Mercantile Exchanges, Mercantilist Enclosures:
Racial Capitalism in the Black Mariner Narratives of Venture Smith and John Jea

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The historical development of world capitalism was influenced in a most fundamental way by the particularistic forces of racism and nationalism. This could only be true if the social, psychological and cultural origins of racism and nationalism both anticipated capitalism in time and formed a piece with those events which contributed directly to its organization of production and exchange.

—Cedric J. Robinson

... the connection between nationalism and racism is neither a matter of perversion (for there is no “pure” essence of nationalism) nor a question of formal similarity, but a question of historical articulation. ... This is to say, by the very same token, that the articulation of nationalism and racism cannot be disentangled by applying classical schemas of causality, whether mechanistic (the one as the cause of the other, “producing” the other according to the rule of the proportionality of the effects to the cause) or spiritualistic (the one “expressing” the other, or giving it its meaning or revealing its
Recent historical research has documented the striking rise of black men employed in seafaring industries on the North Atlantic during the eighteenth century, and their similarly striking decline during the nineteenth century. Between 1740 and 1820, we see large numbers of North Atlantic black men, both free and enslaved, going to sea as common sailors, and occasionally as mates and captains. This rise is also reflected in black Atlantic literature, as nearly every text written during this period plots labor on the deep sea or coastal waters. Both these recent historical studies and the black Atlantic literature indicate that eighteenth-century sea labor was not as racially hierarchized as shore labor. In fact, the dramatic increase in legal and extra-legal racism in North America during the eighteenth century seems to have pushed many black men and women to coastal urban centers where women could obtain shore work and men could go to sea, together forming strong social, political, and economic units in the orbit of sea ports.

In turn, it appears that by the beginning of the nineteenth century, racial codification and exploitation had begun to spill into the North Atlantic. For instance, in 1796 the U.S. government began requiring that mariners carry Seaman’s Protection Certificates attesting to their national identity. Yet black sailors were systematically denied these papers, and so were denied whatever meager protections they provided. In addition, the U.S. Navy stopped enlisting blacks in 1799. Perhaps most devastatingly, the Negro Seamen Acts, which began in South Carolina in 1822 and quickly spread to all the other Southern states, required that black sailors be imprisoned while their ships docked in Southern ports. W. Jeffrey Bolster has estimated that at least 10,000 black sailors were incarcerated under these Acts. In addition, agents in ports who hired seamen became powerful middlemen in the 1820s and ’30s, and institutionalized “white first” hiring in the U.S. maritime industry. Also, after the 1820s, legal restrictions on black ownership of and command over maritime vessels intensified, ending the rare success stories of
merchant mariner families such as the Cuffes, the Fortens, and the Wainers, and precluding future black upward mobility within this sector.\(^9\)

However, some of the research documenting this trend tends uncritically to suggest that the relative egalitarianism on the sea in the eighteenth century was mutually inconsistent with or contradicted by the racism that drove black men off the sea in the nineteenth century.\(^10\) Take, for instance, Bolster’s important 1997 study, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail*. Writes Bolster at the beginning of his text, “Moral complacency and the desire for privilege led whites to *incorporate* race into the social structure of the early modern Atlantic world. White colonial culture *superimposed* racial meanings on a form of labor organization that need not have been racial” (my italics).\(^11\) Northern white sailors and merchants, he reiterates later in the text, “unconsciously developed new assumptions about blacks . . . ,” since “[t]he widespread conviction of equality among white men in antebellum America *rested in part on* a sense of superiority to blacks” (my italics).\(^12\) In his 1996 article, “‘Every Inch a Man’: Gender in the Lives of African American Seamen, 1800–1860,” Bolster makes a similar point: “Black sailors remained painfully aware of the very real limitations to equality in the maritime workplace. But overtly racist actions by other sailors were often subordinated to the requirements of shipboard order,” until the nineteenth century saw a “*growing assumption* among white sailors that” more subordinate, lower-skilled shipboard positions “naturally belonged to men of color. No such assumptions had characterized the late-eighteenth-century maritime world” (my italics).\(^13\)

The figurative terms “incorporate,” “superimposed,” “rested in part on,” and “growing assumption” do a lot of work for Bolster in these passages. As tropological presuppositions, they hold the place of an account of the precise relationship between racism and egalitarianism in the North Atlantic zone, offering instead an implicit set of conjectures about the form of that relationship. By representing race as a secondary (if powerful) add-on, these tropes suggest that race is fundamentally distinct from egalitarianism. In addition, race and equality emerge from this account as so generally construed that, though they exist in different proportions to one another, their meanings apparently remain consistent over the course of some two
centuries. In Bolster’s account, “equality” has a uniform, positive value throughout these centuries; access to it is simply limited by the increasing awareness of “race,” which has a uniform, negative value throughout these centuries. Consequently, Bolster’s tropological presuppositions position racism as, ultimately, a problem of individualized moralities, desires, and psyches.

To a certain extent, Bolster himself acknowledges this problem toward the end of *Black Jacks* in his discussion of the role that port agents who hired seamen, so-called crimps, played in the decline of black mariners:

But the crimps themselves were no *deus ex machina*: no single group ever is. Crimps mediated social and cultural changes in American seaports at mid-century and, in the process, affected seaport society and culture. Crimps emerge not as the cause of black Americans’ circumscribed opportunities at sea, but as the exemplar of social changes that *reworked* the meanings of waged work and race in the Atlantic maritime world. As black sailors’ story so clearly shows, the *invigorated* white supremacy fundamental to the market revolution made the hard times of free blacks even harder. (my italics)

Here, Bolster neither naturalizes equality nor psychologizes race, and he also resists the mechanistic stance in which particular historical events, such as the rise of the crimps, directly cause the decline of black sailors. Instead, he suggests that such events are mediate or exemplary of some wider, but as yet indeterminate, invigoration of racism, some more complex reworking of “waged work and race in the Atlantic maritime world.” The complex indeterminacy of the “invigorated” and “reworked” “meanings” to which Bolster refers at the end of *Black Jacks* reopens a set of questions he seemingly closes elsewhere in his text: How were the relationships between race and work re-formed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries? How does the rise and decline of black mariners transform our understanding of the emergence of and interaction among discursive practices of race, nation, and equality? How might we more precisely characterize this “invigorated” or “reworked” moment that drove black men off the sea in the nineteenth century?
In this essay, focusing on the often ignored narratives of Venture Smith and John Jea, I hope to more precisely characterize this “invigorated” or “reworked” moment. From the narratives of black Atlantic mariners such as Smith and Jea, I argue, we can trace the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century emergence of a mutually constitutive relationship—an “historical articulation,” as Etienne Balibar writes in my epigraph—among hierarchically codified racial and national identities, and a formal, abstract equality characteristic of modern capitalism. This historical articulation emerges not as the “superimposition” of a general and regressive notion of race upon a general and progressive notion of equality, but rather in the paradoxical form, at once anticipatory and constitutive, figured by Cedric J. Robinson in my epigraph: the “origins of racism and nationalism both anticipated capitalism in time and formed a piece with those events which contributed directly to its organization of production and exchange.” To say that world capitalism was influenced in this “most fundamental way” by racism and nationalism, as Robinson does, is, I want to suggest, to say that the very “worldliness” of world capitalism—its global economic development and the universalism of its political and ideological forms (such as citizenship, individualism, aesthetic culture)—depends upon the vigorous production and maintenance of particularistic social identities such as race and nation. Indeed, the very modernity of capitalism consists in the paradoxical, agonistic, and at times antagonistic articulation of universalisms and particularisms.

