Providential Capitalism: Heavenly Intervention and the Atlantic’s Divine Economist

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PROVIDENTIAL CAPITALISM: HEAVENLY INTERVENTION AND THE ATLANTIC’S
DIVINE ECONOMIST

By
Ian Green

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, the City University of New York
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English
in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Providential capitalism names the marriage of providential Christian values and market-oriented capitalist ideology in the post-revolutionary Atlantic through the mid nineteenth century. This is a process by which individuals permitted themselves to be used by a so-called “divine economist” at work in the Atlantic market economy. Backed by a slave market, capital transactions were rendered as often violent ecstatic individual and cultural experiences. Those experiences also formed the bases for national, racial, and classed identification and negotiation among the constellated communities of the Atlantic. With this in mind, writers like Benjamin Franklin, Olaudah Equiano, and Ukawsaw Gronniosaw presented market success as proof of divine election. At the same time, writers like Richard Henry Dana Jr., Royall Tyler, and the anonymous author of *Humanity in Algiers* offered hegemonic expansion as an integral part of a divine capitalist plan. However, writers like Ottobah Cugoano, Venture Smith, John Jea, and, later, Edgar Allan Poe, in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, and Herman Melville, in *Redburn: His First Voyage*, recognized the dehumanizing potential of this power arrangement. They described the ways in which humans could be commodified or rendered invisible by the operations of a market that used individuals for its own ends and maintained the aegis of divine sovereignty. Urban Gothic novels like Charles Brockden Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn* or *Memoirs of the Year 1793* and George Lippard’s *The Quaker City, or The Monks of Monk Hall* likewise commented upon the unsettling nationalist stakes of this power structure. This project reorients Atlantic critical and literary studies around this conflation of interests, philosophies, and theologies, which became culturally formative in the revolutionary period, blossomed throughout the post-revolutionary era, and reached a point of crisis by the mid-nineteenth century. Building upon current Atlantic scholarship, it uses a disparate array of authors and texts to demonstrate the diversity of responses to the emergence, proliferation, and watershed of providential capitalism for Atlantic cultures and individuals.
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## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Particular Favourite of Heaven: Olaudah Equiano and the God of the Marketplace</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncommon Suffering and Divine Deliverance: Atlantic Labor, Captivity and Community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Driver Over You: Piracy, Abuse, and National Vulnerability in the Atlantic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combustible Man: Consumption, Cannibals, and Commodity Horror at Sea</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5</td>
<td>352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All is of Equal Value: Charles Brockden Brown’s Urban Gothic Captivity Narrative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6</td>
<td>421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ghosts of Atlantic Capital: George Lippard and the National Apocalypse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>496</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>511</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction
Shortly after presenting his plan to efficiently systematize the virtues and behavior of a model individual in his autobiography, Benjamin Franklin reflects upon his legacy in order to outline his vision of an ideal citizen in a revolutionary age. He writes, “What reverses may attend the remainder [of his life] is in the hand of Providence.” He continues: “to Temperance he ascribes his long-continued health, and what is still left to him of a good constitution; to Industry and Frugality, the early easiness of his circumstances and acquisition of his fortune.” Finally, his conclusion arrives with an optimistic and forward-looking flourish: “I hope, therefore, that some of my descendants may follow the example and reap the benefit” (70). Although Franklin claims to have avoided “the mark of any of the distinguishing tenets of any particular sect,” he describes himself and his model citizen residing in a world in which capitalist ideology and providential theology act completely and emphatically in concert. He articulates a model of personhood that is market-oriented, upwardly mobile, and, in its indebtedness to “providence,” undoubtedly in communication with a form of divinity. That is: he describes the individual who resides within the world, the market, and, indeed, the church of what I shall call Atlantic providential capitalism.

The major intervention of this project is to reorient Atlantic critical and literary studies around the conflation of interests, philosophies, and theologies, which became culturally formative in the revolutionary period, blossomed throughout the post-revolutionary era, and reached a point of crisis by the mid-nineteenth century. My goal is to build upon current Atlantic literary scholarship but to demonstrate that Atlantic spirit and market cultures cannot be viewed in isolation and must be seen as elements of the same structure of power and sociality that dominated life and letters in the Atlantic. I will use a disparate array of authors and texts to
demonstrate the diversity of responses—some celebratory and some quite pessimistic—to the emergence, proliferation, and watershed of this system for Atlantic cultures and individuals.

New critical approaches to topics ranging from national political ideology, literary genealogy and connectedness, and especially Atlantic history, have invited and necessitated reappraisal of the individual and the society that Franklin describes. Where generations of eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth-century American literary and historical critics often told a story of American foundation rooted in the morality espoused by early colonial groups—particularly groups like the New England pilgrims—and adopted by revolutionary writers like Franklin, more recent critics have told a more complicated story about commerce, social mobility, cultural exchange, and frequent, often violent encounter events. Critics like Paul Gilroy, Anna Brickhouse, Lisa Lowe, Marcus Rediker, and Peter Linebaugh have revealed the story of Atlantic social, political, and ideological formation as one of syncretism, mobility, hegemony, and disruption, rather than one of seamless genealogical transmission leading to national emergence. Writers like Ian Baucom, Colin Dayan, and Vincent Carretta have produced formative accounts of Atlantic cultural, economic, and literary history, by taking seriously the many ways in which capital produced and shaped individual identity, social organization, and the philosophies underpinning Atlantic cultural interactions. I will use the work of such scholars to extend Atlantic literary studies and to integrate the syncretic providential spiritual cultures of the Atlantic and its exchange-oriented market cultures into one overwhelming power arrangement, as well as to show the different ways in which individuals and communities contended with it.

The focus of the scholarship to which I will respond already represents the work of an ongoing and necessary shift away from older generations’ assertions of normative and, at times, monolithic American Studies organized around the expansive triumphs of both capital and New
England “Yankee” religious traditions. Perhaps the most famous representative of this older school of literary and historical analysis was Perry Miller, but subsequent generations of scholars have effectively complicated Americanist studies to represent the diversity often occluded by Miller’s triumphalist narratives. In fact, critics, particularly following Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, have reconceived these ideas to such a degree that American Studies, themselves, feel somewhat antiquated in light of broader Atlantic concentrations.

Scholars like Amy Kaplan were critical to the process of attaining this more expansive critical perspective, helping later scholars to contextualize Miller and his contemporaries’ views, while moving American Studies forward toward its current, more polyphonic position. She takes on “Miller’s conception of America as well: that America—once cut off from Europe—can be understood as a domestic question, left alone, unique, divorced from the international conflicts—whether the slave trade or the Mexican War—in which that national identity takes shape” (7). To view American colonial and proto-national development without consideration for broader transnational political movements is indeed shortsighted. Moreover, to view that development without recognition for the many people and communities that it marginalizes or consigns to subaltern status is to participate in the ongoing Americanist project of reinstating power relations that have produced many of the most dehumanizing elements of Atlantic political ideology. Critical histories like Kaplan’s that challenge and reform older interpretations of Atlantic Americanist and literary history offer a key to understanding the position of the Atlantic subject within the context of competing Atlantic political and ideological power arrangements.

The abandonment of narratives of victorious American historical and literary tradition is, therefore, a crucial turning point for both Atlantic literary studies and for this study in particular. Randall Fuller, for example, notes, “[Sacvan] Bercovitch discerned…the rhetoric of an
'exceptional’ national mission designed to foreclose competing figures as well as competing possibilities of the self and of society. Animated by this insight, Bercovitch transformed the ‘classic’ writers celebrated by Van Wyck Brooks and enshrined by American studies as irascible individuals revolting against convention into a collection of cultural spokespersons whose demands for social change, however charged with the fire of prophecy, were made nevertheless on behalf of the dominant culture of liberal democracy.” He continues, “The force of this new reading, however bracing and suggestive of new interpretive energies, however likely to compel revisions of categories and assumptions, contained within it the seeds of a despairing loss” (124). This loss contains, potentially, the loss of American Studies altogether. It is the loss that necessarily attends transforming American exceptionalism into an expression of hegemonic ideological power structures. It is not, therefore, altogether to be mourned. Yet, even this interpretation of American historical and literary historical movement implies something worth revisiting—something scholars miss if they neglect the spiritual dimensions of Atlantic econopolitics and the econo-political dimensions of Atlantic spirituality.

After Kaplan and, especially, after Gilroy, is it still possible to consider an American power structure? Perhaps not, but the insights offered by these and other scholars invite further scrutiny of the theological alongside the economic, social, and political routes of Atlantic cultural exchange. In this study, I will argue for an ideological and philosophical power structure that does remain active in the formulation of Atlantic identity. However, that power structure extends beyond the borders of nation. It extends even beyond the borders of race and political organization. It is, instead, the source of energy at the center of intersecting Atlantic cultures. This is why the subjects of this study respond to it in such different ways. To see capitalism as
providential is to see it as the figures in this study must have: as something impossibly powerful yet also impossibly baffling.

Carretta, for instance, offers up a perspective of transnational Atlantic expressive culture that is multivocal and highly mobile. This defies older versions of singular, genealogical, and nationalist cultural and literary histories. In fact, criticism like Carretta’s may go some way toward dismantling the logic of American Studies altogether. In light of the prevalence of narratives from individuals who traverse the borders of nationality, community, and even liberty, what use are nationalist interpretations of history and literature for a period of history in which the ideological, philosophical, and geographic borders of nation are in flux? Moreover, how representative of actual history are narratives of national advancement that focus upon the voices of the empowered classes to the exclusion of the perspectives of the authors and communities that those classes sought to make invisible? Carretta’s work suggests that history and literary criticism that obeys this logic perpetuates its blindness. I will, therefore, use a similarly mobile, transnational, and multivocal approach to Atlantic history and to my readings of the literature produced by mobile individuals and populations around the Atlantic.

Baucom similarly establishes the birth of Atlantic political, economic, and individual subjectivity not in a fixed space or political body, but upon and beneath the shifting waters of trade. In fact, he locates it in the exchange of human bodies, the transformation of those bodies into things, and in the market-mandated destruction of those bodies. My study will take up these ideas as well. However, I will demonstrate the deep spiritual significance of these transformative exchange and sacrifice events. Earlier generations of Americanist scholars saw the advancements of political entities organized around shared religious traditions as triumphs of proto-national culture. Later generations of scholars like Baucom see the organization of Atlantic societies
around the ideologies of dehumanized market practices as hegemonic impositions of the market upon the individual. I will argue that, in fact, the market practices that Baucom and others identify attend the very same sites where earlier scholars located religious and political advancement. I will demonstrate that those moments of religious and political advancement are markers of economic encroachment and market sovereignty, and vice-versa. How could it be otherwise? For, in the providential capitalist Atlantic, the worlds of market and spirit are one in the same.

