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African American Literature

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Economic Effects on African Americans

The institution of slavery reduced African Americans to a simple capital and thus were subject to all the ways capital was used. This is in contrast to the regular wage laborer, who sell their own labor. Slaves in a sense were capital composed of pure labor and hence a market was created where labor itself could be bought and sold. Because of the propertization, slaves eventually became a product just like any other, they weren't seen as people they were considered literal property.

While not many, there were African Americans who gained their freedom in various ways. As long as they gained their freedom legally African Americans became a citizen in full of the society at the time and while they did face a great deal of racism they still did take part in the economic system at the time. This participation is not a voluntary choice, but to become successful(at least monetarily) you needed to actively participate it and exploit it. In turn this would naturally lead to buying slaves as a source of labor to exploit for profit. Being exposed to all of this and being a part of its very core led many freed African Americans to believe that the way to success and freedom was to become an active participant in the economy at the time in some way shape or form.

One of those free African Americans was Venture Smith and he was unique in the fact that he was born free, enslaved, and then later gained his freedom. And yet when he was free, he himself bought slaves to put to work. Now he also had the intention of having them buy their

freedom like he did, but nonetheless willingly engaged in the slave trade. Why would someone who was enslaved as a young child and for most of his life, repeatedly being denied buying his freedom despite having the funds for it. But to Venture Smith it was a completely normal thing. Slavery was a fact of life, regardless of ethics. So it wasn't a sadistic motive, it was totally banal.

We can trace this line of thought all the way back to Venture Smith's home country. As a child he was essentially put into slavery by his mom and that was only ended by an immediate return to slavery now underneath the Americans. Even in his account of an ambush upon the slave traders who had captured him, once the Africans had no chance of victory, "They came out of their caves, first spitting the palms of their hands together, and immediately after extended their arms, crossed at their wrists, ready to be bound and pinioned." These people knew what awaited their failure and as such accepted it without question when defeat was sure. Slavery has been very normalized at this point and seems to be accepted as natural law for most people. So to Venture slavery was in fact a system that has followed him from the beginning, and in different forms. The first was his slavery as a child to a sheep herder and he served more as a farm hand than slave. This may have instilled in him a sense that what he was subjected to was more like wage-labor rather than slave-labor as he worked for his keep but was not treated unfairly.

The beginning of Venture Smith's slavery in the United States was marked by an act of loyalty to his then master of refusing to hand over keys to the master's father:

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 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 101)

This event is very telling, it reveals that Venture Smith was so loyal because of how he was originally raised. His sense of loyalty was ingrained in him from birth and due to this his master trusted him a great deal (Smith 101). However, Venture Smith's loyalty was also a source of oppression as his master's son, James Mumford, would give Venture contradicting orders. This eventually led to him being physically punished by James Mumford at one point. Venture described this period of being ordered by James Mumford, "...another difficulty and oppression which was greater than any I had ever experienced since I came into this country. This was to server two masters" (Smith 101) Venture regarded this period as horrible due to him having two masters, not necessarily because of the aspects of slavery. There was even an event where Venture was talked into running away from his master by a fellow Irish slave. During the course of this Venture had discovered that the Irish slave planned to steal all their supplies and take off on this own. After this Venture and the other escaping slaves captured the Irish slave and brought him back to his master, for which they were congratulated for (Smith 101). This loyalty to his master, whether out of his personal desire or the requirements of the time, stayed with him throughout his various masters until he was able to buy his freedom and even this was delayed numerous times despite having the funds (Smith 106).

The faith in the system and to what he kind of labor he was doing may have been misplaced, but remains nonetheless. So it comes as no surprise that after Venture was able to purchase his two sons, he bought a slave for 60 pounds. Venture Smith was unable to actually have him work as the slave ran away soon after, yet it remains that he did buy a slave of his own will. Whether he did so simply to free him or not was not recorded. This happened to two more slaves, one returned to their previous master, the other was parted with. This marked a transition into a more capitalistic position, and he later hired two African American men and used them for

wage-labor(Smith 108).

While Venture Smith's venturing into the slave trade proved uneventful, it did lead him to many business opportunities that made him end up with "...more than one hundred acres of land, and three habitable dwelling houses." It seems to be that Venture Smith did truly live up to his given name. His immersion within the dregs of the economy showed him what he had to do to not only survive but be successful.