow of his former self. Smith serves as an example of the supposed power that the integrity, industry, and honesty of the white bourgeois hold. These qualities, readers are led to believe, have the potential to lift even the uneducated slave to a position of success. In 1798, Smith as a man seems to matter less—his moment of success demonstrates the power of the values legitimating the bourgeois, at least when supported by the labor of a powerful body.

Yet, just as the black bourgeois and the white bourgeois are constructed differently, the black bourgeois is constructed differently over time. A century after the publication of the original narrative, J. S. Stewart republished it, along with *The Traditions of Venture!*, a collection of folk stories about Smith collected by H. M. Selden. While the narrative itself is identical, *Traditions of Venture!* suggests that Smith is an exceptional laborer, not a man of business. In addition to *Traditions*, the general social perception of a black owner class at the turn of the twentieth century is illustrative of a shift: the black bourgeois is gone. In 1905, Calvin Wilson wrote an article entitled “Black Masters: A Side-Light on Slavery,” in which he suggested that black men who owned slaves were “lost from the memories of most people of this generation; I have asked dozens of Southern people, of advanced years, about negroes owning slaves, and have been told that they ‘never heard of such a thing’” (685). Wilson goes on to claim that a

black owner class enslaving others at its core holds “a deeper passion than love of gain in this unnatural arrangement [the owning of slaves], and this was ambition; it was the cold and selfish desire to attain a real or an apparent superiority over other blacks; it was ambition to rise into the class of masters, and to stand, so far as possible, on the same level as white men” (685). A black owner class a decade after the final publication of Smith’s narrative was barely conceivable, and its existence was attributed to “cold and selfish desire.” The language is telling: black and white are different classes, and a black master is more than an anomaly. He is an abomination. Seven years later, Wilson published a piece titled “Negroes Who Owned Slaves,” commenting again on the disappearance of knowledge regarding that element of slavery: “more than forty daily newspapers passed around from one to another during the summer of 1907 a few crumbs of information on this matter as items of curious news. Editorial comment was tinged with surprise and in some cases with incredulity” (483). To rationalize black ownership, Wilson notes that

The negroes brought with them from their native land African ideas and customs. They were used from immemorial times to slavery. Many of those brought thence to America had been slaves in their own land. Others had been owners of slaves in Africa. In both cases they were used to slavery. It did not therefore seem to them unnatural for a negro in America to hold his brethren in bondage, when he had become free and able to buy his fellows. (484)

By making this case, Wilson provides reasons for black ownership of slaves, but at the same time he characterizes that ownership as intrinsically different from white ownership. The goal of black ownership of slaves is not explicitly to generate capital; instead it is something else, something originating from “African ideas and customs.” In claiming this, Wilson seems to prefigure the

scholarly debate over Smith's ideological influences, referenced earlier. Here, too, he contradicts his statement from seven years earlier that such ownership was a "cold and selfish" attempt to become like white owners. Apparently, deciding on what exactly characterizes black ownership of slaves is not as important as establishing that it is definitely not like white ownership. Wilson provides examples of black ownership throughout the piece, mainly highlighting the apparently humorous business failings, and occasionally commenting on the cruelty of black masters (implicitly contrasted with the "kindness" of white masters). Even the economic success of men like John Carruthers Stanly, who at one point owned two plantations and over one hundred slaves, is easily done away with in a short statement: "but finally after so much success, he engaged in speculations and went down hill even faster than he had gone up" (486). For Wilson and the surprised and incredulous newspaper editors of the early twentieth century, the black bourgeois is nearly inconceivable. He is a joke, an oddity, an impossibility.