In particular, the mercantilist regulation of the North Atlantic by the European powers and the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries played a crucial role in this historical articulation, helping to erode the kind of cross-racial, working-class solidarity that Bolster, Marcus Rediker, and Peter Linebaugh have shown to be characteristic of eighteenth-century seafaring. As Giovanni Arrighi, Fernand Braudel, and Immanuel Wallerstein have argued, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw the European powers begin to prioritize the development of their own territorially-specific economies through a range of policies—including protectionism and encouragement—that enabled the emergence of the national bourgeoisie and the nation-states. As Arrighi explains:
The central aspect of this tendency was the strengthening of “forward and backward linkages,” in Albert Hirschman’s (1958) sense, between the consumers and the producers of a given territorial domain—a strengthening which involved not just the establishment of intermediate (mainly “manufacturing”) activities linking domestic primary production to domestic final consumption, but also the forcible “delinking” of producers and consumers from relationships of dependence on foreign (primarily Dutch) purchases and sales.¹⁵

Indeed, such mercantilist policies were crucial steps on the road to global hegemony: “In order to catch up with and overtake the early comers, the latecomers had radically to restructure the political geography of world commerce. This is precisely what was achieved by the new synthesis of capitalism and territorialism brought into being by French and British mercantilism in the eighteenth century.”¹⁶ The U.S. followed suit, vigorously practicing mercantilist measures in a bid to forge a national economy that could compete on a global scale with the European powers. Balibar has urged us to push the work of Arrighi, Braudel, and Wallerstein even further when he suggests that we seek to understand the role of discursive practices such as mercantilism, not only in nationalizing society but also in articulating the nation form with modern racial codification.¹⁷ Indeed, as I have discussed elsewhere, the texts of early U.S. mercantilism—such as the Congressional debate over the 1789 tariff and Alexander Hamilton’s Report on Manufactures—rhetorically produce an intimate articulation of race, nation, and equality.¹⁸

In what follows, I attend to the crucial role mercantilist discursive practices played in the historical articulation of race, nation, and equality plotted by Smith and Jea. In turn, attention to the role of mercantilism allows me to re-read Marx’s work on race and capitalism from the perspective of the mariner narratives. In the last section of this paper, I suggest that this historical articulation of race, nation, and equality affected a vigorous, mercantilist “enclosure” of the North Atlantic that eventually drove black men off the sea.
In 1798, “A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa” was published by Charles Holt. In three chapters, this narrative tells the story of Venture Smith’s life, from his birth around 1729 in Dukandarra, Guinea, to his capture by slave traders; his march to the sea and his Middle Passage; his struggles with a series of masters in Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Long Island; and finally, his efforts as a free black entrepreneur. Often regarded as either a problematic text of accommodation or a heroic text of early black capitalism, Smith’s narrative can also be seen to dramatize the conjoining of racial and national particularity with capitalist forms of equality, and thus to offer a quite detailed account of the historical articulation that black mariners eventually found so untenable. Unlike deep-sea mariners such as Olaudah Equiano, Smith spends most of his life engaged in the coastal trade along the shores of New England. He doggedly maintains his connections with the land, even as he persistently takes to coastal trade routes to make a living. By depicting a liminal space between sea and shore, Smith’s narrative initially figures the coastal maritime world as a necessary supplement to black economic achievement on land. Yet by the end of the narrative, Smith’s achievements have come at a cost so great that this liminal space seems to disappear altogether, becoming incorporated into the racial and national codification of economic activity itself.

The first chapter, which tells of Smith’s childhood in West Africa, begins with an ambivalent recollection of his past: “By [my father’s] first wife he had three children. The eldest of them was myself, named by my father, Brooteer” (3). With the objective “three children,” the detached “of them,” and the subordinate clause “named by my father” separating “myself” from “Brooteer,” this passage marks Smith’s eventual, forced detachment from his African name. Indeed, the narrative never again invokes the name Brooteer. Yet the ambivalent “myself” echoes throughout the first chapter’s carefully constructed account of eighteenth-century West Africa. Implicitly countering Western ethnocentrism about Africa, and differentiating West African servitude from racial slavery in the Americas, this first chapter carves out a
space of opposition to racial slavery’s injustices. Though the autobiographical “myself” emerges out of that space, it cannot simply return to the African “Broteer.” For by the end of the first chapter, Smith has been taken by slave traders to the coastal town of Anamaboe to be sold and re-named:

On a certain time I and other prisoners were put on board a canoe, under our master, and rowed away in a vessel belonging to Rhode Island, commanded by Captain Collingwood, and the mate Thomas Mumford. While we were going to the vessel, our master told us all to appear to the best possible advantage for sale. I was bought on board by one Robertson Mumford, steward of said vessel, for four gallons of rum, and a piece of calico, and called VENTURE, on account of his having purchased me with his own private venture. Thus I came by my name. All the slaves that were bought for that vessel’s cargo, were two hundred and sixty. (9)

This passage shows how deeply the world economy of the time articulates capitalism with race. Occurring around 1737 on the cusp of the Middle Passage, this monetary and linguistic transaction aims to transform Smith into a generic sign of commercial speculation and capitalist exchange, to abstract his very being into the formal logic of value.

The second chapter of the narrative begins with an eight-year-old Smith having arrived in Rhode Island via Barbados “after an ordinary passage, except great mortality by the small pox” (9). Taken to his masters’ Narragansett residence, Smith initially accedes to his transformation by asserting his loyalty to his masters, and receiving lavish, patronistic praise in return. Soon, however, Smith begins to resist his masters with physical struggle, an escape scheme, and bitingly sarcastic wit. Once Smith is given the opportunity by a new master to purchase his own freedom, however, he ceases these overt acts of resistance, and adopts a different strategy, one he will pursue vigorously to his final days: he claims the name “Venture” and the subjugation it figures. That is, he begins to accumulate capital of his own by engaging in his own ventures, selling his own labor and goods on the side to whites he encounters while being hired out by his masters, in the interest of saving enough money to buy his freedom.
With such “perquisites” and “ventures,” as mariners often called these common efforts to trade and earn for themselves, Smith seeks to claim the very term that also marked his own enslavement, to articulate freedom with words such as “venture” that always also mean slavery. Hence the paradox within which Smith writes his life.