In place of Miller’s cohesive American exceptionalist evolutionary perspective, in place of Bercovitch’s cohesive advancement of expansionist belief systems, and in place even of Baucom’s vision of Atlantic history as a fully depersonalized event, I will argue that it is disruption, confusion, uncertainty itself that remains common to the individual and social experiences of the providential capitalist Atlantic. Furthermore, I will argue that, even as later critics have reshaped Atlantic discourse by abandoning overly simplified, hierarchical, and even sometimes ahistorical older narratives of social progress, they have also too frequently deemphasized the crucial role that spirituality played in the evolution of Atlantic politics, philosophy, community, and, perhaps above all, economics. I will argue that the sometimes confusing social disruption, which later critics identify as the productive force engineering Atlantic community, exists because the market operates upon society through forces that seem invisible to the individual, foremost among them being the market-oriented economy. This mutual invisibility and interventionism lends the market supernatural power. I will, therefore, take seriously the Atlantic subject’s interpretation of the market as a divine but inchoate force that connects ordinary and supernatural worlds and its presentation of the divine as an invested actor in the market.
Later scholars have expanded the critique of cold war-era representations of a more cohesive American Studies even beyond the Atlantic context proposed by scholars like Gilroy, and so will I, while reasserting the need for a comprehensive view of providential spirituality and market exchange working together to produce Atlantic community and power arrangements. Lisa Lowe, for instance, uses “intimacy” to locate transcultural and transcontinental encounter throughout Europe, Africa, and the Americas, as well as Asia. Her criticism demonstrates that the cultural productions of eighteenth and nineteenth-century maritime societies represent social interactions that extend even beyond the slave markets of the Atlantic. I will build upon her insights in order to see the mixture of societies inculcated by transnational mobility as the site of possibility and peril for both individuals and social groups. Furthermore, I will argue that the processes of personal, social, and national identification and curation created ambivalent distinctions between home and frontier, so that even metropolitan spaces that were posited as the home sites of nationalist states remained influenced by the frontier. Such spaces maintained the moral ambiguity and spiritual uncertainty that arose from the displacement and synchrony of the broader Atlantic world. As a result, the geography of the mobile Atlantic also contributed to the development of a philosophical and ideological marriage of spirituality and capitalism, for good or ill.

Wendy Warren offers a different view. She notes that “at some point, historians have generally argued, the concept of mercantilism gave way to a nascent system of capitalism. Looking closely at the trade records of midcentury New England indicates just how that transition happened in the daily lives of people living in the rollicking Atlantic world…the New England merchants drew their power by bucking the state-imposed economic order and operating instead as the market rewarded. Though the metropole may have regarded the New England
colonies as peripheral to the real economic action, it turns out that those peripheral colonies may in fact have driven the move to full-fledged capitalism” (57). However, Warren’s and Lowe’s interpretations of modernity need not clash, if readers approach the periods under discussion with providential capitalism in mind, and recognize the ways in which providential capitalism evolved to direct the philosophy, politics, theologies and subjectivities of societies and expressive cultures in the Atlantic.

Mercantilism did indeed give way to capitalism. Moreover, this turn did, as Wendy Warren indicates, hasten the approach of New World independence. At the same time, the universal application of market-oriented commerce as not only an economic mechanism, but also as a driver of spiritual culture kept societies linked in “intimate” relation. Edward E. Baptist places this connection in purely economic terms, writing that “empires emerged to dominate the first three centuries of American history: Spanish, Portuguese, French, and British. Once all the gold and silver had been thoroughly stolen, the empires found even greater sources of wealth by laying a belt of plantation colonies from Brazil north to Virginia. Many were small in size, but all were huge in economic and political significance” (42). Warren would rightly include New England in this list of small but significant slave economies. And so, New England, Philadelphia, Le Pac, or Liverpool could all appear as both central to Atlantic culture and as seemingly distant frontier spaces, could all appear bound in an intimate relation of exchange. I will add that such transnational closeness arose largely because of shared beliefs in the interventionist divinity of capital and in economic interpretations of interventionist divinity.

In order to see the ways in which Atlantic communities and cultural productions are productions of the synthesis of Atlantic spiritual cultures that posited divine intervention and providential arrangement with the economic realities of Atlantic market capital, I will look to
diverse literary sources spanning the period from the revolutionary age to the mid-nineteenth century. I will do so in order to offer a broad and varied picture of individual and community responses to providential capitalism. Fuller writes, “After Bercovitch, culture no longer seems to many critics the disinterested location for abstract reflection or political opposition but rather the place in which American power most pervasively resides. In this vision, power permeates and therefore shapes individuals, coercing compliance not through the crude energies of force but rather through those media previously thought to be the very grounds of resistance: language, the aesthetic, literature” (124). This is a perceptive analysis of the push-and-pull of individual and social power. My study will continue in this vein, but it will take literary sources as its focus to examine the many unique ways in which different authors attempted to comprehend the seemingly-incomprehensible forces of economy and spirituality that shaped their world.

This disruptive synchrony of spirit and market emerges from a period of intense disruption that extends largely from the revolutionary era, through the United States’ simultaneously productive and unsettling Jacksonian period, and right up to the point of the United States’ Compromise of 1850 and passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, along with Europe’s mid-nineteenth-century revolutions— particularly in France still reeling from the destabilizations that began with the Haitian revolution and continued through its period of autocratic rule—, and Marx’s and Engels’ mid-century diagnosis of capital’s supernatural underpinnings and probable advancement toward crisis and reformulation. This is not to say that these latter events did not produce their own social disturbances. They undoubtedly did. Indeed, the future that Marx predicted actually transformed into the violence of the mid-nineteenth century, which, in turn, produced an even more globalized version of capital that largely echoed the Atlantic power structures described in this study. I am concerned with examining the disruptive operations that
preceded this political, social, and spiritual reckoning. The revolutionary period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries produced ripples and then waves that simultaneously necessitated the construction of national and transnational polities and undermined the basis upon which those polities were constructed. By the time that Marx surveyed and diagnosed capitalism, he observed a social system already organized around received notions of an ordained social economy ripe for renewal and reconsideration. Providential capitalism’s victory was total, if only occasionally explicit in the various political contracts that developed out of the Enlightenment revolutionary age. By the middle of the nineteenth century, capital and capital as an implicitly or explicitly divine social force was the unifying philosophical ethos that linked the various cultures of the Atlantic and that extended, by then, beyond the Atlantic itself.

Hastening drastically during the revolutionary and post-revolutionary eras, individual, social, and political interactions in the Atlantic intentionally and unintentionally bound the values of market capitalism to those of providential Christianity. Such interactions produced societies and configurations of power that established the spiritual virtue of market-driven mobility and divinely ordained capitalist practices. The values that underwrote those interactions generated social polities through the early part of the nineteenth century. At that point, as Marx noted, and as events like the European revolutions of 1848 and the chaos of the American Compromise of 1850 demonstrate, a reckoning with divinely asserted capital was in order.

By that point, the fissures in that foundation became too massive to deny. Unfreedom, personal commodification, cultural syncretism, ideologies of ordained upward mobility and racial and classed hierarchy—these cultural elements clashed and converged in the years immediately preceding and following the most intense period of Atlantic revolutionary action. They then became the very forces around which individual and social identities attempted to
cohere. That they eventually exploded into widespread social violence by mid-century should come as no surprise.

This is not an attempt to revive the Miller-ite perspective of universal social values on the march. Fuller, for instance, reveals the social critical limits of Miller’s historical and literary analyses when he observes, “The first volume of *The New England Mind*…emphatically proclaimed Miller’s underlying assumption that ideas construct reality, that a society’s way of knowing is framed more by its system of beliefs than its material reality” (104). This critique recognizes the contributions of Miller and the Miller-ite cold war critics to historical studies of American colonial politics and culture, while also rejecting their assumption of homogenous and agreed-upon “ideas” at the root of proto-nationalist societies. My study will perform a similar function: permitting the contributions of older Americanist studies, building upon newer and broader scholarship, and looking ahead to what comes next. For example, that a critique like the one that Fuller presents also raises a question: what if a society’s “way of knowing” is shaped emphatically by its “material reality?”

In this study, I will insist that the movements of Atlantic capital reestablished the terms of individual, social, and spiritual subjectivity. This was true for the Puritans in Miller’s studies, but it is especially true for the persons and communities that contended through the disruptions of revolution and that continued to navigate the shifting waters of early market capital during the early Jacksonian period and into the middle of the nineteenth century. ii An emphasis upon individualism matched with election in the context of a market culture organized around slave economies helped local and national polities of the Atlantic to establish and cultivate the borders of community. In the Atlantic, these same values became the engines upon which both the economy and the forces of racial and ideological hierarchy vastly expanded. Yet these forces
always also produced oft-unacknowledged anxieties. By the mid-nineteenth century, those anxieties could no longer be denied by individuals or by the communities of which they were part.

It was, therefore, always left to the individual to contend with the confusing currents of power and social exchange that would lead to this moment. However, this dynamic between the individual and the social has not always been the focus of Americanists. Fuller again notes, “The shift to culture would shrink the imaginable grounds of oppositional criticism to smaller and smaller increments, eventually endangering the concept of agency altogether” (124). This, even as Fuller suggests that older studies like Bercovitch’s indicate a kind of longing for a return to the cohesion provided by narratives of American exceptionalism, or at least of coherent American identification.iii In this study, I wish to return to the issue of agency, without negating the influence of larger power structures on the construction of the modern Atlantic subject. This agency is exactly the problem with which the figures in this study contend: how, in a world governed by seemingly divine forces of economy, can an individual survive, thrive, or find community? The answers are, as this study will demonstrate, diverse, divergent, and disruptive. No two authors seem to come to the same conclusion. Nor should they, for their experiences are very different. Yet they all live in and respond to the providential capitalist forces of the Atlantic and, as a result, reveal different facets of providential Atlantic capitalist culture.

The signs of evolving social institutions and their concomitant ruptures are evident in the narratives of individuals who lived in and traversed these transnational Atlantic cultures. They recognize, for example, the supernatural significance of allegorical mechanisms of capitalist equivalence through often anxious productions of speculative, autobiographical, travel, and political literature. They respond to cultures that presented the captivity and the sacrifice of
individuals as necessary transactions by which a divine community enlarged itself. They contend with the fact that these cultures insisted upon a social, geographic, political, economic, and sacred community in which capitalism was a spiritual practice, and in which Christian spirituality functioned according to the logic of capitalism. Finally, they gave expressive life to their societies’ assertions of a universal Atlantic cosmology—a web of geographical, economic, and philosophical intimacy—in which the divine interacted with the ordinary through the exchange-oriented capitalist marketplace.

The individuals who experienced this moment would have to learn to exploit this network of belief in order to survive in an emerging Atlantic economy. Moreover, writers from this period frequently reproduced or interrogated this belief system for reasons of individual survival, nation formation, and even exploration of social anxieties that emerged among the inhabitants of this greater Atlantic. Simply put, they experienced and expressed the most important, the most generative, and the most awful force at work in the production of Atlantic cultures during the revolutionary and post-revolutionary period: this conflation of spirit and capital, this philosophy of providential capitalism.

