

# **THE DEADLY CASH NEXUS IN THE SLAVE NARRATIVE OF VENTURE SMITH**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article examines Venture Smith's slave narrative, one of the very first in the United States, in which Smith recounts his African childhood and his struggle to purchase his freedom. Smith describes various financial transactions including one that led to the death of his son. Because he exploits other African Americans in pursuit of his freedom, Smith is implicated in the very system that had enslaved him. In his mordant narrative Smith delegitimizes slavery by showing how it converts human beings into commodities. At its conclusion, the narrative conveys the sorrow of a man relegated to social death by the institution of slavery.

## **RESUMEN**

Este artículo analiza el relato de esclavitud de Venture Smith, uno de los primeros de los Estados Unidos, en el que Smith narra su infancia africana y su lucha para obtener la libertad. Smith describe varias transacciones financieras incluyendo la que resultó en la muerte de su hijo. Al explotar a otros afroamericanos en búsqueda de su libertad, Smith se ve envuelto en el mismo sistema que lo esclavizó. A través de una narración llena de amargura Smith deslegitima la esclavitud mostrando cómo convierte a los seres humanos en mercancías. El relato concluye mostrando la tristeza del hombre condenado a una muerte social por culpa de la esclavitud.

Venture Smith's slave narrative (1798), one of the earliest of the United States, came nearly a decade after the landmark autobiography of the freed slave Olaudah Equiano (1789). Smith's narrative, published at a time of upsurge in the anti-slavery movement, concludes in sorrow as Smith meditates on the death of his children and what they might have become had they not died young, the victims of slavery. Just as Charles Brockden Brown did in his novel *Arthur Mervyn*, Smith connects money to the idea of death in order to undermine the ideology of early capitalism and its allure of a prosperous future. Because he was illiterate, Smith had to dictate his life history of displacement and struggle to white men (Lovejoy "Freedom" 97). At the conclusion of the narrative, a certificate, dated November 3, 1798, validates a tale that shows how the institution of slavery commodified human beings and created spiritual amputees. The affixed signatures of five white men, who were likely abolitionist sympathizers, enabled Smith's narrative to enter the new nation's collective memory.

In a preface to the narrative, the signatories compare Smith to the founding fathers, thereby inserting him into the national imaginary:

The subject of the following pages, had he received only a common education, might have been a man of high respectability and usefulness; and 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 displeasing to see the efforts of a great mind wholly uncultivated, enfeebled and depressed by slavery, and struggling under every disadvantage. The reader may see here a Franklin and a Washington, in a state of nature, or, rather, in a state of slavery. Destitute as he is of all education, and broken by hardships and infirmities of age, he still exhibits striking traces of native ingenuity and good sense. (Smith 3)

At first glance, the preface appears to anticipate the uplifting tale of a former slave who through determined hard work came to achieve freedom and the respectability that it entails. However, the subsequent narrative will reveal the subversive intent of the preface. Smith emerges a free man only by participating in the brutal exploitation of fellow men. His freedom comes at the cost of the death of two of his children. Through his narrative, Smith conveys how slavery thwarts a key right enshrined in the founding documents, namely, the pursuit of happiness.

According to his narrative, Venture Smith was born Broteer Furro in 1729 as the son of a prince of Dukandarra. This place name belongs to an undetermined region of Guinea, a geographical term that at the time designated a broad swath of Western Africa (Krimsky and Saint 9). Paul E. Lovejoy notes that the place name "Dukandarra" never appears in contemporary histories of the region, and argues that the place name refers to "a people and place that no longer exist" ("African" 48-49). "Dukandarra" may possibly be a place name of Smith's own invention, perhaps denoting, in a personal way, a spiritual realm beyond the comprehension of white men.

The mother of Broteer, his father's first wife, departed in anger when the prince took a third wife without her consent. She left her five-year-old son with a farmer to earn his own living and Broteer was further traumatized when one day, while he was tending a flock of sheep, two dogs mauled him. Although his father brought him back home after settling the quarrel with Broteer's mother, a hostile African army invaded his father's dominions just weeks later. The enemy laid waste to the countryside, taking prisoners as they advanced. After extorting animals and money from his father, the enemy proceeded to attack his subjects anyway. The prince fled with his family only to be captured. Smith describes the manner in which his father was tortured and murdered:

The women and myself, being submissive, had tolerable treatment from the enemy, while my father was closely interrogated respecting his money, which they knew he must have. But as he gave them no account of it, he was instantly cut and pounded on his body with great inhumanity, that he might be induced by the torture he suffered to make the discovery. All this availed not in the least to make him give up his money, but he despised all the tortures which they inflicted, until the continued exercise and increase of torment obliged him to sink and expire. He thus died without informing his enemies where his money lay. I saw him while he was thus tortured to death. The shocking scene is to this day fresh in my memory, and I have often been overcome while thinking on it. (Smith 8)

This scene is the first in the narrative to connect the ideas of money and death. The brutal deceit of the Africans, who later sold the boy into slavery, must have left a profound mark on him.