Smith ends chapter 2 with his purchase of his own freedom, and begins chapter 3 with an account of his move to Long Island and his immediate prowess as a free laborer:

In the space of six months I cut and corded upwards of four hundred cords of wood. Many other singular and wonderful labors I performed in cutting wood there, which would not be inferior to the one just recited, but for brevity sake I must omit them. . . . This money I laid up carefully by me. Perhaps some may enquire what maintained me all the time I was laying up money. I would inform them that I bought nothing which I did not absolutely want. . . . as for superfluous finery I never thought it to be compared with a decent homespun dress, a good supply of money and prudence. Expensive gatherings of my mates I commonly shunned, and all kinds of luxuries I was perfectly a stranger to; and during the time I was employed in cutting the aforementioned quantity of wood, I never was at the expense of six-pence worth of spirits. (18–19)

Throughout Chapters 2 and 3, the narrative works to convert the “myself” of the first paragraph into this thrifty, hard-working subject who incessantly chronicles his labors and their monetary worth. Indeed, Smith even calculates the value of the life and death tragedies he suffers. After telling of his futile efforts to stop his son from shipping out on a whaling voyage, he explains: “My son died of scurvy in this voyage, and Church [his son’s master] has never yet paid me the least of his wages. In my son, besides the loss of his life, I lost equal to seventy five pounds” (19). He writes in a similar vein of his oldest child’s death: “I procured her all the aid mortals could afford, but notwithstanding this she fell a prey to her disease, after a lingering and painful endurance of it. The physician’s bill for attending her during her illness amounted to forty pounds” (21). Once again, after working for years to
purchase his wife's freedom, Smith calculates his prudent timing: “I pur-
chased my wife Meg, and thereby prevented having another child to buy, as she was then pregnant” (19). Repeatedly slipping from serious concern for his family’s well-being to serious concern for his savings, equating the value of his family with the value of his labors by calculating the cost of both, Smith does not just coldly calculate the cost of death. He also implicitly gives his calculable labors the incalculable value of life.

This oscillation between calculable and incalculable values suggests that Smith wants something more than just capital from his ventures. Or rather, to Smith, capital means more than just wealth. Capital, it seems, means an expansive, social, substantial freedom. Smith’s ventures throughout chapter 2 are consistently tied to his efforts to purchase his own freedom, and, throughout chapter 3, the freedom of his enslaved family, friends, and even casual acquaintances. Smith thus not only seeks to gain access to the formal and abstract equality of capitalist exchange—in which subjects are meant to enter the market, momentarily suspend the differences between their commodities and between their own identities, and encounter each other as formally and abstractly equal exchangers of formally and abstractly equal commodities. Smith also seeks to convert that formal and abstract equality into a much more substantial freedom.21 Rather than simply seeking inclusion in formal and abstract equality, Smith strives to practice equality as a weapon against the racism by which he and other Africans were named on the cusp of the Middle Passage.

Actively claiming the very terms of his own subjugation, Smith succeeds in a certain way. After he purchases his own freedom and that of many others, he buys a large plot of land, a small fleet of ships, and a few houses. Yet he places at least as much emphasis on the repeated injustices he suffers in his mercantile endeavors. After purchasing his own freedom around 1765, for instance, Smith refuses to celebrate: “Being thirty-six years old, I left Col. Smith once for all. I had already been sold three different times, made considerable money with seemingly nothing to derive it from, had been cheated out of a large sum of money, lost much by misfortunes, and paid an enormous sum for my freedom” (18). This misfit between the formal equality of
capitalist exchange and a more substantive freedom steadily takes on greater import as the narrative progresses.

For instance, early in chapter 3 Smith highlights both the marine trade’s relative freedom from land-based racism and the increasing power of that racism:

In the night time I fished with sernets and pots for eels and lobsters, and shortly after went a whaling voyage in the service of Col. Smith. After being out seven months, the vessel returned laden with four hundred barrels of oil. About this time I 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 [i.e., eastern Long 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. (20)

Perhaps it is Smith’s wealth that protects him from expulsion, but by writing “This and my industry,” he seems to suggest that his hard-earned “prosperous condition” was not his only safeguard. “This” may refer to the maritime labor that took him off the island for seven months, or, relatedly, to his connections to Col. Smith. Free and prosperous, but also well-connected and out of the sight of local whites for much of the year, Smith seems here to acknowledge that “industry” is not sufficient to forge freedom, that the maritime world is a necessary supplement to his hard work, a counterforce to increasing, terrestrial racism.

According to the 1771 census, eastern Long Island, or Suffolk County, had the largest population of any county on Long Island, with a total population of 13,128, 11 percent of which was black. With an ample labor pool, the white political structure might have turned against poor and enslaved blacks in order to relieve white competition over labor and/or land. Such expulsions were increasingly common during the Revolutionary era, and were at times coupled with land expropriation, to which Smith might have become vulnerable. Indeed, three paragraphs later, Smith tells us that a few years after this act, “I disposed of all my property at Long Island, and came from thence
into East Haddam,” Connecticut (20). I will return to this racialized form of enclosure in the last section of this essay, but for now I want to note that, by linking his apparently narrow escape from expulsion to his sudden move, he shows us how economic activity on land was being increasingly racialized during the Revolutionary period.

Smith proceeds to show how tenuous even maritime industry was becoming for black mariners at the end of the eighteenth century by paying particular attention to the repeated instances in which he is bilked and swindled in the coastal trade: “During my residence at Long Island, I raised one year with another, ten cart loads of water melons, and lost a great many besides by the thievishness of the sailors” (20). He immediately expands on this “thievishness”: “Since my residence at Haddam neck, I have owned of boats, canoes and sail vessels, not less than twenty. These I mostly employed in the fishing and trafficking business, and in these occupations I have been cheated out of considerable money by people whom I traded with taking advantage of my ignorance of numbers” (21). Then, in the very next paragraph, the narrative suggests that Smith’s misfortunes might be due to something other than his mathematical skills:

About twelve years ago, I hired a whale-boat and four black men, and proceeded to Long Island after a load of round clams. Having arrived there, I first purchased of James Webb, son of Orange Webb, six hundred and sixty clams, and afterwards with the help of my men, finished loading my boat. The same evening, however, this Webb stole my boat, and went in her to Connecticut river, and sold her cargo for his own benefit. I thereupon pursued him, and at length, after an additional expense of nine crowns, recovered the boat; for the proceed of her cargo I never could obtain any compensation. (21–22)

By cheating Smith, these sailors do not simply deprive Smith of money; they also refuse to recognize him as an equal in exchange, effectively enacting a quotidian version of the Long Island expulsion act. This theft of an all-black crew and, in particular, Smith’s failure to “obtain any compensation” suggest that white traders on the northeastern U.S. coast increasingly respected
little cross-racial solidarity with black mariners. Once again, the relative freedom blacks experienced on the sea in the eighteenth century seems to become quite tenuous toward century’s end, as Smith’s and his fellow mariners’ attempts to secure terrestrial equality through coastal mercantile capitalism are increasingly frustrated.