This philosophical power arrangement would come to foreclose other possibilities for community creation, personal identification, and even literary representations of the liberal self in the post-revolutionary Atlantic. In a period of intense flux, during which colonies violently transformed into nations or nations came apart at the seams, in which racial identities were both codified and challenged, in which huge masses of laboring individuals—both free and unfree—found themselves mobilized in a circulating economy of culture and commodity, this philosophy would emerge as the guiding political, social, and expressive engine in the Atlantic world.
There were other options. Post-revolutionary Atlantic societies could have coalesced around purely secular liberal value systems. Hegemonic nationalism could have resisted narratives of divine right. Individuals could have seen themselves either as masters of their own fate or as true collaborative laborers and members of cooperative societies. Hannah Arendt, for example, looks to non-Christian classical philosophy to explain the emergence of capitalist modes of social and individual production and meaning. At the same time, she gestures toward the largely secular Adam Smith, John Locke, and Karl Marx as the primary theorists of the modern post-capital age. However, although she recognizes that these thinkers looked to invisible forces to explain the seemingly disembodied nature of financial social interactions, she never arrives at the conclusion that truly empowered the post-revolutionary era. What emerged from the competition among post-revolutionary Enlightenment philosophies was a mechanism of social expansion and control, a tool of political hegemony, a justification for working conditions, a way of seeing the self that presented experiences of Atlantic economic conditions as divinely ordained.

As John Locke imagined labor and political organizations, he observed a still-malleable Atlantic world in the process of settling upon a useful mode of social, political, and ideological formation and expansion. He imagined a socio-political world arising through consent, through liberty achieved through freedom defined and protected by law. Implicit to his theory was an understanding not only of unconstrained freedoms, but also of a lack of freedom altogether. Thus, unfreedom was integral to his perspective and to the many Enlightenment texts that took him as a touchstone. Moreover, even though Locke espoused a practiced secularism, his theories demonstrated that that secularism was deceptive. It relied upon invisible forces acting within and
through social political interactions. The providential capitalist mindset would not abandon
Lockean notions of liberty altogether, but would seize upon these intangibles as material reality.

Similarly, Edmund Burke argued for social legalism based upon past legal precedents,
but set the stage for a philosophy that would take up legality as an expression of covenant
theology. Enlightenment society was absolutely organized around binding contracts that derived
their power from social beliefs in legalism. The sanctity of that legalism, however, derived from
religious traditions that instantiated the word of God in sacred texts. This too would become one
of the essential elements of providential capitalism.

Thomas Paine also argued for revolutionary energies that emerged from natural law.
Once more, social theorists, politicians, writers, and individuals could interpret this in secular
fashion, or they could see natural law arising from the divine ordination of the material and
supernatural worlds. As providential capitalism came to dominate post-revolutionary expressive
cultures, the latter interpretation would take hold. The spirituality contained within seemingly
secular Enlightenment theory would achieve social authority through more explicitly
supernatural application.

Friedrich Hegel too bore witness to a materially and philosophically evolving society—
or, perhaps, an archipelago of connected societies—that pivoted around theories of natural social
hierarchy. In his case, this meant implicitly or explicitly addressing the facts of an Atlantic
economy rooted in slavery and racial domination. In effect, his interpretation of Atlantic social
construction yoked theories of consented liberty, legalism, and natural law to a recognition that
all of those concepts rested upon the backs of the excluded. The implications of this fact are
troubling but formative: if social hierarchies reflected natural law, and natural law derived from
the will of God, then the social exclusion—even the death—of the unfree was also an expression of divine intent.

Susan Buck-Morss has demonstrated the degree to which Hegel developed his theories of social arrangement in response to the very real circumstances of Atlantic slavery, in which the tug-of-war between freedom and unfreedom played out not as thought exercises but as the material conditions of living persons and communities. Hegel responded to this by presenting society locked in a competition over freedom. However, the providential capitalist ethos positions freedom extended or retracted as an expression of election and, more importantly, of election within a marketplace. With this in mind, I will build upon Buck-Morss’ insights about the roots of Hegelian theory, and upon Hegel’s own dialectical interpretation of society, by adding economic, spiritual, and, more importantly, a fused econo-spiritual culture to the body of material realities to which Enlightenment philosophers and writing individuals responded.

Perhaps most pressing for this discussion, Adam Smith described invisible and complicated social forces acting within and upon the market, and, in so doing, articulated a vision of the market as a theater for supernatural activity. He could never have imagined the ways that Atlantic commerce would instantiate around a literal interpretation of immaterial interventions into the material world through the marketplace. Probably the most important insight to be gained by viewing the revolutionary, post-revolutionary, and early nineteenth-century Atlantic through the lens of providential capitalism is that the invisible hand was, in the minds of many if not most inhabitants of the Atlantic cultural marketplace, quite literally the hand of God.

Writing generations later, Max Weber retrospectively described a largely secular economic system that merely benefitted a particular religious group. He glimpsed but never fully
explained the full fusion of economic and spiritual cultures that took place in the revolutionary and post-revolutionary eras, which allowed the various communities and polities that arose during that period to establish themselves and to flourish throughout the early part of the nineteenth century. Nor did he see the many individual anxieties contained within the arrangements of providential capitalist power. What Enlightenment thinkers saw coming into being and what Marx and, later, Weber saw as already in place was not simply capitalism as an ideological force, but capitalism as a theology, as a lived personal and social experience, as a mode not only of social instantiation, but also of interaction with the world beyond seeing. The force that goes beyond the unity of “labor power” to the “invisible hand” or other nominally secular theories of labor and value is a latent belief that the economy is backed by divine intent and that divine intellect uses the economy as its primary mechanism of interaction with the ordinary world. The revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods through the early nineteenth century saw polities driven by a productive belief in a divine intelligence acting—literally, materially, sometimes, briefly, visibly—through the marketplace. Individuals and communities responded to the emerging exchange-oriented capitalist market of this era not as they would to a secular political or labor theory, but as they would to dispatches from an unseen and often mysterious god.

Michael Taussig has identified a tendency among societies undergoing the transition from precapitalism to capitalism to describe capitalist mechanisms in supernatural terms (11). Taussig focuses his analysis upon pre- or proto-capitalist indigenous societies as they confront the encroachments of modern industrialization. I will demonstrate that, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Atlantic societies underwent a similar transition and experienced similar anxieties, leaving individuals and groups to use spiritual language to explain the effects
and absences of an increasingly post-human market, and to use market language to explain a new relationship between God and humanity. However, this fusion was more than theoretical or expressive. It was, instead, the central motivating premise of the post-revolutionary Atlantic society up to the mid-nineteenth century. Nevertheless, as it is in the societies that Taussig examines, this fusion remained ambivalent. In some cases, it was socially productive and stabilizing; in others, it was personally destructive and destabilizing. In their often groping search for understanding of and in the providential capitalist world, these texts explore and help to illuminate both sides of this unique cultural innovation.

Even secular presentations of self or constructions of community adhered to the logic of interventionist providence situated within the Atlantic marketplace. Franklin, among the central figures in the formulation of the United States’ Enlightenment political thought about the individual and the state, presented the modern liberal self as lucky, virtuous, and upwardly mobile. That figure, however, is still ascendant or descendant within an economy that appears to be guided and ordered before its arrival. In fact, it is positioned by the hand of the economy—through luck—and recognized by the economy as elect—through the rewards that attend virtuous interactions with the social marketplace. Franklin’s ideal citizen is, like the providential soul, positioned within the social and economic cosmology of the post-revolutionary Atlantic, uses the market to exercise virtuous characteristics, and is shown signs of divine favor. Moreover, that citizen is already implicitly elected by inclusion within the hierarchies of race, gender, and economic success. The luck of Franklin’s text is no accidental phenomenon. Similarly, the invisible hand of Adam Smith’s is not some unnamable power of economy. I suggest that we name these forces: in a world in which economy shapes theology and theology shapes economy, luck is providence; the invisible hand is God.
This notion of election was premised upon but also challenged by the presence of the unfree within societies that espoused special economic and divine sanction. Atlantic history, literature, and literary history attest to the inextricability of works by authors canonical, noncanonical, white, nonwhite, enslaved, and free. My reading, therefore, will offer a perspective of Atlantic society as interactive, multivocal, and, in many cases, confused. The dissimilarity of responses to the impositions and opportunities of providential capitalism reveals both its centrality to Atlantic politics and culture and its seeming impenetrability for the subjects caught up in its ever-hastening current. With good reason, critics like Paul Gilroy and Anna Brickhouse have described the associations that linked North America, Europe, West Africa, and the Caribbean through slavery, commerce, social mobility, and cultural exchange as “Atlantic,” the “Black Atlantic,” or even the “Red Atlantic.”

Gilroy famously draws readers’ and critics’ attentions to the cultural syncretism that defined Atlantic life and culture, even as it so often remained occluded by histories that looked to the highest members of the Atlantic’s hierarchies of race, class, gender, and nationality, rather than to the figures whose lives more fully represented those of the great bulk of Atlantic denizens. West Africans were kidnapped from kingdoms and villages by people who asserted their own Christianity alongside their capitalist purchasing and trading powers, and they were then forced to navigate the economies, religions, and polities that depended upon the value of their labor and their bodies, even as those polities often attempted to erase them from recorded sight. Caribbean slaves and maritime free black sailors all encountered the Americas not as a fixed state but as one of flux, of economic transaction, of political incubation, at once rigidly hierarchical and socially porous.
Brickhouse builds upon these insights to recognize the similar navigation experiences of Aboriginal Americans who were wrenched from their traditional homes, exchanged as slaves and servants, and returned to the Americas, already conversant in the languages, and religious and economic customs of Europe, to meet a new influx of foreign colonists. These individuals likewise encountered a social world held together through economic links given the aegis of divine authority. As a result, they were forced to traverse routes of trade and cultural exchange that mandated their position as embodiments of the Atlantic’s syncretic, exchange-oriented character.

Whatever name readers and critics apply to this space and to this historical moment, such figures truly embody the social demands and experiences of Atlantic life, particularly in the period surrounding the convulsive revolutions taking place throughout the Americas, Europe, and the Caribbean. Often politically excluded, frequently the targets of narrative and historical erasure, the enslaved, the only partially free, the marginalized classes of Atlantic economies and polities encountered mobility, social disruption, personal commodification, and struggles to cultivate community at the centers of and at the fringes of the evolving social institutions that constellated the Atlantic. Their voices reveal the more truthful and more common experiences of life in the revolutionary and post-revolutionary providential capitalist Atlantic. I will investigate some of the necessarily innovative approaches they brought to bear upon a world that was organized around the dual significance of value, conversion, and economy, as terms to indicate both the marketplace and the divine intelligence within it.

The central figures of Atlantic history are not necessarily white, wealthy, and politically empowered figures, but the individuals and groups these classes often exploited in an effort to order history around themselves. Olaudah Equiano, Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, Briton Hammon—all
of these are names that writers like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson would just as soon relegate to subordinate roles in the history of the foundation of Atlantic society. Yet, as recent scholarship by critics like Brickhouse, Toni Wall Jaudon, Kelly Wisecup, and Saidiya Hartman demonstrates, these were the individuals who navigated the tense, buffeting currents of Atlantic cultural, spiritual, and political history in order to climb the ladder of providential capitalism or to carve out alternative communities within the providential capitalist Atlantic.

In fact, Jaudon and Wisecup reveal the ways in which Atlantic religious practices, both occult and normative both came into being as a result of and helped to produce the syncretic exchanges of Atlantic community. Their investigation of Obeah practices demonstrates the fact that the free and the unfree developed spiritual and supernatural beliefs in response both to each other and to the hermeneutic of power, economics, community, and polity in which all found themselves bound. These cultures all even came to believe in the supernatural influence of objects infused with social power, commodities, in short, given divine authority. These insights challenge assertions of normativity and difference in regard to supernatural cultures, further dismantling narratives of homogenous Americanism, and demonstrating the links of economy, social interaction, and theological interpretation that bound the cultures of the Atlantic.