As a whole, the shift between the end of the eighteenth and the end of the nineteenth centuries demonstrates the solidification (and power) of a system of racial capitalism. At the end of the eighteenth century, the black bourgeois exists, but he is essentially the bourgeois—his blackness as an emerging category gets in the way of casting him simply as "bourgeois," but it does not bar him from that category, either. He must be canny, but his existence is not an impossibility. Smith demonstrates this canniness throughout the narrative, but as an example, it is highlighted most in his confrontation with Captain Hart, in which he navigates a highly racialized confrontation by drawing attention to his superior honesty and integrity. He is still legitimated in essentially the same way as the white bourgeois. By contrast, the treatment of a black owner class in newspapers at the beginning of the twentieth century—as recounted by Wilson—demonstrates the mental acrobatics required of people living at that time to fit black

owners into their conceptual framework, a framework that did not allow for such a class. The black bourgeois requires social legitimation—just as the white bourgeois—but such social legitimation, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, runs into the problem of the calcified color line. The black owner/investor class should be a structural impossibility. What is revealed by the previous analysis of Wilson and the newspaper editors he refers to, then, is an effort to smooth over something that, apparently, should not exist. That effort does several different things, in different cases. Wilson and the newspaper editors variously cast black owners as: selfish and arrogant; cruel; successful in a limited sense; not successful at all, and humorous because of it; temporarily successful, but ultimately not successful (because of an apparent lack of sense); and, perhaps most important given the present consideration of Smith, hardworking. If we are to take *Traditions of Venture!* seriously, that means at the end of the nineteenth century, Smith—as an exemplar of the black bourgeois—is legitimated by one thing: the ability to produce labor.



## 6. VENTURE SMITH AS “EMBLEMATIC BOURGEOIS”

The implications of the shift in representations of Venture Smith matter for more than just the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The late nineteenth-century understanding of Smith as an exceptional laborer is not relegated to that time. It filters into the present, shaping current thought about who Venture Smith was, and how he operated. While current scholarship reflects the influence of some of this nineteenth-century understanding of Smith, a more general source of information is illustrative of the continuing effect representations of Smith have had on how he is understood in our time. Conducting a Google search with the keywords “black Benjamin Franklin” returns information about Franklin’s attitude toward slavery. Nothing is mentioned of Venture Smith. By contrast, searching with the keywords “black Paul Bunyan” returns multiple articles on Smith, including interviews with historians about his life, and reports on what archaeologists found when they dug up his grave. Furthermore, some of these articles grossly misrepresent Smith, such as one claiming that “as a slave, Smith was sold over thirty times due to his size and unwillingness to cooperate with his slavemasters [sic]” (Jones). Over two centuries after his death, his physicality still matters, and is recycled for the purposes of a misleading narrative. The common factor within these pieces is that they valorize Smith’s physical characteristics—something that *Traditions of Venture!* brought to the fore of conversations regarding Smith in 1897. They recapitulate a particular understanding of Smith, one that perpetuates the nineteenth-century preoccupation with his physical ability to produce labor. The black bourgeois, it seems, has always required some form of social legitimation. Turning back to Smith’s narratives can help clarify what that legitimation looked like in the past, how it changed over time, and how it endures even now.

In the 1798 narrative Smith emerges as what we might call the “emblematic bourgeois,” publicly demonstrating his industry and honesty while subtly achieving advantage in whatever ways he can. Charles Holt attempts to frame Smith in the same way that Moretti’s white bourgeois is legitimated—through the qualities of industry, frugality, usefulness, and honesty, which veil the canny dealings taking place within the “grey area.” The framing materials produced by Holt and the writer of the preface serve to reduce Smith to a cog in the economic machine, reproducing the ideology that shaped early American life and the understanding of the bourgeois. By focusing on Smith’s vast ability to work, the documents elide any consideration of Smith as a free man or of his transition from being a manipulated, exploited body, to being a manipulator and exploiter of other bodies. In short, despite his savvy, he continues to be manipulated and exploited—in literary form—to fit into the narrative justifying an owner class. Yet Smith has what we might call an accumulative politics; he labors endlessly, but it isn’t just for the Protestant virtue of labor. Rather, his goal is to accumulate capital, which allows for the accumulation of bodies, but he also strives for the accumulation of respect and trust. The bodies of Smith’s family members and the bodies of the men he purchases are held in place by the generation of capital. At the end of his life, Smith says:

Amidst all my griefs and pains, I have many consolations; Meg, the wife of my youth, whom I married for love, and bought with my money, is still alive. My freedom is a privilege which nothing else can equal. Notwithstanding all the losses I have suffered by fire, by the injustice of knaves, by the cruelty and oppression of false hearted friends, and the perfidy of my own countrymen whom I have assisted and redeemed from bondage, I am now possessed of more than one hundred acres of land, and three habitable dwelling houses. (Smith 31)

This moment highlights the weirdness of Smith's ownership, which includes land, houses, and also his wife. Smith frames his entire life with money, and with ownership. The passage highlights the failings and shortcomings of others, contrasting their dishonesty with Smith's success to make the implicit argument that it is his honesty and industry that result in success. Smith is represented as acting according to the rules of economics, to a fault. In 1798, he becomes the black Benjamin Franklin, the "emblematic bourgeois." Smith's narrative serves to legitimate an owner class, valorizing the ideals of the bourgeois capitalist, and framing Smith as such. In this sense, Smith's narrative is exceptional and insightful since it demonstrates the morally fuzzy actions required to survive a system of racial capitalism. The later representations of Smith attempt to erase this, though. He becomes all labor, no cunning, and no luck.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Smith is legitimated differently—in *Traditions of Venture!*, Smith as the black bourgeois is not legitimated based on honesty, but is framed as a superabundant laborer. Smith becomes the black Paul Bunyan. The stories and anecdotes included in the text focus entirely on Smith's physical ability. No mention is made of his honesty, frugality, or integrity. In itself, this is not surprising. Post-emancipation, creating and perpetuating a misleading narrative about economic success based on incredible physical labor makes a certain amount of economic sense for a system that relies on cheap labor. What is surprising, though, is the persistence of this particular narrative, and that it filters into current scholarship, and even into Google searches and popular understanding. The danger of valorizing Venture Smith as a superabundant laborer is this: the valorization becomes a recapitulation of the late nineteenth-century fantasy of Venture Smith as the idealized black body. Uncritically valorizing Smith's accomplishments runs the risk of unintentionally recapitulating a nineteenth-century fiction that freedom (and ownership) is attainable through hard work and frugality.

Doing so serves to elide Smith's accumulative politics, and ignores that his freedom was not only attainable through the labor of his own body, but, more importantly, through shrewdness and the domination and exploitation of other bodies.

In many ways, Smith's text operates in a different moral economy than other slave narratives. As Vincent Caretta observes, Smith makes little effort to highlight his Americanness, in contrast to other so-called "slave narratives." This omission is particularly striking because Smith's son served in the Revolutionary War, a conflict about which he makes no mention in his narrative (176). Furthermore, Smith does not take a stand against the institution of slavery, and he does not accept the so-called superiority of Christian or American views, even to the extent that he points out the hypocrisy of an apparently Christian land when it comes to honesty and accountability (177-178). These qualities starkly contrast with other "freedom narratives" stressing Christian or American ideals. As Duane notes, Smith's narrative runs counter to other slave narratives, which often highlight the sympathy of the narrators, but at the same time insidiously promote the idea of racialized helplessness and dependence (190). Smith's narrative doesn't do this, instead highlighting his independence. Philip Gould also notes how Smith's narrative functions in opposition to such tropes, stating that "to convert oneself from object to subject, the black autobiographer, like the black venture capitalist working his way to 'freedom,' must master the ideological and symbolic resources made available to him... the slave narrative performs itself publicly within the context of such an exchange" (678). However, Smith's narrative performs something different than other nineteenth-century "freedom narratives," which were often published by abolitionists. These scholars seem to be battling with the fact that Smith's narrative is perhaps more akin to Franklin's autobiography—which was in fact published by Holt in the same year as Smith's—than it is to that of Frederick Douglass's (1845)

or Olaudah Equiano's (1789). Treating Smith's narrative as a "freedom narrative" is perhaps a mistake. The text does trace Smith's route to freedom, but to the skeptical reader who investigates Smith's practices and business success, it also reveals the insidious link between freedom and engagement with capitalism that helped produce and legitimate slavery.