Despite his relative prosperity, such instances lead Smith effectively to repudiate mercantile capitalism by the end of his life. Crucially, he concludes the narrative with the following incident from around 1781, filled with bitterness and despair at the final outcome of his mercantile strategy to claim the very terms of his own subjugation:

Being going to New-London with a grand-child, I took passage in an Indian’s boat, and went there with him. On our return, the Indian took on board two hogshead of molasses, one of which belonged to Capt Elisha Hart, of Saybrook, to be delivered on his wharf. When we arrived there, and while I was gone, at the request of the Indian, to inform Captain Hart of his arrival, and receive the freight for him, one hogshead of the molasses had been lost overboard by the people in attempting to land it on the wharf. Although I was absent at the time, and had no concern whatever in the business, as I was known to a number of respectable witnesses, I was nevertheless prosecuted by this conscientious gentleman, (the Indian not being able to pay for it) and obliged to pay upwards of ten pounds lawful money, with all the costs of court. I applied to several gentlemen for counsel in this affair, and they advised me, as my adversary was rich, and threatened to carry the matter from court to court till it would cost me more than the first damages would be, to pay the sum and submit to the injury, which I accordingly did, and he has often since insultingly taunted me with my unmerited misfortune. Such a proceeding as this committed on a defenceless stranger, almost worn out in the hard service of the world, without any foundation in reason or justice, 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 black African, therefore it was all right, and good enough for the black dog. (22)
At first glance, this seems to be a simple instance of a white captain swindling an elderly black sailor. However, the language Smith uses to describe this incident tells us more than a first glance might suggest. Why, first of all, is Smith held responsible for this business in which he “had no concern whatever”? It would seem that he is known to this Captain Hart, just as he says he “was known to a number of respectable witnesses,” as someone with resources. His parenthetical “the Indian not being able to pay for it” suggests as much. Presumably, though Smith is not venturing anything on this day, Captain Hart goes after him precisely because Smith’s previous ventures have allowed him, despite many similarly unjust swindles, to participate in mercantile capitalism. Hart’s unjust suit thus punishes Smith for his efforts to claim the terms of his own subjugation. That is, the suit attempts to resubjugate Smith for his efforts to participate in the very system of capitalist exchange that sought to reduce him to a mere venture.

On what grounds does Hart punish Smith? Smith would seem to know a good deal about Hart’s rationale, since he tells us that Hart “often since insultingly taunted me with my unmerited misfortune.” From these taunts, it seems that Hart meted out his punishment on racial grounds. When Smith gives his own interpretation of the incident in the final two sentences of the paragraph, he emphasizes that Hart’s effort relies on the racial distinction between “a white gentleman” and “a poor black African,” “the black dog.” Yet Smith also emphasizes another distinction Hart seems to invoke. He suggests that Hart understood him also as a “stranger,” a term more often used at the time to mark national differences. In effect, Hart seems to remind Smith that they also do not share an emerging U.S. national identity. With the fervor of the Revolution still bubbling throughout the colonies, Hart may be at the forefront of quotidian racial and national imaginings in his insistence that Smith cannot participate in economic activity. Hence, Hart turns to the courts, within which Smith’s standing as a non-citizen would have been tenuous. The language of this passage thus urges us to see not just the racial distinction with which Hart rejects Smith’s effort to produce substantial freedom from engagement in the formal and abstract equality of capitalist exchange. It also suggests that Hart articulates such formal and abstract equality with emergent, particularized, national identity.
Finally, Hart’s need to reiterate incessantly the terms of his bilking of Smith—“he has often since insultingly taunted me with my unmerited misfortune”—amplifies the constitutive character of this articulation. It is not simply that Smith is excluded from equality. Rather, Hart apparently must ritually reinvoke his exclusion of Smith, turning that exclusion into a kind of perpetual performance—indeed, a discursive practice—which enables Hart to venture on. This scene thus suggests that the formal equality of capitalist exchange is not contradicted by or even necessarily antagonistic to racism and nationalism, but rather articulates with the reiteration of mutually constitutive, hierarchically codified racial and national identities. If economic historians have found diverse, mercantilist efforts on the part of emerging nation-states to nationalize economic activity during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, then perhaps we can see in Smith’s increasingly furtive mercantile exchanges a fertile, racialized, quotidian ground for such efforts.

In “The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher,” published around 1815, John Jea offers a spiritual autobiography for which maritime labor is also a crucial touchstone. As Jea tells us in the first sentences of his narrative, he was born in 1773 in Old Callabar, Southern Nigeria, and in 1775 he and his family were “stolen, and conveyed to North America, and sold for slaves” in New York to Oliver and Angelika Triehuen. Working as a field slave in rural New York under the “very cruel” Triehuens, Jea initially rejects the pro-slavery preachings of his masters’ Dutch Reformed Church: “My rage and malice against every person that was religious was so very great that I would have destroyed them all, had it been in my power” (94). Yet Jea soon learns to use religion against slavery. When he is brutally punished by his master for his initial efforts to “know God” for himself, he redoubles his efforts, perhaps sensing his proximity to a powerful discourse. When he gains his freedom around 1788, he begins to travel throughout the Atlantic zone as a strident and unorthodox itinerant preacher, who apparently never fully affiliates with any institutional church. As Graham Russell Hodges has shown, Jea blended traces of his childhood
Efik cosmology with the Dutch Reformed theology of his first masters and with many of the varieties of Methodism that circulated among blacks and the poor in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Atlantic world.23

Unlike Smith, Jea never places much stock in mercantile capitalism, declaring at one point that he took to the sea

not to seek mine own interest, but the interest of my Lord and Master Jesus Christ; not for the honour and riches of this world, but the riches and honours of that which is to come: I say, not for the riches of this world, which fadeth away; neither for the glory of man; not for golden treasure; but my motive and great concern was for the sake of my Lord and Master, who went about doing good, in order to save poor wicked and sinful creatures. (145)

Indeed, Jea emphasizes that he sees ships and ports primarily as sites for evangelizing: "I had engaged myself on board of the above ship, as cook, for seventeen Spanish dollars per month, in order that I should not be burdensome to the church of God; and this was the way I acted whenever I travelled; for, as St. Paul saith, 'I would rather labour with my hands than be burdensome to the church’” (146). Though Jea eschews the lure of freedom through mercantile capitalism, he certainly makes a living from the sea for a good part of his life, often as a cook on deep sea vessels. By representing labor as a means to his evangelical ends, Jea works to pry black subjectivity loose from racial capitalism, and to render a spiritual identity beyond commodification.