Hartman similarly reveals the tense but interactive power arrangements that defined the social life of the communities of the Atlantic. Her examination of the often bloody communication between the free and the unfree establishes the grounds upon which Atlantic societies formed—shared but violent, syncretic but exclusionary, hierarchical but permeable. This too presents a challenge to histories that locate American origin in the words and deeds of the powerful. In my study, I will similarly detail the emergence of Atlantic subjectivity through
the accounts of individuals who navigated the shoals and climbed the rigging that simultaneously linked and distanced freedom and unfreedom or even life and death.

Building upon this work, I will use chapter one to discuss Olaudah Equiano, not as part of an English, West African, or North American polity, but as a prototypical Atlantic individual, a man defined by his mobility within and around the maritime Atlantic, who used that mobility to insist upon his own humanity, liberty, and spiritual transcendence. Equiano utilizes the language of covenant, election, and conversion to present himself as a man ascending both within an economy and within a Christian spiritual typology. In so doing, he stands in implicit contrast to the American revolutionary writers, like Jefferson and Franklin, who would seek to use providential capitalist ideology as an exclusionary social compact. Rather, Equiano uses it as a universal promise of election that transcends borders of race and class, and cares not for distinctions of nationality.

At the same time, Equiano capitalizes on the same tactics as colonial writers in order to gain personal advantage within the Atlantic marketplace. He conflates the will of God with market directives, not only to negotiate and to argue for his own transcendence above slavery’s obliterative machinery, but also to extend projects of capitalist colonialism. Even after he finds release from slavery’s grip, he uses the language and ideology of providential capitalism to subdue others and to bend them to his will for financial gain. He also posits a system of colonial uplift for the African continent, a notion that builds upon the logic of hegemonic colonialism to empower and spread the hierarchies of providential capitalism throughout the Atlantic. Nevertheless, perhaps because he contains these seeming contradictions, Equiano embodies the modern Atlantic individual that revolutionary writers like Benjamin Franklin envisioned, albeit in a vessel they explicitly did not imagine. Thrifty, literate, lucky, and mobile, he takes full
advantage of the opportunities and pitfalls of providential capitalism in order to arrive at a place of freedom, self-expression, and advancement within the greater Atlantic.

In chapter two I will further examine the kinds of mobile, alternative communities at sea of which Equiano was a part. Authors like Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, Briton Hammon, John Jea, Venture Smith, and John Marrant reveal the different ways in which enslaved maritime laborers attempted to create community around common experiences of suffering, commodification, and Christian spiritualism. I will use the writing of these figures to complicate a picture of the communities that grew out of and gave power to the maritime providential capitalist Atlantic.

Not all efforts at Atlantic community creation were successful. Some of these writers, especially Venture Smith, described potential humiliations, dislocations, and ruptures that could prevail in the maritime Atlantic. Such writers demonstrate that, just as some individuals could use the experiences of commodity conversion, exchange, and mobility to rise within the spiritual and financial hierarchies of the Atlantic, others could be crushed, dehumanized, and excluded by those same experiences. These authors demonstrate the ambivalent nature of individual life and attempts at community within economic and increasingly national Atlantic cultures that present themselves as divinely ordered. Their successes and their failures attest to the fact that the Atlantic as a market and as a social space remained both tantalizing and treacherous, a space in which individuals could succeed or fail, and in which communities could come together, or find themselves shattered or marginalized.

The persistence and even struggles of such figures reveal the deceptive class and, particularly, racial binarism of many Atlantic texts. As Jace Weaver contends, “Atlantic world studies, which Gilroy so skillfully opened up, remain…largely a conversation about blacks and whites…an analysis of the Anglo-colonial world” (8). This is a fair critique, especially given the
prominence of texts like Olaudah Equiano’s in conversations about American and European literature and canon. Nevertheless, the pervasiveness of the providential capitalist machinery and mindset is such that it transcends and, in some cases, even dismantles the borders of race, and certainly extends beyond a simple black-white dichotomy. The divine economy upon which Atlantic societies formulated notions of statehood, self, and spirit, empowered colonialist impulses, even as it forced individuals to navigate the labyrinthine routes of exchange and conversion in the Atlantic. Like Brickhouse, Weaver points out that “Western Hemisphere indigenes” traversed the same Atlantic routes as did black and white bodies, and with differing degrees of freedom. This group includes some 600,000 enslaved natives who circulated amongst the Caribbean, Europe, and North America (17). The same core elements of providential capitalism maintain their grip on this population as well. Conversion—forced or willing—, mobility, equivalent value and exchange, all became the primary means by which the self was measured, defined, and positioned by an economy that appeared divine and by a divinity that acted through the market. This is a fact that holds true for white sailors, black slaves, and aboriginal translators, alike.

Nonwhite authors further insisted upon their own centrality in Atlantic culture through writing that demonstrates the blunt utility of providential capitalist tropes and ideas. Equiano, for instance, narrates his involvement with a proposed colony on Florida’s Miskito Coast, as one in which the author invokes his providential god for economic purposes. In so doing, he concentrates his own narrative of transcendence around a reenactment of the drama of encounter, exchange, and divine invocation with native peoples. I will use moments like this one in order to demonstrate that providential capitalism was both a shared cultural context for Atlantic writers of
all races, free or unfree, and a tool to be wielded for competitive purposes in the hierarchies of the Atlantic.

Furthermore, the experiences of figures like Equiano often highlight through reflection both the promises and anxieties of other, ostensibly mainstream, communities within the Atlantic’s political, social, theological, and racial hierarchies. His voyage from slavery to freedom and along the routes of Atlantic trade, religious community, and publication market, for instance, puts into practice the ascension of Franklin’s imagined heroic socio-political citizen. He articulates the providential nature of the Franklin-esque figure of upward economic and personal ascension, and, in so doing, challenges the racial hierarchism underpinning that hero’s imagined journey. At the same time, his victory and even his proposal for the extension of Christian-capitalist colonial adventure tests the ideological assumptions of white authors and individuals, many of whom never found themselves in the position to command the market as their supposed racial and classed inferior ultimately could. As is uniformly and undeniably true of life in the Atlantic, all of these groups interacted with one another, defined themselves with, among, and against one another, and worked both collaboratively and combatively to produce the Atlantic world.

Meanwhile, a very different sort of ambivalence attends white slavery narratives by Royall Tyler, and maritime laboring narratives by Richard Henry Dana, centered upon the possibility that the commodifying logic of the slave markets might philosophically, economically, and, perhaps, spiritually attend white individuals and classes as well. Such texts offer a unique perspective from the ones presented by black maritime sailors. Rightly so, for their experiences in the market and in the cultures of the Atlantic are radically altered by their relative racial, class, and national status. Nevertheless, they too respond to frequently
dehumanizing power arrangements that come into being and that come to dominate Atlantic political and philosophical discourse through the marriage of economic ideology to providential theology.

The often violent personal stakes of life within a system that commodifies bodies and souls become vividly clear later in works by Herman Melville and Edgar Allan Poe. These author’s works highlight the personally obliterative stakes for the individual caught up in the providential capitalist Atlantic system, a system in which the market makes demands upon the entire person, as a laborer, as a commodity, and as a spirit. These authors too offer very different perspectives on providential capitalism, but their conclusions—coming as they do on the cusp of another period of intense violent social rupture in the mid-nineteenth century—highlight the darker implications of that system. They demonstrate that the confusing and intersecting flux of syncretic spiritual and economic practices that emerged from the revolutionary and post-revolutionary moments was coming to a head by the mid-point of the nineteenth century. If bloody and disruptive revolution initiated and necessitated new relationships of subjectivity and power in a socio-economy granted divine authority, these nihilistic accounts suggest that a new period of social and political rupture and violence was, perhaps, inevitable and that the individual may not—perhaps should not—survive it.

The social perils for a national society attempting to use the philosophy of providential capitalism to announce and to expand itself would look different for readers of another sort of text—one that shifts the oceanic perspective to the shores of the urban metropole. Narratives by writers such as Charles Brockden Brown and George Lippard offer just this sort of vision, even if they too are strikingly different and emerge from unique literary and socio-historical traditions. These texts helped to develop and then to critique the American urban gothic genre. Brockden
Brown’s texts often contend with the relationship of the urban individual to the American frontier. Meanwhile, George Lippard’s investigate and critique many of the race and class hierarchies of the metropole, while looking forward to the probable apocalyptic termination of capitalist democracy. And yet, in their own way, each attests to the thrust and essential victory of providential capitalist power structures and beliefs in the post-revolutionary Atlantic.

It is critical not to conflate these texts, as if they all speak in one voice or come to one conclusion. They resolutely do not. What they share, however, and what they help to illuminate, is the social context that emerged from the revolutionary Atlantic period, proliferated in the post-revolutionary and Jacksonian periods, and came to a head by the middle of the nineteenth century. These are individual, and therefore unique, responses to the inescapable fact of a form of capitalist economy that operated as divine machinery upon individuals and communities.

Some narratives from these periods vocally and enthusiastically articulate an ideology that unites capitalism and providential Christian virtue. These represent the ostensibly normative urtexts of Atlantic providential capitalism, even if, under scrutiny, they let slip much of the uncertainty and anxiety that was always latent in them. Weber, for example, quotes Benjamin Franklin’s dictum that “time is money,” to demonstrate the philosophy and quasi-theology beneath economic action (Weber 15). This is an innovation, Weber says, over older forms of capitalism, because it applies morality to market participation (17). However, Weber fails to acknowledge Franklin’s strategic and self-justifying motivations for invoking this ideology. Franklin and the other founding writers and politicians of the United States applied a moral imperative to capitalist economy not merely because contact with providential Christianity made an individual or a nation uniquely suited to succeed within capitalism, but also because the interrelation of capitalism and Christianity justified the creation of an expansive state, whose
identity, morals, and operations, especially with regard to its selective embrace of liberty, could be presented as sacred and inviolable. However, this need to assert divine sanction belies the author’s tenuous claims to authority. In a world governed by an economy of providential design, all individuals, slave, free, empowered, or commodified, were subject to the whims of forces they could never command to the degree that they might claim to do.

Such texts are as much documents of their authors’ pursuits of racial, economic and hierarchically selective election as they are of their fears that those ideals might be out of reach. In the process of carrying forward myths of national foundation, earlier generations of Americanists also reinstated the biases, anxieties and superstitions embedded in such documents. What later chapters in this study will suggest, therefore, is that the anxieties the providential capitalist writers sought to suppress have always been more features than flaws of providential capitalist expressive culture. As time goes on, although thinkers, writers and critics will look to providential capitalist successes to envision national futures, their texts will reveal that the failures to ever truly master a system that, by definition, cannot be mastered, equally defines the providential capitalist age to follow. Fuller rightly points out that “Again building upon Miller’s work on the Puritans, Bercovitch would rewrite the earlier critic’s notion of the jeremiad as a dark and glowering id-like expression of the despairing New England Mind, portraying it instead as an essentially affirmative rhetoric designed to renovate the national mission by generation consensus” (134). My analysis will go even further than Fuller’s critique by essentially making that dissensus its subject. Indeed, the Puritans were in search of cohesion in a changing political, cultural, and spiritual world. However, their solution—celebrating the marriage of profitable expansion to public displays of election—was only one of many. Some individuals and communities would find this union similarly profitable. Others would find it
deeply and personally disturbing. Some would yoke it to projects of political establishment. Others would see it as an impediment to the instantiation of community. The revolutionary period would force individuals and communities to reckon with the emergence of transnational economies and their supposed divine origin in personal, social, and political terms in a much more pressing and widespread fashion. The evolution of mobile-market economies throughout the early part of the nineteenth century would make the project of contending with the overwhelming authority of transnational and divinely-ordained market logic urgent to the point of fearful inescapability.