Shortly afterwards, Broteer was taken to an American slave ship commanded by Captain Collingwood and bound for Rhode Island: "I was bought on board by one Robertson Mumford, a

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” (Smith 9-10). Smith’s distinct enumeration of the price for which he was sold, down to the detail of the piece of calico, is a rhetorical strategy, part of a pattern in which people are commodified. Smith’s chosen name was not unusual at a time of human commodification. As George A. Krinsky and Chandler B. Saint point out, “the name is clearly a caricature, bestowed insensitively by a white man who viewed another human being as a property investment. Mockingly contrived as labels rather than identities, such names were commonly imposed on slaves to relegate them to the status of lesser beings” (103). Krinsky and Saint argue that Smith may have kept this name because it suited him as someone who was, in spite of his enslavement, an incipient venture capitalist (103-104). In a paradoxical combination, “Venture” was the name given to Broteer by the man who enslaved him while “Smith” is taken from his last owner, Oliver Smith, the man who freed him (Carretta 165). It is a fitting name for the subject of an autobiographical narrative that, as Philip Gould points out, blurs “the ontological boundaries of property and humanity” (677).

Historical records corroborate the fact that slaves were brought to Rhode Island in 1738 on the *Charming Susana*, a vessel commanded by Captain James Collingwood. However, although Smith claims that 260 slaves were purchased and transported to Barbados, ship records confirm that the *Charming Susana* carried only 91 slaves (Lovejoy “African” 38). This lower number is more in keeping with the size of Rhode Island slave vessels at the time (Forbes 61). Moreover, there is reason to doubt Smith’s claim that he was six years old at the time of his arrival in Rhode Island. As Lovejoy observes, Smith’s recollections of his passage to America resemble more those of a twelve year old boy (“African” 38). Smith’s autobiography, which appears to be basically accurate, resembles other slave narratives in that it is much more a factual life history, for it is meant to show how human beings were being transformed into units of monetary value.

Upon his arrival in Narraganset, Rhode Island, Smith was immediately put to the test by his new master, Robertson Mumford, who gave him the keys to the trunks on his vessel and instructed Smith that he not give them to anyone but himself. When the master’s father asked for the keys, Smith refused to part with them

in spite of threats. Smith recounts what ensued when his master discovered what had happened:

When he returned he asked where VENTURE was. As I was within hearing, I came and said, "Here, sir, at your service." He asked for his keys, and I immediately took them off my neck and reached them out to him. He took them, stroked my hair, and commended me, saying in presence of his father 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. (Smith 12)

However momentarily gratifying his master's appreciation, of the kind that might be shown to a loyal dog, young Smith would soon find that loyalty would not save him from the harsh rigor of a slave's work or unwarranted punishment. While still a boy, Smith was forced to pound corn and card wool for long hours. To make matters worse, Mumford's son, during his father's absence, would compel Smith to abandon the tasks that his master had given him, and do instead the work that the son wanted. When Smith defied him, the son had Smith whipped and hung from a gallows. In short, there was little reward in obeying the master and faithfully looking out for his interests.

At age twenty two, after serving the Mumfords for thirteen years, Smith married a fellow slave named Meg. Soon afterwards, Smith was sold to a new master, Thomas Stanton. One day while Stanton was away from home, Smith heard a commotion and rushed to see what was happening. He found Stanton's wife beating Meg with a horse whip. Smith stayed her hand, took the whip and hurled it into the fire. Upon his return, Stanton waited for an opportune moment to club Smith while he was unawares. Smith seized the club from his master and complained to a judge about his master's cruelty.