This effort is strikingly figured when he addresses his “dear reader . . . born in Britain” early in the narrative:

. . . recollect that as you possess much, much will be required; and, unless you improve your advantages, you had better be a slave in any dark part of the world, than a neglecter of of [sic] the gospel in this highly favoured land; recollect also that even here you might be a slave of the most awful description:—a slave to your passions—a slave to the world—a slave to sin—a slave to satan—a slave of hell—and, unless you are made free by Christ, through
the means of the gospel, you will remain in captivity, tied and bound in the chains of your sin, till at last you will be bound hand and foot, and cast into outer darkness, there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth for ever. (93)

By setting chattel slavery within the larger context of human slavery to sin, this passage works against the dichotomy between positively-valued whiteness, material wealth, and freedom on the one hand; and negatively-valued blackness, poverty, and slavery on the other. Positing a realm of disadvantage, darkness, and enslavement to which white slaveowners are particularly susceptible, Jea renders an alternative realm of advantage, light, and freedom available to enslaved Africans. In turn, he represents slavemasters as keeping blacks from this realm of spiritual freedom—“our master would make us work, and neglect the concerns of our souls” (94)—rather than as keeping blacks from participating fully in mercantile capitalism, as Smith does.24

The sea thus emerges from Jea’s text as a potential zone of spiritual freedom, both in his life-long commitment to evangelizing on ships and in ports (“it pleased God to put it into my mind to cross the Atlantic main” [123]) and in his persistent invocation of water as a figure for baptism and freedom (99). Yet the sea is not simply the site of Jea’s theology of anti-slavery and anti-racism. As a medium on which he can travel more readily than the shore, it offers a mobility that figures freedom itself: “...you must think that I suffered very much by travelling to and fro; but I counted it all joy that I was worthy to suffer for the glory of God...” (136). The injustices he suffers at the hands of white masters and fellow sailors do not function as obstacles to an ideal mobility defined by freedom through economic opportunity; rather, mobility as evangelical itinerancy makes spiritual freedom possible.

Because he was not concerned with mercantile capitalism, Jea does not chronicle repeated incidents of swindling and bilking as exemplary instances of oppression under racial capitalism. Rather, he recounts his encounters with the injustices of slavery, with the “sinfulness” of those around him—particularly slave masters and sailors who prohibit or mock his religious fervor—as well as with the orthodox theologies of religious officials whom he debates in England. Toward the end of his narrative, however, Jea does recount an
incident that brings him into contact with the historical articulation of race, nation, and equality we saw in Smith’s narrative.

Sailing in the British brig *Iscet of Liverpool* out of Portsmouth in 1810, Jea and his shipmates are captured off the coast of Brittany by a French privateer. After being marched to prisons in Cambria and then in Brest, Jea and his shipmates are “sent on board of a French corvette, under American colours, to go and fight against the English” (155). However, Jea and some twenty other sailors refuse to “enlist under the banner of the tyrants of this world; for far be it from me ever to fight against Old England, unless it be with the sword of the gospel” (155). Consequently, all are imprisoned again by the French. Jea’s anti-American, pro-English stance was common among Atlantic blacks of the period, since British tactics during and after the American Revolution had involved suppression of the slave trade and offers of freedom to black Americans who fought against the American side. In addition, the most active abolitionist movement of the day was solidly based in England, and blacks had for some time seen England as a place where they could live more freely. However, we must also notice that Jea’s pro-English sentiment is not unqualified; he expresses a willingness to suspend that sentiment if his religious convictions were to direct him so: “unless it be with the sword of the gospel.” This tactical national allegiance indicates that, for Jea, freedom is not yoked to national identity; rather, the freedom he seeks is tied to a “gospel” that could readily abandon any such identity.

After receiving harsh treatment in prison, all the sailors except Jea consent to fight the British, so the French authorities bring him before “the council and head minister of the Americans” (155). This time, Jea suppresses his anti-Americanism, instead taking a pacifist position: “I told them I was determined not to fight against any one and that I would rather suffer any thing than do it. . . . I was determined not to do any work, for I would rather suffer any thing than fight or kill any one” (155). The American officials nonetheless force Jea to express his views on nationality:

The head minister then asked me what I was at, that I would not fight for my country. I told him that I was not an American, but that I was a poor black African, *a preacher of the gospel*. He said, “Cannot you go on board, and
preach the gospel there?”—“No, Sir,” said I, “it is a floating hell, and therefore I cannot preach there.” Then said the council, “We will cool your Negro temper, and will not suffer any of your insolence in our office.” So they turned me out of their office; and said that I had liberty to go any where in the town, but not out of the town; that they would not give me any work, provisions, or lodgings, but that I should provide it myself. (155)

Tying a critique of working conditions on ships of war to his anti-Americanism, Jea asserts a syncretic identity: poor, black, African, and a preacher of the gospel. By again subordinating his pro-English sentiment to these other identities—he does not even mention England here—Jea’s syncretism carves out a heterodox Christian identity irreducible to nationality. Against this, the American minister—a Mr. Veal—furiously works to subject Jea to a racially and nationally codified identity, first by seeking Jea’s service in the military, then by representing Jea’s refusal as irrational, and finally by punishing Jea with forced vagabondage.

Ironically, apparently because he cannot apprehend Jea’s syncretic identity, Veal deprives Jea of material goods, but gives him the freedom he values most: mobility. Jea immediately begins preaching about the town, and within a few days gains the favor of the French officials as well as “the nobility and gentry,” who give him food and shelter in exchange for his sermons (156). This infuriates the American officials, who in vain press the French inhabitants to turn Jea away. After over a year, a peace is declared, and Jea applies to the “American counsellor,” a Mr. Dyeott, for a passport to England, which is predictably refused: “... he denied me, and said that he would keep me in France until he could send me to America, for he said that I was an American, that I lied in saying I was married in England, and that I was no African. I told him with a broken heart, and crying, that I was an African, and that I was married in England” (157). Jea persists in his efforts to leave for England, and describes in detail his many trips back and forth between the American officials and the more sympathetic French officials. Eventually, the latter obtain his passport to England, where Jea arrives to find his family well. After thanking God and appealing to the reader’s own religious sentiments, Jea ends the narrative.
From this climactic sequence, “America” emerges as a racial and national figure that Jea counters with a mobile, syncretic identity irreducible to racial or national codification. Dyeott ignores Jea’s religious identity, and insists that Jea is neither English nor African, but American and black; whereas the former constellation would give Jea an unorthodox freedom, the latter would reduce him to chattel slavery. By recounting this exchange in such detail, Jea emphasizes that the war in which Veal and Dyeott seek to impress him is one for the freedom and equality of a particularized “America,” a freedom and equality inextricably bound to racial and national codification.