Chapter three will subsequently address the unsettling realities and social importance of white maritime captivity narratives for writers concerned with the production and cultivation of a racially-ordered Atlantic nationality, in order to explore the political, economic, and theological significance of this failure. In particular, I will discuss the anonymous *Humanity in Algiers: or, the Story of Azem*, along with Royall Tyler’s *Algerine Captive*, and Richard Henry Dana’s *Two Years Before the Mast*. These narratives at once formulated a white, nationalist identity, and revealed the destabilizing forces that would challenge or undermine that identity. The writers in this chapter could use the experiences of white slavery to assert white superiority or to cultivate a superior national identity. However, they could also reveal the instability of race, nationality, and class as signifiers of election.

In particular, white slave and white wage-slave narratives reveal the tenuousness of whiteness, free-laborism, or national paeans to liberty in a system that thrives upon the dehumanizing commodification and exchange of even ostensibly free persons. Dana, for example, relates his experiences under a sadistic captain who threatens to “make” a white sailor into “a negro slave.” The captain’s threat is telling, for life among the maritime laboring classes
revolved around violent episodes of power and submission that simultaneously endangered claims to freedom and reasserted the distance between white laborers and black chattel slaves. Such episodes sketched the limits of freedom even within whiteness, while also reasserting the logic of racial hierarchy. At the same time, the threat reveals the imaginary, and, therefore, unstable, nature of racial formulations in the maritime Atlantic. Whiteness and liberty could be conferred and, just as easily, withdrawn.

So too could definitions of election, and these texts demonstrate the spiritual dimensions of their racial, national, and class anxieties. In light of the potential reversals of race and class at sea, these writers admit that commodification could render any individual a thing, could take away their supposed special status, and could evacuate ostensible signifiers of election—like race and contract—of their stabilizing power. The superstitions surrounding commodification in these texts demonstrate the extent to which sailing laborers understood the philosophical implications of their potential depersonalization in the market. Moreover, these texts subvert the protective ideals of election to see it as, potentially, only the promise of exploitation and suffering.

And so, I will explore both the explicit promise and the implicit anxiety of providential capitalist writing in the Atlantic maritime. Generations of critics, including Miller and Bercovitch, saw both capitalism and puritan Christianity as important but relatively discrete elements of the background context from which an Atlantic state evolved. This study, however, will argue that the more important development has larger transnational and transhistorical stakes, including stakes for the present global economy, and the globalized societies that take their cues from this crucial Atlantic moment. Mobile maritime cultures crucially demonstrate the oceanic landlessness that helped such a system to evolve.
The oceanic perspective, therefore, raises both theological and political questions. Kaplan responded to Miller by investigating “what Miller relegated to the unnarrated background.” With frank assertiveness, she names “the multiple histories of continental and overseas expansion, conquest, conflict, and resistance which have shaped the cultures of the United States and the cultures of those it has dominated within and beyond its geopolitical boundaries” (4). I will argue that, the geopolitical issues that Kaplan raises should embrace, rather than reject Miller’s contention that religion functioned as the driver of national expansion. The spiritual cultures that Miller and, later, Bercovitch celebrate, actually fit into the wider, messier world that Kaplan and even more recent critics, including the post-Gilroy wave of Atlantic scholars suggest that they ignore. The spiritual perspective is precisely the thing that allowed individuals and communities to contend with the political, personal, and social disruptions that exploded in the revolutionary period, expanded into the first half of the nineteenth century, and set the stage for the fights of national and social meaning in the second wave of bloody upheaval that rocked the Atlantic throughout that century’s second half. It is also precisely the thing that keeps these issues so current for today’s political and social climate. It was, indeed, reductive to position Christian spirituality as a driver of celebratory expansion, but it was not wrong to recognize its central role in the production of Atlantic community and identity. Wedded to the rise of transnational market capital that occurred during and after the revolutionary period and continued apace into the first half of the nineteenth century, a spiritual frame of reference and mode of interpretation established community parameters, presented daunting challenges to the situation of the self within social hierarchies, and offered individuals the puzzling issues with which they contended most personally and most potently.
To demonstrate this, I will also take up more recent scholarship from writers who place this political transformation in its mobile—and frequently oceanic—context. Indeed, central to this study will be the work of critics like Alexander Byrd, Sean X. Goudie, Edward E. Baptist, Lauren Benton, Vincent Carretta, Paul Baepler, and Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, who accept Paul Gilroy’s challenge from *The Black Atlantic*, to trace the routes of thought and lineage that defined the mobile reality of Atlantic history. Byrd, for example, focuses critical attention upon both the cultures of West Africa and the Caribbean that were disrupted and formed by diaspora, and the colonial enterprises of Sierra Leone and Nova Scotia as the sites of Atlantic cultural formation. Baptist, likewise, moves the terms of Atlantic discourse and subjectivity from the routes of trade to the plantation cultures that served as the social ports linking those routes. This study will likewise insist upon the importance of the synthesis of spiritual and economic processes to these mobile maritime encounters. Building upon such works, I will do more than trace the economic, political, or even spiritual movements and moments of Atlantic history throughout the Atlantic. Instead, I will demonstrate the diverse ways in which the maritime literature that emerged from this period of intense change would not and could not have developed if not in response to the deliberate but deeply ambivalent marriage of providential spirituality to market-oriented capitalism.

I will also use these critical works to demonstrate that the moral questions related to economic systems—especially those dependent upon slavery—were not merely provincial or denominational concerns. Rather, they were demonstrative of a larger process by which capitalism transformed Christianity itself, and by which, simultaneously, Christian principles guided the evolution of capitalism in the Atlantic as a potentially colonizing hegemonic force. At the same time, I will expand upon the work of critics like Samuel Otter to reveal the fraught local
and national experiences of social and economic transformation in the post-revolutionary locales and ports that constellated the Atlantic, in order to draw links between economic and religious movements, and local and national historical events. Scholars like Brycchan Carey and Anna Brickhouse likewise demonstrate the contentious interrelation of spirituality, colonialism, national expansion, and commerce in the early colonial and later revolutionary periods, but they address neither Atlantic economy nor transnational spiritual traditions as the fully imbricated social structure that this study will illustrate. Building upon the work of such critics will allow me to demonstrate the theological implications of this, the most important of Atlantic economic and theological transformations. I argue that the analysis of that event, its production, its maintenance, and its social and personal effects is the major project of Atlantic studies.

The following chapters will also take inspiration from critics like Ian Baucom and Avery Gordon, who discuss the uncanny aspects of both finance and Atlantic social formations that allowed the ghostly essences of individuals and communities to circulate within the material world, especially within a market that saw bodies and souls—whether alive or dead—as commodities open to trade, transportation, transaction, and disposal. In these chapters, I will take up Baucom’s work of situating history around moments of uncanny capital signification, rather than around moments of political breakthrough. At the same time, I will draw upon Joseph Roach’s work, recognizing that beliefs about death and the dead reinstated social and economic hierarchies throughout the Atlantic.

Baucom observes the tragedy of the Zong massacre and finds in it evidence for the totalizing and dehumanizing logic of commodity allegorization. He sees the transformation of persons into things in the market and in the ledger books of the insurance trade as defining eighteenth-century innovations. I will look to Baucom’s analysis, but add a spiritual critique.
This market transformation initiated a new perspective of the body and its soul, as elements of a person trapped in the market-turned Kingdom, even after death.

Roach uses spaces marked by death, such as the killing fields, the parade-grounds for the dead, and, in particular, the cemetery, to recognize the intersections of class and spiritual beliefs. He observes that class-distinctions in the social and power relations among the living are replicated in rituals surrounding death, throughout the slave-holding, and post-slavery Atlantic. This observation further dismantles early interpretations of Americanist social foundation emerging from triumphant religious and political events, by recognizing the inescapability, even across the boundaries of life and death, of the very class formations that those earlier histories ignored. I will use this scholarship to demonstrate the fact that, in the providential capitalist Atlantic, class itself became one more register of divine election, and one more sign that the divine hand operated through the marketplace.

Avery Gordon similarly recognizes the supernatural resonances in social interactions, when she observes the “haunted” continuance of social and personal trauma. Haunting, for Gordon, maintains the social traumas, the histories, the personal appearances and disappearances attendant to societies whose constructions of power and sociality are more infused with supernatural uncanny than they might admit. I will situate these notions specifically in the Atlantic during the revolutionary, post-revolutionary, and early nineteenth century periods, because there too polities developed around beliefs that were often supernatural, even if they were not invoked as such. Moreover, I will build upon her ideas to present the Atlantic as a space supernaturally haunted by the seemingly ordinary actions of day-to-day market capital, and to see individual persons as vessels haunted by their immaterial existence in both the market and in the mind of the god that controls it.
Moreover, I will reinterpret Colin Dayan’s discussion of sacred fetish objects and ritualistic practices as not only responses to, but endemic parts of an Atlantic spiritual culture that was inextricably tied to Atlantic economic culture. Dayan describes a kind of reliquary religious tradition among the diverse racial and class groups of Haiti during and after the revolution. She uncovers tantalizing links between vodou ritual and storytelling practices, and I will focus, in particular, upon her readings of traditions related to supernatural embodiment. I will argue that the same logic that leads these spiritual cultures to view material objects as repositories for sacred, supernatural, and social forces pertains in eighteenth and nineteenth-century market practices. There too commodified objects and even human beings take on the sacred forces of the market that orders their movements throughout mobile Atlantic societies.

Stephen Greenblatt observes a similar fetishization process in a colonial context, writing, "Where Roman law had seen objects transformed into possessions through bodily presence, here objects—the mute rocks—are transformed through such presence into sacred artifacts, that is, into objects infused with the manifest will and residual power of their maker" (39). I will reframe this fetishization process as a form of spiritual commodification: the transformation of a transactional thing into a repository for social interactions through a process that is equally economic and spiritual. I will build upon this logic of the sacred aspect of fetish objects, apply it to market commodities, and then, using Baucom and others, apply the logic of commodification to human bodies. In this way, I will demonstrate that, within the Atlantic system, human beings held both sacred and economic value, no different from the sacred stones or fetish objects that Dayan and Greenblatt describe, or even from the socially communicative fetishized currency that Marx describes. The body becomes all of these things, a home for a soul and for potential or real
labor interactions, and, therefore, becomes a valuable commodity in the providential capitalist Atlantic marketplace.