His act of physical resistance could only provide a momentary respite from injustice, for the legal and political system, as always, was heavily tilted in favor of the powerful. Smith soon discovered that the judicial system held little recourse for slaves. The judge told Smith to return to his master and complain only if he were abused again. That happened immediately. Stanton, together with his brother, viciously beat Smith, handcuffed him, and hauled him

before the master's wife. Smith remained defiant, even when Stanton threatened to send him to the West Indies. Sensing that Smith was ungovernable, Stanton sold him to a man named Hempstead Miner. When his new master planned to sell him, Smith refused to accompany Miner to Hartford in order to be sold. Miner threatened to tie down Smith, but Smith shrewdly told his master that if were carried by force no one would purchase him, "for it would be thought he had a murderer for sale" (Smith 16).

Having understood that he was but a commodity to his masters, Smith had learned to use his predicament to his own advantage, to the point where he was able to eventually purchase his freedom (Sweet 95). John Wood Sweet observes that "historians have intended to overemphasize the role of laws passed by state legislatures [and that] the vast majority of enslaved northerners got free not by depending on the acts of well-intentioned politicians, but rather – as Smith did – by taking matters into their own hands and driving the best bargains they could" (111). During the late eighteenth century, very few white men spoke out against slavery, and those who did had little influence.

During the decades that followed Smith's narrative, more citizens began to speak out against slavery. Although, as David Waldstreicher observes, planters invented genteel traditions that distanced themselves from the brutality of slavery, the protests of abolitionists and slave narratives nonetheless began to chip away at the cherished image of the benevolent master. Waldstreicher further points out that, despite being marginalized politically, abolitionists were nonetheless able to identify and publicly denounce slavery as a market created by an insidious economic system:

Although the political party system was reconstructed during the Jacksonian era in part to marginalize them, abolitionists repeatedly called white Americans to account the contradictions in their self-conceptions. When William Lloyd Garrison described a citizen who could not eliminate slavery as branded chattel, and when Thoreau depicted a trip to town itself as a cattle drive, they continued the dialogue about republicanism, economic arrangements, and human commodification that Franklin himself engaged in as a way of justifying, and salvaging, the American Revolution. In this as in other things they were less outside the consensus than they were inside the cultural logic of the time (Waldstreicher 277-278).

Smith ostensibly internalizes that cultural logic but his narrative of a hard-working, self-made man undercuts the can-do optimism epitomized by Franklin (Carreta 176). His narrative, which might inspire white businessmen, uses the master's language and values to convey a sadness that exposes the complicity of the new nation in barbarism.

Smith details a series of incidents in which money or love for money is linked to death. The first instance of the pattern in which money is linked to death is when Smith describes how his African father died of torture rather than reveal where he had hidden his money. Initially, it appears that, like his father, Smith was reluctant to part with money, to judge from the way that he enumerates the amounts that he had to spend in order to free his wife and children. Smith notes, as if it were a two-for-one sale, that "I purchased my wife Meg, and thereby prevented having another child to buy, as she was then pregnant" (21). As the narrative progresses, we come to sense that Smith's deadpan tone conveys an indictment of slavery and a sense of untellable sadness. Smith relates that he hired out his seventeen-year-old son Solomon to a man named Charles Church who sent him on his vessel to hunt for whales. Smith recalls how during the voyage his son died of scurvy and that Church failed to pay him his son's wages, adding, "In my son, besides the loss of his life, I lost equal to seventy-five pounds" (21). These words reaffirm just how much Smith sacrificed in the pursuit of profit, in this case, his eldest son. Smith also alludes to monetary loss while recounting the circumstances that led to the death of his daughter:

Shortly after I had much trouble and expense with my daughter Hannah, whose name has been before mentioned to this account. She was soon married after I redeemed her, to one Isaac, and shortly after her marriage fell sick of a mortal disease. Her husband, a dissolute and abandoned wretch, paid but little attention to her illness. I therefore thought it best to bring her to my house and nurse her there. 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 illness amounted to forty pounds. (22)

Smith's allusions to monetary loss in regard to his son and daughter's deaths are unsettling. Smith is holding an unforgiving mirror, not just to an economic system characterized by callous disregard for suffering, but also to himself. He refrains from religious

pieties and makes it clear that he himself is implicated in the very system that his narrative is meant to condemn.

In his quest to purchase his freedom, Smith engaged in a practice known as pawnship in which he hired African American indentured servants to work for a specified time in order to pay off their debts to him (Blevins 138-139). Smith recounts several of these transactions. In one, he purchased an African American for sixty pounds “for no other reason to oblige him,” but that man ran away shortly afterwards having paid Smith only twenty pounds (21). Another African American was then purchased for four hundred dollars but was let go since he wanted to return to his former master. In the following sentence, Smith recalls, “Shortly afterwards, I purchased another negro man for twenty-five pounds, whom I parted with shortly after” (22). These recollections suggest that Smith exploited his indentured servants like any other slave master. Given the pervasive character of slavery, it is hardly surprising that Smith engaged in brutal labor practices in order to purchase his freedom and acquire wealth.