This war is, of course, the War of 1812 between the British and a French–U.S. alliance, a war which Immanuel Wallerstein has called “more or less the last act of the settler decolonization of the United States.” Despite its formal independence, by 1812 the United States had not significantly eroded British maritime power, in particular British control over Atlantic trading. Consequently, the United States saw an opportunity to increase both its Atlantic and its continental power when the British and the French renewed fighting on the continent. By the end of the war with the Treaty of Ghent in 1814, Britain still had neither surrendered Canada nor ceded the main pillar of its maritime power: the navigation code’s monopoly of carriage. The United States did, however, take crucial steps toward securing western and southern North America, with the grudging blessing of the British. At stake in the international struggle which ensnares Jea, then, is the solidification of territorially-specific economies with an eye to hegemony in the world-system. The War of 1812 was fought through mercantilist principles and practices, and consequently increased the demand on North Atlantic subjects to declare national allegiance.

In effect, Jea offers us a “history from below” of this war and its mercantilist conjuncture, showing how it subjectified even its most minor players within quotidian national and racial discursive practices. The vigor with which Veal and Dyeott attempt to impress Jea into service against the British as an irrational “Negro” American with no freedom of will, and their utter inability to comprehend the syncretic subjectivity with which Jea counters their efforts, show how world-system conflicts materialize in the local worlds of ships and ports. These U.S. bureaucrats assume a self-evident conjunction
of race, nation, and equality to the point of bafflement at anyone who would deny or refuse such a conjunction. At a moment of profound transformation in the world-economy, as the United States begins to assert itself against the reigning continental powers, Jea’s narrative marks the quotidian traces of a powerful, emergent, historical articulation that conjoined hierarchically codified notions of race and nation with the formal and abstract equality that liberal capitalism equates with “freedom.”

**Enclosing the “Open Sea”**

I have suggested that the intimate relationship among race, nation, and equality represented by Smith’s and Jea’s mariner narratives coincides with a period of intense, mercantilist regulation of North Atlantic economies. Smith’s encounters with the racial enclosures of the Long Island expulsion act, as well as the “thievishness” of sailors and coastal traders such as Hart, depict this regulation as part of a wider discursive practice beginning to adhere in the everyday world of North Atlantic ports and ships. In turn, Jea’s struggles with U.S. officials in France during the War of 1812, his efforts to wrest a mobile, spiritual freedom from imprisonment and forced vagabondage, represent the rapidly increasing stakes of such a discursive practice. Radically disparate in their engagements with and against racial capitalism, Smith’s and Jea’s narratives both nonetheless bear witness to a formative moment in which race, nation, and equality are, in Cedric J. Robinson’s terms, paradoxically constitutive of one another, as well as irreducible, in Etienne Balibar’s terms, to laws of contradiction, formal similarity, mechanistic production, or spiritualistic causality. If Robinson and Balibar help us to re-read this mercantilist conjuncture, they also urge a re-reading of Marx’s own account of mercantilism from the quotidian perspective of the mariner narratives. I would like to conclude this essay with such a reading.

As I have argued elsewhere, Marx’s account of the emergence of the value-form—or the material form taken by economic, juridical, political, and social relations among people under capitalism—does not simply show how substantial, human relations are transformed into abstract relations of formal equivalence. Marx repeatedly suggests that those abstract relations
of formal equivalence are always supplemented by material, particularized identities. Whether he writes of the transformation of “human labor-power in its fluid state” to “value in its coagulated state . . . as a congealed mass of human labor,” or of “the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes, for them, the phantasmagoric form of a relation between things,” Marx figures formal, abstract equality as having a complex, material, substantial particularity under capitalism. The value form, he repeatedly intimates, produces a universal abstraction that paradoxically has particularized substantiality. That is, as capitalism begins to revalue social relations by privileging the formal equality of subjects abstracted from their particularities, the value-form intimately articulates abstract equality with vigorously produced particularities. Though Marx rarely offers extensive accounts of this articulation in the context of racialization, if we read Marx from the perspective of the black mariner narratives, we can cull from certain crucial passages an interpretation of the very historical articulation plotted by those narratives.

As Louis Althusser and Balibar stress in Reading Capital, Marx pays great attention to the relationships among different elements, factors, or instances in social formations. In the introduction to the Grundrisse, Marx describes such relationships with the term Gliederung—meaning “articulation,” “arrangement,” “structure,” “division,” “formation,” or “order.” Since Glied can mean “limb” as well as a military “rank” and a mathematical “term,” and Gliedern can mean “joint,” Gliederung carries with it the sense of potentially hierarchical relationships among elements that are connected in integrated, constitutive, differential, and material or substantive ways—mutually constitutive, embodied elements.

This form of interrelation is uncannily echoed in Marx’s account of racial slavery in the Americas in his Theories of Surplus Value, where he writes that “the business in which slaves are used is conducted by capitalists. The mode of production which they introduce has not arisen out of slavery but is grafted on to it” [Es sind aber Kapitalisten, die das Geschäft mit Negersklaven treiben. Die Produktionsweise, die sie einführen, ist nicht aus der Sklaverei entsprungen, sondern wird auf sie gepfropft]. This passage describes a historically specific Gliederung—between capitalism and racial slavery—as
taking the mutually constitutive, embodied form figured by the verb *pfropfen*, which means “to graft” in an agricultural or surgical sense, as well as “to cork” or colloquially “to stuff.” Capitalism has not arisen or developed out of slavery in a necessary and natural progression, leaving slavery behind—as the verb *entspringen* would suggest—but rather, capitalism has been joined with slavery, forming a mutually constitutive relationship at once artificial and organic, forced and interrelated. By positioning modern racial slavery in this liminal space between the constructed and the natural, this passage urges us to attend to the ways race and formal equality articulate together in a substantial, material relationship of mutual constitution. What is more, this passage urges us to consider precisely how this articulation *comes to appear* natural and necessary, as a graft does.

As we have seen, mercantilist discursive practices played a crucial role in forging such an articulation in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic zone. Might we read mercantilism as a discursive practice that grafts emerging conceptions of race, nation, and equality? In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx describes mercantilism or “the system of protection” as one of the many systems that, under capitalism, has “the objective of manufacturing capitalists artificially in the mother country,” adding in a footnote to this passage that mercantilism’s “artificial manufacturing” eventually “became a temporary necessity in the international competitive struggle.” Marx thus represents mercantilism as one of the systems that work to transform, control, and manage the development of capital for the nation-state—one of the systems that materialize the value-form.  