Indeed, the concept of the word made flesh anticipates and haunts a central conceit of commodity fetishism—that of the value embodied in the fetish object. Greenblatt, observing the power of objects to contain this sort of social value in colonial contexts, writes that, "replacement and renewal are possible precisely because the representation does not depend upon the claim of an intrinsic, material value...but solely upon...authority...Conversely the magnitude of that authority is constantly reaffirmed in the subjects' willingness to treat worthless objects as signs of wealth and tokens of exchange" (37). Greenblatt here describes contracts, speech acts, totemic exchanges—the technologies that announce colonial encounter, peaceful or, more frequently, violent. However, the same logic applies for the commodities that travel throughout the revolutionary and post-revolutionary Atlantic market, as well as for the individuals who, themselves, act as commodities in the very same ways. With this in mind, Arendt is correct when she writes, “value consists solely in the esteem of the public realm where things appear as commodities, and it is neither labor, nor work, nor capital, nor profit, nor material which bestows such value upon an object, but only and exclusively the public realm where it appears to be esteemed, demanded, or neglected. Value is the quality a thing can never possess in privacy but acquires automatically the moment it appears in public” (Arendt 164). However, the individual saw the public both as a marketplace and as a divine kingdom, both potentially ennobling and obliteratorive. I will both examine individual responses to this market-oriented society, and use those responses to sketch and define the parameters of that transnational society.

I will, therefore, use chapter four to explore the symbolic and literal human sacrifices that served as the communion events in the church of sacred capital. Herman Melville’s *Redburn:*
His First Voyage and Edgar Allan Poe’s The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket both revolve around uncanny moments of commodification, communion, and sacrifice. As they do, they comment upon the commodity anxiety of white authors and audiences, as well as upon the necessary violence of consumption, exchange, and loss that secured Atlantic capital.

Redburn, for example, offers the story of a naïve youth’s first humiliating encounters with Atlantic maritime capitalism. The titular Redburn does find election, but finds it among similarly suffering and commodified laborers. Likewise, he comes of age with knowledge of the natural order of the world and society, but discovers that it is eternally possessive, unreliable, and sharkish. Finally, he learns, in moments of shocking and uncanny violence, that his commodification is total, both bodily and spiritual, and that there is no escape from his commodity status within the Atlantic market.

Poe’s Pym learns similarly harsh lessons about his place within the cosmology of Atlantic providential capitalism. Even more explicit than Redburn, Pym is a text interested in the supernatural causes and effects of commodification. Pym’s maritime market is, it seems, supernaturally ordered and ordained and, as such, the violence and sacrifices that occur in the text serve dual economic and spiritual functions. As Pym finds himself engaged in ghastly rituals of cannibalistic communion, he discovers that the universe revolves around the logic of consumption and that he must learn to consume, lest he be consumed by the inescapable providential capitalist cosmos.

I will produce a reading of this text that will uncover the personal, political, racial, and social significance of capitalist practices cast into pre-capitalist terms, such as sacrifice and haunting. I will demonstrate that this narrative articulates an understanding of the self that rests upon the dual economic and moral significance of “value,” which pertains on both sides of the
ledger board of the living and the dead. Divinity and the market work in concert upon one individual, exerting the same pressures and elevating the same values upon him or her and upon the society in which he or she lives, works, and dies. This is not an endorsement of the Atlantic economy’s most destabilizing or dehumanizing tendencies, but a recognition of an emergent and increasingly potent philosophy uniting capitalism to providential theology, and a roadmap for how to survive it.

Of course, personal, social, and ideological survival remained a pressing matter for the metropoles bound by Atlantic commerce, as much as for the individuals and communities whose mobility linked them. I will therefore also add to early contextual explorations of capitalism and spirituality by examining the ways in which an imaginary frontier helped to construct relationships of core and periphery that, as scholars like Jennifer Rae Greeson, have pointed out, had important consequences for state-creation and identification. To offer just one example, Walter Johnson describes the way that the failure of a supposed slave-rebellion, or “apocalypse,” organized by the famous bandit and con-man, John Murrell, suggested the full Atlantic scope of slavery as an economic and social threat to national unity in the Atlantic. Johnson writes, “The sovereign boundary drawn around the slave South at the beginning of the nineteenth century was exposed in Murrell’s plan as a comforting illusion of territorial and historical isolation” (68). This is true, but the significance of boundary status goes beyond questions of political sovereignty. New England, the American South, the Caribbean, West Africa, and Europe were linked in a transactional economy and culture from the first moments of encounter and cultural exchange. Moreover, as Wendy Warren reminds readers, commodities were of value at all points in this economy. As a result, narratives of social encounter and frontier are also stories of
economic transaction, and, more pressingly, of the individual’s and the state’s positions in and responses to a cosmology of divine economy.

Geographical, economic, and spiritual frontiers invited writers and politicians to argue over the meaning of nationalism built upon exceptionalism, colonial hegemony premised upon Christian vocation, and capitalist expansion developed through personal and social virtue. Those who embraced this conceit echoed the sentiments of the “English Traveler” that Bercovitch quotes describing the nation in terms of “Wealth and Conquest...striking traits of grandeur and magnificence, which the Divine Economist...reserved to crown the closing scene” (114).

Bercovitch’s vision of an “American Jeremiad” also premised “American exceptionalism...in terms of an increasingly pervasive middle-class hegemony” (xiii). This extends such that many see “the city on a hill as a model of middle-class economy” (110). This also includes expansion: “it implies a form of community without geographical boundaries, since the wilderness is by definition unbounded, the terra profana...yet to be conquered, step by inevitable step, by the advancing armies of Christ” (26). Thus, any territory not annexed to this American state was wilderness, demonic, and peopled with demons. Any projects to expand the American territory were projects of bringing God to a godless wilderness.

However, as many later Atlantic scholars will demonstrate, this view of colonial America as an outpost within or against the unclaimed wilderness is deeply misleading. In fact, colonial America was just one part of a wide-ranging system of Atlantic commerce that brought ideas along with goods from all of the far-flung ports of Atlantic society. Even in the most “Yankee”-centric texts, which attempt to assert stability against the instability of Atlantic life, the mobile displacement of Atlantic authors’ experiences reveals the endlessly peripheral nature of Atlantic community. At the same time that writers like Franklin used the language of providential
capitalism to assert the importance of their citizenry in history, they were being used to calculate a system of Atlantic commerce, which they described as divinely ordered, but which saw them as only one part in a grand economic cosmology.

Claims to geographical isolation or ideological purity were open to critique, especially as the nation attempted to define itself in the wake of revolution. Accordingly, writers like Charles Brockden Brown narrated the intimate connections between the supposedly morally superior North and the supposedly decadent South, as a result of continued economic codependence. In fact, as Warren points out, those links were always present. She observes that “John Winthrop’s brother-in-law Emmanuel Downing, a lawyer of the inner Temple in London, and a prominent member of his church, had profit on his mind when he wrote in 1645 to Winthrop to encourage war with the Narragansett Indians in order to eventually create profits in Barbados” (95). And so, from the very start of North American colonialism and broader Atlantic expansion, economics, cultural exclusivity, and the church, were all mutually involved in the same transnational ideological system and the same attendant moral and theological challenges.

Chapter five will consequently follow the routes of Atlantic providential capitalism back to shore, to examine how they reveal the peripheral status of the post-revolutionary-era North American metropolis, and pose troubling questions for the emergent nation. In Charles Brockden Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn or Memoirs of the Year 1793*, the logics of commodification, mastery, and abuse become central tenets of the national self. Moreover, Brockden Brown crafts a narrative that reconceives the city at the center of the new American nation’s political and imaginary self as a frontier space, an area through which flows Atlantic capital, and which remains connected to the broader Atlantic through business, personal relations, and even disease. In particular, white women in peril become the focal points through which to examine and to
critique a national culture that is subservient to and dependent upon an Atlantic economy of racialized subjugation, violence, and captivity. Brockden Brown’s focus upon these captive figures also permits him to challenge the nostalgic urge that framed the United States as an outpost of safety in an imagined frontier, even as it actively imperiled its own subjects and citizens.

It is difficult to overstate the utility of a past that provided a providential basis for the extension of both capitalist markets and national polities as the post-revolutionary period evolved, and those polities attempted—and often failed—to stabilize into the nineteenth century. As Bercovitch wrote, “The American was not...a member of ‘the people.’ He stood for an errand that was limitless in effect...Thus (in the notorious paradox of the Declaration of Independence) he could denounce servitude, oppression and inadequate representation while concerning himself least (if at all) with the most enslaved, oppressed and inadequately represented group” (153). From the earliest moments, this view of a fallen state and a promised future was central to the American project. It was also central to the study of that project. Perry Miller, for instance, explained how the jeremiad inculcates a sense of struggle to be overcome, and argues that the same principle becomes confused in the moment of victory (33). However, Miller stopped short of noting the way that capitalism offers an endless thrust, which allows jeremiad to go on forever. In providential capitalism, there is no ultimate victory to recover from, only endless potential victories to look forward to in the future. Even so, this is a system defined by mobility, exchange, by the transferrable value of the individual, and by the construction of the state as a part of a constantly reassembling transnational market. Consequently, it appears that that victory belongs not to the individual, or even to the society of which it was a part, but to the divine market that enfolds them both.
The approach to history and to literary history that Miller and even Bercovitch entertained has elicited significant critical pushback. Rightly so, for American Studies and broader Atlantic studies have revealed a world of intersecting cultures, power arrangements, and expressive literary communities that cannot possibly be contained by readings that offer voice to writers like Mather or even Emerson but deny it to writers like Equiano. Nevertheless, this work was onto something: the revolutionary era exploded proto-national cultures with providential religion at their heart. What these earlier critical responses failed to see, however, was the way in which that explosion initiated a period of competitive confrontations between the individual and social subject and the econo-spiritual world in which they were housed—confrontations that were at the very center of the Atlantic metropole.

Brycchan Carey, for example, describes the long period of struggle through which Philadelphia Quakers had to pass in order to disentangle themselves from the economy of Atlantic slavery. Similarly, Johnson reminds readers that, during the nineteenth century, “the history being made in the South was not the history that the slaveholders and cotton factors told themselves they were making, but another sort of history entirely. It was a history being made by their black slaves. And though that real history was evident every day in the physical labor with which those slaves created ‘the country,’ it was yet hidden from view by the forced conversion of their labor into wealth credited to the substance of their masters and by a stage-prop sovereignty designed to convince them they were alone in the world” (68). Attempts by people like John Murrell to disrupt the hierarchies of power in the Atlantic economy would further underscore the extent to which ostensibly marginalized individuals were actually central to the cultural and economic life of Atlantic societies. Johnson writes that Murrell “would pry the history of the South away from that of the United States and reattach it to the history being made
in what we would today call the Black Atlantic: in Haiti, where blacks had been ruling themselves for forty years; in the West Indies, where the slaves had gained their full freedom in 1834; and in South America, where, he would assure them, there were many thousands ready to join them in arms” (68-9). Both Johnson and Carey offer valuable insights into the processes of cultural formation and disruption that took place among different communities within the Atlantic economy. However, if readers approach these histories in isolation, they will fail to see the full scope of Atlantic society and its impact on individuals and social groups. The Atlantic was an economy run on the backs of the enslaved, and a community of mobile displaced individuals. It was also a kind of church. Nationalist rhetoric produced and clashed with democratic ideals. Economic entanglements created moral questions. Spiritual beliefs directed economic behavior. Individuals and individual souls were commodified or empowered. All of this happened within a constellated geography of one culture, composed of many cultures, all abiding by the same universal truth: that the market was divine and that the universe was market-oriented.