Roughly a decade after these incidents with indentured servants, when he was fifty four years old, Smith hired a Negro named Mingo, who worked for him for a year. After Mingo tried to flee without paying Smith an eight-dollar debt, Smith obtained a warrant, caught Mingo, and forcibly brought him back. According to Smith, Mingo “complained of being hurt, and asked me if this was not a hard way of treating our fellow-creatures. I answered him that it would be hard thus to treat our honest fellow-creatures” (23). Mingo was able to persuade Smith to let him go by giving him (as Smith remembers in detail) “a pair of silver shoe-buckles, one shirt and a pocket handkerchief” but the following night Mingo stole Smith’s horse and escaped (23). Such outcomes implicate Smith in an economic system that overworked slaves and hired men. The very notion of honesty was suspect in a system that perverts all sense of decency and justice.

In a revealing episode, Smith describes what ensued after he traveled on a boat with an Indian who was transporting two barrels of molasses for one Captain Elisha Hart. One of the barrels was lost overboard, and although he had not been hired to transport the molasses, Smith was nonetheless prosecuted since the Indian was unable to indemnify Captain Hart for the loss. Smith knew that he stood no chance in a court of law and was therefore forced to pay for the lost molasses:

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 African*, therefore it was *all right, and good enough for the black dog*. (Smith 24)

Smith's bitterness towards the judicial system is readily apparent in his acerbic italicized words that demolish the rhetoric that was commonly used to justify white authority. His appeal to reason and justice recalls the language of the Declaration of Independence. This passage also reveals his contempt for the conventional Christianity of whites.

As he concludes his narrative, Smith expresses, tongue-in-cheek, his hope to be held in high esteem for his good character and for having survived hardship and betrayal:

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. It gives me joy to think that I *have* and that I *deserve* so good a character, especially for *truth* and *integrity*. (Smith 24)

At first glance, it might appear in the above passage that Smith is being overly emphatic. However, people with good character tend not to insist on it. In the italicized words, Smith appropriates the master's voice and lexicon and values in order to puncture the discourse of white gentlemen, for whom respectability is predicated on property. Smith follows these words with the parenthetical aside that concludes his narrative:

(While I am now looking to the grave as my home, my joy for this world would be full – IF my children, Cuff for whom I paid two hundred dollars when a boy, and Solomon who was born soon after I purchased his mother – IF Cuff and Solomon – Oh! That they had walked in the way of their father. But a father's lips are closed in silence and in grief! – Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.) (Smith 24)

These final words cast a wistful look at a poignant, stillborn future. Even in this last expression of grief, Smith reiterates that he had paid two hundred dollars for his son's freedom. Smith's final words, taken from *Ecclesiastes* 12: 8, undercut his apparent attempt to take pride in his success and character. For Smith, it was impossible to wring even a semblance of satisfaction out of a life in which respectability depends on the acquisition of material possessions and in which a deformed conception of good character only serves the interests of slave masters.

After a life of torment and grief, Smith emerged from slavery nominally a free man. Like other African Americans living in Connecticut, Smith had to abide by local ordinances that circumscribed where he could live or own a business (Krimsky and Saint 67). His narrative describes the inhuman transactions that constituted his social death-in-life. As Orlando Patterson observes,

Because the slave had no socially recognized existence outside of his master, he became a social nonperson [ ... ] Not only was the slave denied all claims on, and obligations to his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants. Slaves differed from other human beings in that they were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory. (5)

Deprived of his loved ones, Smith pursued wealth as a means to their and his own freedom. However, his narrative is a bitter distillate in which money is tied to death, including the death of his father, the death of his son, the death of his daughter, and his own spiritual death. The narrative anticipates a modern United States in which all life forms, including animals, seeds, plants, and even genes, have become commodities in the quest for profit. Smith showed his white audience how slavery warped discourse and belief. Through parody that converts human suffering into units of financial loss, Smith showed how capitalism was a soul-destroying enterprise. He helped delegitimize slavery, shaping a future somewhat more in keeping with the principle of equality enshrined in the Declaration of Independence.

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