Marx does not exactly explain how mercantilism “artificially manufactures” capitalists. Yet in part 8 of *Capital*, vol. 1, he does offer a comprehensive account of how related systems such as the enclosure movement and colonization, grouped under the name “so-called primitive accumulation,” conduct a similar artificial manufacturing of capitalists as well as wage laborers: “Just as the system of protection originally had the objective of manufacturing capitalists artificially in the mother country, so Wakefield’s theory of colonization . . . aims at manufacturing wage-labourers in the colonies.” He argues that when capitalism first emerged as an economic and political force, it worked to break down current ways of giving value to
social relations, while simultaneously instituting new ways of giving value to social relations;36 “so-called primitive accumulation” is an historical articulation of this process of devaluing and revaluing. He mocks the name “primitive accumulation” as “so-called” because it comes from the classical economists, such as Adam Smith, who used it as a name for their myth about capitalism emerging naturally and inevitably from “frugal man’s” peaceful and spontaneous decision to abstain from obsessive conflict, consumption, and debauchery and begin saving and accumulating capital: “This [classical account of] primitive accumulation plays approximately the same role in political economy as original sin does in theology. . . . Its origin is supposed to be explained when it is told as an anecdote about the past. Long, long ago there were two sorts of people; one, the diligent, intelligent and above all frugal élite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living. . . . Thus it came to pass that the former sort accumulated wealth, and the latter sort finally had nothing to sell except their own skins.”37 “As a matter of fact,” Marx corrects, “the methods of primitive accumulation are anything but idyllic.”38

The centerpiece of Marx’s account of primitive accumulation is his interpretation of the English enclosure movement. When English peasants lived on common lands, Marx explains, they were in possession of their means of production. Beginning in the fifteenth century, fractions of the English nobility began to force those peasants from their lands by violent legal and extra-legal measures; that is, they began to “enclose” the common lands with laws depriving the peasantry of any rights to land; carving up land into large, private holdings; and ceding those holdings to noble oligarchs and the rising bourgeoisie. Consequently, the peasants had to begin working for others who now owned the means of production; that is, the peasants had to become free wage-laborers.

Freedom here takes on a quite precise meaning. Writes Marx: “The free workers are therefore free from, unencumbered by, any means of production of their own.”39 The transformation of peasant producers into wage laborers “appears, on the one hand, as their emancipation from serfdom and from the fetters of the guilds, and it is this aspect of the movement which alone exists for our bourgeois historians. But, on the other hand, these newly freed
men became sellers of themselves only after they had been robbed of all their own means of production.” These peasants become free, then, in the sense that they have been forced from their particular political, agricultural, and familial identities and transformed into formally and abstractly equivalent bearers of labor power. As wage-laborers, or laborers who sell their abstract labor, they are the free economic subjects of capitalism because they are said to be formally and abstractly equal to all other laborers. The laborer’s freedom is his or her abstraction from particularity; he or she is freed from particularity. This freedom is “anything but idyllic.”

However, this is not the only aspect of the enclosure movement’s transformation of the English peasantry that Marx examines. As masses of these “freed” peasants slipped into poverty and vagabondage, laws to criminalize vagabonds and paupers emerged. Not only were these peasants broken away from their particular, rural, economic and social identities and conditions of production, and transformed into mobile, abstractly equal wage laborers. They also became vagabonds who often had to steal to survive, and who were systematically re-particularized as lazy, dirty, undisciplined criminals by draconian legal discursive practices of vagabondage and theft, which Marx calls the “bloody legislation against the expropriated”; “Thus were the agricultural folk first forcibly expropriated from the soil, driven from their homes, turned into vagabonds, and then whipped, branded and tortured by grotesquely terroristic laws into accepting the discipline necessary for the system of wage-labor.” Enclosure thus did not simply make all workers interchangeable and abstract subjects devoid of particularity. Rather, it began a discursive and material practice of subjection: at once the subordination by power and the formation of subjectivity. The peasants became wage-laborers whose formal and abstract equality was systematically supplemented by, and thus constitutively related to, their new particular identities as criminals and vagabonds.

Importantly, Marx insists that this process begun by enclosure is systematic and reiterative, in that the discursive practices that expropriated the peasants and then criminalized them transformed the very identities of the peasants by being repeatedly and incessantly applied to them. Writes Marx:
It is not enough that the conditions of labour are concentrated at one pole of society in the shape of capital, while at the other pole are grouped masses of men who have nothing to sell but their labour-power. Nor is it enough that they are compelled to sell themselves voluntarily. The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws. The organization of the capitalist process of production, once it is fully developed, breaks down all resistance. . . . The silent compulsion of economic relations sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker. . . . This is an essential aspect of so-called primitive accumulation. 43

Capitalism here emerges not simply as the formation of formally and abstractly equal wage-laborers exploited by capitalists. Those wage laborers are also systematically and relentlessly subjectified within discursive practices that naturalize the historical articulation of their formal and abstract equality with their new, particular identities.

There are other origin stories for the emergence of capitalism, and this is not the place to rehearse those debates. Rather, I am interested here in the morphology of Marx’s interpretation of “enclosure” as one of the systems that, like mercantilism, artificially manufactures capitalists and wage-laborers. If, as Marx suggests, mercantilism is, like enclosure, also a systematic de-valuing and re-valuing of social relations, then we could say that it, too, works both to abstract subjects into formal equality, and constitutively to supplement that equality with new social particularities—in this case, race ("the mode of production which [capitalists] introduce has not arisen out of slavery but is grafted on to it") and nation ("manufacturing capitalists artificially in the mother country"). That is, Marx suggests that enclosure helped to instantiate capitalist relations of production by “freeing” peasants from their social and political particularities, forcing them into conditions of formal and abstract equality as wage-laborers, and incessantly supplementing that equality with new social and political particularities, such as criminality and vagabondage. Similarly, we can read mercantilism as a discursive practice that “manufactured capitalists artificially” by “freeing”
workers in the North Atlantic zone from social and political particularities, pushing those workers into conditions of formal and abstract equality as wage-laborers, and incessantly supplementing that equality with new social and political particularities, such as codified racial and national identities.

In other words, pushed out of a racially and nationally enclosed North America and into marine vagabondage, Venture Smith and John Jea found their efforts to claim the mobility of that vagabondage increasingly difficult, as the sea was also enclosed within increasingly reiterated, discursive practices of racial and national codification articulated with formal egalitarianism. If we read the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century articulation of race, nation, and equality so prevalent in the mariner narratives from this perspective, the story of the rise and decline of black mariners no longer appears to be a story of a generally construed, progressive egalitarianism being contradicted by a generally construed, regressive racism and nationalism. Rather, the systematic production and maintenance of hierarchically codified racial and national identities by discursive practices such as mercantilism articulate with a restricted notion of formally and abstractly universal equality. Paradoxically, the subjection of national citizens as formally and abstractly equal to one another and to citizens of other nations depends upon the vigorous and substantial subjection of subjects to the interdependent codification of race and nation. The study of mercantilism allows us to map a genealogy of this subjection that was at once a subjugation and a subjectification, at once the subordination by power and the production of subjectivity. That is, this study lets us trace the emergence of a specific, historical articulation that enclosed the North Atlantic zone within capitalist relations of production that pushed black mariners off the sea.