These Atlantic spaces, their inhabitants, and the individuals who spent their lives traversing the routes that connected them all shared a belief in the natural ordination and application of economic principles as social and even spiritual truths, and believed that evidence of divine order appeared in the market that bound them all together. Indeed, this had to be true in order for the economy of the Atlantic, along with the cultures that fed into that economy, to function. These cultures were rigidly hierarchical, often oppressively violent, and committed to an economy that used the individual to enlarge the Atlantic marketplace. To exist as such, these societies also had to demonstrate the spiritual dimensions of the market, and the market dimensions of the spirit-world. Vincent Brown, for example, notes that “slave masters
throughout the Caribbean used spiritual terror to deter Africans from self-destruction” that would allow them to escape slavery. They also used this “spiritual terror” in order to ritualistically perform their mastery over slaves even beyond the boundaries of life and death (133). Moreover, Brown observes, “the rites of legal practice likened judges to God, and thus they seemingly derived their authority from the divine” (138). Legal, economic, and spiritual authority were bound together in the Atlantic, whether in New England, the Chesapeake, the Caribbean, or West Africa, as different faces of the same universal system, the same divine economy or economic divine kingdom. And yet, as cohesive and unifying as that system could be, it was also dangerous: for it made the moral perils of slavery, commodification, and violence universally inescapable.

Indeed, as chapter six will demonstrate, in the economy of Atlantic providential capitalism, the nation’s very soul was at risk of violent assault. George Lippard’s _The Quaker City: Or, The Monks of Monk Hall_ amplifies the supernatural and spiritual resonances of the nation’s continued involvement with and reliance upon Atlantic capital’s most abusive structures and demonstrates their inextricability from the metropole’s claims to productivity and cultural authority. Lippard’s Philadelphia is a society that proclaims the virtues of providential capitalism but remains deeply involved in the violence, vice, and abuse of commodity capital at its worst. The prophecies and dreams that occur in the novel therefore critique the ostensibly virtuous basis of covenanted capitalism seized upon by opportunistic capitalists and politicians throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, even as they look forward to an apocalyptic clash of democratic and capitalist ideals. Society, the novel posits, is a series of rigged games, in which everyone and everything is open to exploitation, capture, and commodification.
Moreover, the nature of that commodification suggests the deepening of long-held providential capitalist anxieties over the status of the body and the soul in Atlantic society. Lippard’s hybrid, seemingly post-human Devil-Bug thus asserts his claim as the prototypical Atlantic individual—syncretic, vicious, and dehumanized. Looking back to what colonial and revolutionary thinkers promised and forward to what was to come, Lippard insists that providential capital does not produce a society that mirrors the Kingdom of Heaven, but, instead, produces one that resembles Monk-Hall, a debased hive of mutual deceit, zombie-like dehumanization, and universal depravity, careening toward divine judgement and apocalyptic ruin.

The revolutionary moment produced possibilities for secular expansion, for national hegemony, for new arrangements of labor conditions, for new hierarchies of race, nationality, sex, and spiritual affiliation. The moment also exposed the instability and competition that was always already there and that would produce collisions of race, citizenship, and liberty by mid-century. Fuller writes, “In hindsight, what [cold war] studies share is a critical exploration of what was described as the distinctive nature of American thought and writing: its ‘Americanness’ In the process, they often blended historical and aesthetic concerns in ways that strengthened and consolidated a set of themes and myths, authors and canons” (123). This study will not reengage such blanket social and political assertions. However, it will recognize that, from the competition over ideas, over social arrangements, over property, and over the self emerged the defining and most productive philosophical union of the post-revolutionary age: of providential theology to capitalist ideology in the form of providential capitalism. Providential capitalism, materialized as the historical, ideological, and theological trends, to which the works
in this study respond, foreclosed other possibilities as it came to dominate Atlantic life and letters.

All of the texts that this study examines take different approaches to the challenges of situating the self or the society within a divine-economic cosmology. Narratives that use the language of exchange and covenant to define an upwardly mobile self within a system that would otherwise deny their authors’ humanity revel in the promises extended by this system. Conversely, narratives that probe the anxiety produced by the conflation of spirituality and finance reveal the dark undercurrents of personal and social peril at the heart of the selfsame structures of power, economy, and society. These texts are quite different, the circumstances of their production are unique, but their subject is, in some ways, ultimately the same: the individual confronted by a divine economic social world.

In the wake of the revolutionary, post-revolutionary, and early nineteenth-century periods, in response to the mass experiences of social disruption, commodification, and exchange that defined those periods, individuals would learn how to assert their value, with its multiple economic, spiritual, and cultural meanings, within a divine, commercial, and increasingly nationalistic context. Other individuals would find themselves marginalized by these forces, attempting to create bonds of community, only to find their efforts frustrated by the same forces that elevated other individuals and other groups. Still others would learn the harsh truths inherent to the philosophy of providential capitalism: that the economy of market and spirit requires sacrifice and dehumanizing commodification, and enlarges itself whether individuals succeed or fail.

This is the tradition with which these figures had to contend and to which they turned. Enlightenment thinkers, Atlantic authors of fiction, maritime explorers, and diasporic
autobiographers all addressed the post-revolutionary Atlantic by explicitly or implicitly invoking a philosophical position that flowered during their historical moment, that competed with other possibilities for social organization, and that became dominant, stabilizing, and self-justifying in the wake of revolutionary disruptions. They did so by recognizing the power not only of generalized spirituality, not only of capital, not only even of the marriage of the two. Rather, they faced the marriage of a particularly market-oriented capital exchange to a particularly providential vision of divine order and intervention. This was an explanation of and justification for Atlantic capital on the grounds that it contained prearranged logic and extended signs of election to those who fit within the plans of a divine intelligence.

In this study, therefore, I will position providential spirituality fused to market economy at the center of the social history of Atlantic discourse and expressive production—a centrality too often ignored—while resisting the overly reductive gestures toward national foundation mythology found in the scholarship of earlier generations. As the forces of nationalism became more pronounced during this period, the conflation of providential and capitalist definitions of “value,” and the dual economic and divine mechanisms by which individuals and societies were positioned and ordered raised pressing questions about the future—questions that readers and critics, alike, miss if they ignore the spiritual basis of revolutionary Atlantic market development, or the capitalist operations of Atlantic spiritual culture. Would liberty extend to all? Was liberty even possible in such a system? Were humans made powerful by their value in the marketplace or were they reduced to mere things to be exchanged for other commodities? In ways large and small, positive and negative, individuals and communities learned the same lesson: that the Atlantic world announced by colonialism, enlarged by trade, and fomented by revolutionary
social identification was engineered by a new philosophy in which the economy was divine and God was alive in the market.

In today’s political and social climate, in which the philosophy of divinely ordained wealth, of value demonstrated through economic success, of election as economic reward is ascendant, a study that engages with the emergence of that philosophy is more vital than ever. Understanding the ways in which Atlantic societies organized their politics, their ideologies, their social hierarchies, their theologies around a simple but revolutionary idea—that individuals were placed within an economic world by an interventionist god—will allow readers, critics, historians, and citizens to understand this current moment, as well as to comprehend the significance of the spread of Atlantic social arrangements to the broader world. For post-revolutionary thinkers and writers, and, indeed, for current politicians, writers, societies, and individuals, God acted through the market and that market was an expression of God.
Chapter 1

A Particular Favourite of Heaven: Olaudah Equiano and the God of the Marketplace
Sometime in the year 1765, during one of the brief periods ashore that punctuated his long circuitous life at sea, Olaudah Equiano, a slave, an able sailor, and respected member of a merchant ship’s crew, had two visions of his impending freedom. The presentation of these visions could not be more different: one arrives in the form of a commercial evaluation, a performance review that portends a bright future for a laborer who goes out of his way to make himself indispensable; the other appears in a dream, requiring interpretation by a local “Wise Woman,” who promises an imminent end to a period of suffering. One of these predictions is announced by the cold calculating language of commerce and value, the other by the awed tones of the supernatural divine. By 1766, Olaudah Equiano would accomplish his manumission and find himself legally converted into a free man. As a result, these visions—these very different ways of interpreting and interacting with the concepts of liberty, providence, election, and finance—coalesce in Equiano’s fateful narrative. The logic of the capitalist market and the belief systems of supernatural providence cohere, through Equiano’s autobiographical history, into equal parts of a grand cosmological whole that works upon and within individuals to position them in an Atlantic that is divinely ordered and economically animated. Equiano’s narrative of conversion sees him transform from a subject upon whom the logic and mechanisms of the Atlantic market are forced, into an agent of the Atlantic market, who gains mastery over and eventually learns to manipulate the rhetorical power of providential and capitalist language for his own ends. For Olaudah Equiano, the mobility and exchange logic of the Atlantic market are expressions of providential intelligence and allow him to ascend ever closer to election.

The Olaudah Equiano readers meet in The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African is both an evidently elect individual and an explicitly marketable commodity, making him ideally situated to demonstrate the personal effects of
eighteenth-century capitalism and providential Christianity, when they work in tandem through providential capitalism. Equiano’s status as a racialized and commodified subject both aids and delimits his navigation of the Atlantic’s networks of trade, religion, and migration and he interprets all of his movements through a firm belief in his own providential election. He writes, “I regard myself as a particular favourite of Heaven, and acknowledge the mercies of Providence in every occurrence in my life” (9-10). Equiano also articulates a nuanced critique of the mysterious workings of this system, which privileges special knowledge, requires faith in inscrutable logic, rewards mastery based upon domination, and encourages exploitation. While contemporary critical debates over Equiano’s originary or national status belie the hegemonic and nationalist impulses to claim successful participants in Atlantic history, Equiano’s narrative is one of circular Atlantic mobility reimagined as personal transcendence. For Equiano, the invisible hand of the market is paired with the invisible hand of an interventionist Christian god, and faith is revealed as a matter of mobile commercial competition.

It is unfortunate that so much of Equiano’s curated narrative of self has been obscured by questions of its authenticity or anthropological importance. Brycchan Carey, for example has outlined the bitter debate about Equiano’s narrative’s anthropological verifiability, especially surrounding his description of his birth, early life, and experience with the middle passage. In truth, this critical fight to claim Equiano is about more than asserting “firstness.” Rather, it is about subsuming Equiano’s individual success story into one hegemonic national myth or another, in order to transform his narrative into proof of American or English or even West African cultural primacy, rather than to see it is a product of broader Atlantic mobility and displacement. However, as a narrative figure, Equiano presents himself as a truly Atlantic subject, an active participant in the culture and commerce of the Atlantic world. Wherever he
was born, he is a product of Atlantic modernity and comes to embrace its possibilities and suffer
its perils. Though it provides fascinating anthropological insight, his narrative is less interested in
documenting Atlantic history than it is in articulating a philosophy that makes sense of that
history. Yes, he acknowledges, the systems of trade, exchange, and finance produce violence and
dehumanization, but, he argues, they also offer individual opportunities to successfully navigate
the market and to find salvation through acceptance of a providential intelligence that operates
through market economy.