My aim is not to valorize the Franklin-esque legitimation that characterized the representation of Smith in the late eighteenth century, and that was later erased. Rather, it is to focus on the interlocking elements of slavery and capitalism, in which Smith's life and narrative are integrated. The Franklin-esque social legitimation of the bourgeois in which Smith's 1798 narrative participates existed as a veil built out of performing honesty, frugality, and industry, hiding the savviness, shrewdness, legalism, and exploitation that resulted in economic success. Nonetheless, Smith's narrative contains competing strands—he is the black Benjamin Franklin and Paul Bunyan, a slave and a free man, an emancipator and a master, all at varying times—and different combinations of those strands have been noticed and valorized (or elided) over time. David Waldstreicher seems to notice these internal discrepancies held in the narrative, drawing a parallel between Smith and Franklin, and noting that "there is something disturbing about Smith's absorption into the cash nexus in his society, as disturbing, perhaps, as his self-liberation is inspiring" (243). However, this treatment casts liberation and absorption into the cash nexus as separate things, when in fact they are the same in Smith's case. Representations of what Smith's success means for the larger culture have varied. In 1798, Smith's success ostensibly demonstrated the virtue of frugality, abstemiousness, and hard work. A century later, his success ostensibly revealed the virtue of the laboring black body. But both claims fundamentally misunderstand Smith's anomalousness. Smith's success means very little because it was wholly inaccessible to others like him. In this sense, then, Smith was very much the bourgeois of the

“grey area.” He was not a white bourgeois, but neither did he occupy the economic space reserved to him through his blackness. Rather, he seized unique opportunities unavailable to others, and his narrative papered over the ways contingency and shrewdness enabled an anomalous economic success.

Smith’s success was improbable. It required more than a healthy, laboring body. It required more, even, than the shrewdness of a man who understood how to seize opportunities when they presented themselves. Smith’s success depended upon luck and contingency. He was sold into slavery at precisely the time, and in precisely the place, that enabled him to seize opportunities that would be unavailable to other enslaved people in other times and in other places. Smith’s narrative thus legitimates the project of bourgeois capitalism as other, similar narratives do. It implicitly suggests that the particular, the idiosyncratic, and the contingent experience of one man—who worked often in the unrepresentable “grey area” of capitalist economics—functions as a universally applicable set of rules, a guide-book to be followed by those who will in fact live outside of the particular, anomalous conditions that characterized the life of Venture Smith. What emerges from my argument is not a condemnation of Smith or his actions, but nor is it a valorization of those actions. Rather, Smith’s actions made him a part of a system that should be condemned: not just slavery, but the capitalism that produced and legitimated slavery; not just the color line, but the needs of capital that helped to invent the color line.