NOTES

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3. Statistically, for instance, by 1803 about 18 percent of U.S. seamen’s jobs were filled by black men (most but not all of whom were free). In 1803, 22 percent of berths on U.S. ships sailing from Providence were held by blacks (159 out of 723 berths); by 1844 that number had dropped to 11.4 percent (42 of 369). Also in 1803, 13 percent of berths from Savannah were held by blacks (47 of 367); by 1836 that number had dropped to 2 percent (5 of 240). Finally, in 1803, 16 percent of berths from New Orleans were held by blacks (93 of 585); by 1843 that number had dropped to 3 percent (40 of 1339). See W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 235–39; Martha S. Putney, *Black Sailors: Afro-American Merchant Seamen and Whalemens Prior to the Civil War* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 120–25.

4. See, for example, the narratives of Briton Hammon (1760), James Gronniosaw (1770), Olaudah Equiano (1789), John Marrant (1785), Venture Smith (1798), Boston King (1798), John Jea (ca. 1815), Paul Cuffé (1811), Nancy Prince (1850), John Thompson (1856), and Frederick Douglass (1845, 1855, 1881).


8. Ibid., 225–29.


10. The exception to this tendency is the exemplary work of Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, cited above.


16. Arrighi, 49.


As has often been pointed out, the narrative appears to have had a white amanuensis: probably Elisha Niles, perhaps the printer Holt. Thus, both the tenuousness of authorial control that structures all texts and the performative ruse that structures all autobiographical texts are amplified and transformed by this racialized scene, shared by many early slave narratives. Though I am more concerned with the historical articulation performed by this text than with this question of authorship, it is worth noting that the authorial and autobiographical problematic has produced a debate about the “authenticity” of Smith’s narrative. On this and other issues relating to Smith’s narrative, see William L. Andrews, “The First Fifty Years of the Slave Narrative, 1760–1810,” in The Art of the Slave Narrative: Original Essays in Criticism and Theory, ed. John Sekora and Darwin T. Turner (Macomb: Western Illinois Press, 1982); Andrews, To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Robert E. Desrochers Jr., “‘Not Fade Away’: The Narrative of Venture Smith, an African American in the Early Republic,” Journal of American History 84 (June 1997): 40–66; Frances Smith Foster, Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Antebellum Slave Narratives (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994); Philip Gould, “Free Carpenter, Venture Capitalist: Reading the Lives of the Early Black Atlantic,” in American Literary History 35, no. 4 (winter 2000): 659–84; Charles Nichols, Many Thousand Gone: The Ex-Slaves’ Account of their Bondage and Freedom (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969); John Sekora, “Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative,” Callaloo 10 (1987): 482–515.

20. For the historical context of Smith’s life and that of his text, see Desrochers, “‘Not Fade Away.’”

21. Indeed, as Desrochers (51–66) has suggested, Venture can be seen to blend traces of his
African childhood into his Western life, working in a syncretic fashion to forge a more culturally complex freedom than his obsessive mercantile endeavors might suggest at first glance.

22. The publication date of Jea’s narrative is often given as 1800, but as Graham Russell Hodges has argued, it must have been much later, though before 1817. See Hodges, “Introduction,” in Black Itinerants of the Gospel: The Narratives of John Jea and George White, ed. Graham Russell Hodges (Madison, Wis.: Madison House, 1993), 34. For Jea’s narrative, I quote from Hodges’s edition, giving page numbers parenthetically in the text, though I have also consulted what seems to be a first edition in the John Carter Brown Library, published by the author in Portsea and undated except for an unattributed notation in pencil on the title page which reads “1800?”

As Jea suggests on the last page of his text, he also likely had an amanuensis—”My dear reader, I would now inform you, that I have stated this in the best manner I am able, for I cannot write, therefore it is not so correct as if I have been able to have written it myself . . . “ (159). Hodges argues that the amanuensis was probably not the printer, James Williams, but does not suggest who it might have been (Hodges, 34).

23. See Hodges, “Introduction” to Black Itinerants of the Gospel, 1–9, 18–39. For an important account of spirituality in early black literature, see Katherine Clay Bassard’s Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African American Women’s Writing (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999). It was Katherine Bassard who first taught me eighteenth-century black literature while I was in graduate school, and I am most grateful to her for sparking my interest.

24. Jea’s lack of interest in mercantile labor as a road to freedom can also be gleaned from his book of hymns, published by J. Williams in Portsea in 1816. Though many of the hymns focus on the life of sailors at sea, rather than calling on God to aid those sailors in their material labors the hymns usually call on sailors to address their spiritual life so that God will keep the forces of nature at bay. See Hodges, ed. Black Itinerants of the Gospel, 164–77, and in particular, hymns 296–300.

25. For a vivid account of this pro-English sentiment, see the narrative of Boston King, a black preacher and mariner, entitled Memoirs of the life of Boston King, a Black Preacher. Written by Himself, during his Residence at Kingswood School, and published serially in 1798 in The Methodist Magazine, vol. 21 (March: 105–10; April: 157–61; May: 209–13; June: 261–65). Born a slave in South Carolina in the late 1750s or early 1760s, by the time of the Revolutionary War, King refers to the Americans repeatedly and unambiguously as “the enemy.” See especially April: 157.

26. Jea does not say if the other rebellious sailors are black or not. If we assume that some were white, we need to acknowledge the kind of cross-racial solidarity of which Bolster, Rediker, and Linebaugh have written, and/or the other reasons Jea mentions for not being impressed: the typically brutal working conditions on board ships of war and the national alliances of British sailors to their homeland.

28. See Kazanjian, "Race, Nation, Equality," 137–42.

29. I follow Gillian Rose in modifying the translation of "die phantasmagorische form" in the second quotation. Ben Fowkes gives it as "fantastic form," whereas Rose translates it as "phantasmatic form," reminding us that the term *phantasmagorische* more precisely evokes the English word "phantasmagoria." I opt for "phantasmagoric form" to even further emphasize the historical valence of *phantasmagorische*. Literally "the place of assembly for phantasms," "phantasmagoria" was invented in 1802 as a name for an exhibition of optical illusions produced by a magic lantern: "In Philipstal's 'phantasmagoria' the figures were made rapidly to increase and decrease in size, to advance and retreat, dissolve, vanish, and pass into each other, in a manner then considered marvellous," *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Glasgow: Oxford University Press, 1971), 2:2151. Marx thus indicates that a "definite social relation between men themselves" takes a hallucinatory form, as if the new relation appeared in the form of a dream. This form is thus spectral, unclear, phantasmatic—not simply abstract or reductive, but, rather, bearing an odd, haunted materiality. See Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 31.


34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.


38. Ibid., 874.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid., 875.

41. Ibid., 896, 899.