## WORKS CITED

- Advertisement. *Bee*, published as The Bee (New London, Connecticut). December 26, 1798.
- Baptist, Edward. *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*. Basic Books, 2014.
- Blevins, Cameron. “‘Owned by Negro Venture’: Land and Liberty in the Life of Venture Smith.” *Venture Smith and the Business of Slavery and Freedom*, edited by James Stewart, University of Massachusetts Press, 2010, pp. 129-159.
- Caretta, Vincent. “Venture Smith, One of a Kind.” *Venture Smith and the Business of Slavery and Freedom*, edited by James Stewart, University of Massachusetts Press, 2010, pp. 163-183.
- Desrochers, Robert. “‘Not Fade Away’: The Narrative of Venture Smith, an African American in the Early Republic.” *The Journal of American History*, vol. 84, no. 1, 1997, pp. 40-66.
- Douglass, Frederick. “The Color Line.” *The North American Review*, vol. 132, no. 295, 1881, pp. 567-577.
- Duane, Anna. “Keeping His Word: Money, Love, and Privacy in the Narrative of Venture Smith.” *Venture Smith and the Business of Slavery and Freedom*, edited by James Stewart, University of Massachusetts Press, 2010, pp. 184-204.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. In *Du Bois: Writings*, edited by Nathan Huggins, Library of America College Edition, 1996, pp. 357-547.
- Flynn, Charles. *White Land, Black Labor: Caste and Class in Late Nineteenth Century Georgia*. Louisiana State University Press, 1983.

Forbes, Robert, David Richardson, and Chandler Saint. "Trust and Violence in Atlantic History: The Economic Worlds of Venture Smith." *Venture Smith and the Business of Slavery and Freedom*, edited by James Stewart, University of Massachusetts Press, 2010, pp. 56-82.

Franklin, Benjamin. *The life of Doctor Benjamin Franklin; written by himself: together with Essays, humourous, moral, and literary, chiefly in the manner of the Spectator*. New London, Charles Holt, 1798. *America's Historical Imprints*.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*. Harvard UP, 2005.

Gould, Philip. "Free Carpenter, Venture Capitalist: Reading the Lives of the Early Black Atlantic." *American Literary History*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2000, pp. 559-684.

Jones, Jae. "Venture Smith: The Black Paul Bunyan" *blackthen.com*, 26 November 2017.  
<https://blackthen.com/venture-smith-the-black-paul-bunyan/>

Kazanjian, David. *The Colonizing Trick: National Culture and Imperial Citizenship in Early America*. University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

Moretti, Franco. *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature*. Verso, 2014.

Nelson, Marilyn. "How I Came By My Name." *Venture Smith and the Business of Slavery and Freedom*, edited by James Stewart, University of Massachusetts Press, 2010, pp. xix.

Robinson, Cedric. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

Schweninger, Loren. "John Carruthers Stanly and the Anomaly of Black Slaveholding." *The North Carolina Historical Review*, vol. 67, no. 2, 1990, pp. 159-192.

Selden, H. M. *Traditions of Venture! Known as Venture Smith*. Middletown, J. S. Stewart, 1897.

Smith, Venture. *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa*. Middletown, J. S. Stewart, 1897.



- . *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa*. New London, published by a descendant of Venture, 1835.
- . *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa*. New London, Charles Holt, 1798.
- Smith, Zephaniah. *A System of the Laws of the State of Connecticut, Volume I*. Wyndham, John Byrne, 1795.
- Sweet, John. "Venture Smith and the Law of Slavery." *Venture Smith and the Business of Slavery and Freedom*, edited by James Stewart, University of Massachusetts Press, 2010, pp. 83-128.
- Tulimieri, Kevin. "Venture Smith's Gravestone: Its Maker and His Message" *Venture Smith and the Business of Slavery and Freedom*, edited by James Stewart, University of Massachusetts Press, 2010, pp. 252-256
- Waldstreicher, David. *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery and the American Revolution*. Hill and Wang, 2004.
- Washington, Booker T. "Negro Leaders Have Kept Racial Peace." 1912. In *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, vol. 11, edited by Louis Harlan and Raymond Smock, University of Illinois Press, 1981.
- Washington, Booker T. *The Future of the American Negro*. Small, Maynard & Company, 1900.
- Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958.
- Wilson, Calvin. "Black Masters: A Side-Light on Slavery." *The North American Review*, vol. 181, no. 588, 1905, pp. 685-698.
- Wilson, Calvin. "Negroes Who Owned Slaves." *Popular Science Monthly*, Nov. 1912.