Furthermore, Equiano uses his autobiography to grant himself a voice and volition, and to
demonstrate his own fulfillment of a providential promise of ultimate salvation. Even as his
narrative shows readers a commodity figure, a body with a transactional value, the textual
version of Equiano is empowered by his dawning awareness of his authorial self. He is a man,
made into a commodity, and reawakening to and reasserting his humanity through authorship.
He does so gradually, by accruing value as both a commodity subject and as an elected vessel of
divine providential will. As Ian Baucom makes clear, this reliance upon the allegorical is a
unique feature of capitalism, capitalist modernity, and the modern novel (215-219). The
eighteenth and nineteenth century systems of exchange transformed, for example, grain from a
consumable food source into a commodity with a variable exchange rate, and permitted that rate
to change, depending upon the logic or caprice of an immeasurably complex invisible network of
trade and commerce. This system also transformed individuals into commodities with equally
variable exchange rates. This was true of all individuals who participated in the capitalist system,
but, for obvious reasons, especially so for slaves. Recognizing this, Equiano treats himself, both
allegorically and literally, as a commodity to be evaluated, traded and exchanged, who, over the
course of the narrative, uses his special status as God’s “particular favourite” to take control of his own trading and exchange processes.

Given Equiano’s examination of the personal effects of the market’s allegorizing logic, the autobiography reads as, at once, a history of Atlantic exchange, a personal examination of the slave experience, a roadmap toward a particular mode of self-liberation, and a proposal for the further advance of a kind of capitalist humanism. Stephen Shapiro notes the importance of allegorical evaluative exchange logic for the formation of the novel as a generic mode and, though it is, perhaps, not right to call Equiano’s autobiography a novel, it is also not quite right to call it an anthropological history. Rather, it contains elements of both, using a novelistic sense of the self as developing entity in order to personalize historical experiences, and commanding control over the text to position the author within a larger Atlantic history. As much as Equiano’s text is an examination of his own life or a creative work of identity-curation, it is a meditation upon the ambivalent process and meaning of conversion for a commodified individual embedded within the eighteenth century’s most important marketplaces: both the slave system and the merchant trading economy.

The process of conversion—from one unit of exchange to another, or from unbeliever to believer—works as both the narrative arc of the text and its major theme. Moreover, the text that Equiano produces serves as proof of his conversion and a kind of commodity note in its own right, a covenant document asserting his freedom and symbolic value in Atlantic society. Finally, Equiano’s autobiography is not a blanket endorsement of capitalism. Capitalism, after all, produces the slave system he so vocally opposes. Rather, Equiano argues for a form of capitalist humanism that is virtuous and vocational, that uses the market to realize the will of God. There are, in this text, bad capitalists just as there are bad Christians. But Equiano presents himself as a
model virtuous Christian capitalist, at once made wealthier because of his adherence to Christian virtues and blessed for his effective navigation of the capitalist marketplace. He is specially selected and protected by God, so that he can use the marketplace to advance divine causes in the material world. The text and its protagonist wind a circular path around the Atlantic, even as they advance incrementally toward embodying an ideal of providential capitalism.

This narrative arc is as important as any anthropological insights the text might contain, for it allows Equiano, the author, to critique slavery, and to examine capital’s role in the institution, even as he, ultimately, presents capitalism as a divinely ordered system by which individuals might attain liberty and salvation. In *Freedom’s Empire*, Laura Doyle argues that the literary and cultural fixation upon freedom and liberty develop out of an articulation of racial consciousness as a means of solidarity and individual striving for freedom and come at the expense of denying those virtues to others. She writes, “In Atlantic modernity, freedom is a race myth” (Doyle 3). This remains true for Equiano, whose narrative exploration of the routes of Atlantic trade notes and challenges the racial contours of liberty, mobility, value, and providence. He knows that Atlantic freedom isn’t extended to everybody, but imagines a providentially ordered form of capitalism that might redeem Atlantic modern societies from the sin of racial slavery and offer individual escape routes from racial barriers.

Still, it is worth wondering whether he contributes a novelistic history that does as Doyle claims most Atlantic novels do: challenge paternal power structures without dismantling them (10). The same philosophy of individual providential election represented by the accumulation of economic value that Equiano champions, will also be taken up by proponents of racially, economically, and ideologically exclusive nationalist societies. If Equiano personalizes the conflation of providence and capitalism to show its treacherous but ultimately salvific potential,
other writers, politicians, and critics, including the founders of the United States, will use the same logic to erect political states that preach virtue and populism, even as they protect racial and economic power structures, and extend colonial hegemony abroad.

Although Equiano evolves into a vocal abolitionist, his text also propounds the same capital-colonialist projects that relied upon and empowered the prodigious spread of slavery throughout the Atlantic. As a result, critical readers of Equiano should be willing to ask whether his narrative is a true forceful critique of the economic and philosophical roots of slavery or whether he too converts the “awe and terror” of exploitation into a personalized experience of sublime colonial and capitalist victory (Doyle 87). In *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Lisa Lowe comments on the way Equiano’s autobiography participates in the literature of “liberalism” a form which “requires mediation through an aesthetic form that encourages readers to understand the emancipation of the individual as if it were a collective emancipation” (50).¹ This is essentially what Lowe, quoting Laura Doyle, calls a “liberty plot,” in which one man’s ascent toward liberty stands in for the implicit progressive liberation of a people, and occludes their continued bondage (Lowe 48).¹ This corresponds with eighteenth and nineteenth century efforts to draw emancipation into the narrative of self and national liberation. As Lowe writes “the narrative of freedom overcoming slavery was canonized in British and European political and economic spheres, in discourses of citizenship, free labor, and free trade.” Nevertheless, “the desire for promised freedoms came to discipline and organize varieties of social subjects” (Lowe 46). And so, Equiano’s was hardly the only black Atlantic subject to comment upon the liberationist peril and potential of the Atlantic marketplace.

Indeed, readers might counter Equiano’s narrative with that of Ottobah Cugoano, whose *Narrative of the Enslavement of Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa*, from 1787, explicitly
rejects the notion that slavery, an innately sinful and lawless practice, could be redeemed, even as it acts as a vehicle by which individuals find Christianity. He calls it in every way “not natural and innocent” despite the fact that it brings the unreformed into contact with the Christian God that he venerates and honors (51). He writes, “Sovereign goodness may eventually visit some men even in a state of slavery, but their slavery is not the cause of that event and benignity” (23). Nor does Cugoano shy away from wishing divine, even violent retribution upon enslavers who “are those cooks and men that would be roasted and saddled, it certainly would be no unpleasant sight to see them well roasted, saddled and bridled too” (16). Equiano is, by no means, a slaver of this sort, but his text is much more complicated than its antislavery reputation suggests, and, indeed, more ambivalent than Cugoano’s fierce antislavery discourse. Equiano challenges readers to reconcile his belief in the economy as an expression of God’s plan with his acknowledgement of capital’s abusive potential and, furthermore, with his own embrace of capitalist colonialism.

**Pilgrim’s Progress: The Conversion from Narrative to Authorial Self**

Even as Equiano, the protagonist, experiences capitalism at its worst, Equiano, the author, alludes to it at its best. He turns crises of identity into monuments to transcendent conversion, and traumas of displacement into opportunities to achieve individual liberty. Equiano learns through successive steps and conversions to navigate the Atlantic capitalist system, to leverage his own value as a traded commodity into the purchasing power necessary to buy his freedom. Then he uses his labor and value as a free laborer in the Atlantic marketplace to embrace and fulfill a vision of Christian providence and even goes on to promote colonialist schemes of reform based upon the mingling of Christian and capitalist ideals. *The Interesting Narrative*… is, therefore, a deeply ambivalent text, at once enthusiastic in its embrace of the
mobile possibilities of capital, and circumspect in its awareness of the dehumanizing brutality of human commodification.

The authorial Equiano uses his narrative self to expose the worst elements of Atlantic capitalist trade, but also to assert and to model the ways an individual might navigate that system successfully. He writes that if the text “affords any satisfaction to my numerous friends, at whose request it has been written, or in the smallest degree promotes the interests of humanity, the ends for which it was undertaken will be fully attained” (Equiano 10). The autobiography is, at its heart, an argumentative performance, using personal anecdote and social history to promote specific interests.

Indeed, the text emphasizes this split between author and subject, encouraging readers to engage with his account not as a strict autobiography, but as an imaginative and deeply personal argument for the union of Atlantic capitalism and providential Christianity. Gerard Genette uses the term, *metalepsis* to name this sort of experience, in which the walls between “the world in which one tells and the world of which one tells” break down (33). For example, to emphasize the distance between author and character, the authorial Equiano repeatedly quotes text with which the narrative Equiano could have had no experience, including Homer and Milton (Equiano 54; 81). Notably, the quotes the author chooses contextualize the character’s experiences as classical and humanist, the results of an ongoing developmental synthesis of Equiano’s West African heritage with European classical culture and Judeo-Christian religious traditions, that could only have come about through his immersion in the mobile routes of Atlantic trade. The text’s perspective is that of an author who has achieved the rewards of grace, literacy, and wealth, looking back at a character who has yet to receive these gifts. And they are gifts—providential signs of grace and election, that conflate freedom, special knowledge, and
economic success into the definition of Atlantic humanity. As Equiano says: “I blessed the Lord that I was so rich” (85). Freedom is a goal that Equiano can achieve only through economic means, through exchanges and purchases that build upon conversion logic, toward his own ultimate conversion into a free and elect man. At the same time, he attributes his successive steps toward that goal to providence. “Every day now brought me nearer my freedom” he writes, “and I was impatient till we proceeded again to sea, that I might have an opportunity of getting a sum large enough to purchase it…I laid in as large a cargo as I could, trusting to God’s Providence to prosper my undertaking” (97). In this way, he argues, the market can operate as the means of expressing providential will personally and in the world.

Nevertheless, the narrative arc of Equiano’s life sees him plunged, by the Atlantic’s capitalist slave system, into terrifying isolation, separated from his family, and cut off from his ancestral culture and traditions. Whatever the real circumstances of Equiano’s enslavement or capture, his harrowing account of the middle passage demonstrates the essential depravity of a debased capitalism that has produced slavery. When he writes, of his “anxious wish for death to relieve me from all my pains,” Equiano personalizes the worst potential results of slave capitalism, while also exercising argumentative control over his autobiography in order to prepare readers to embrace a better, divinely ordered, capitalist experience (27). Such moments allow the author not only to relate (or invent) his life story, but also to present the Atlantic market’s dehumanizing abuses in the starkest possible terms. This is a system that strips him of family bonds. It transforms white Christians into figurative—and potentially literal—cannibals. It even strips Equiano of his identity. The authorial Equiano reasserts himself, so that his narrative’s subtitle, “the African,” is as much an act of defiance as it is of relation. He claims an
identity that is at once racially and geographically specific, and staunchly expressive of the fluid Atlantic mobility that has produced both the author and his work.

As much as Equiano’s text uses his own shifting identity to argue for the salvific benefits of the mobile Atlantic market, it also uses a detailed catalogue of gains, losses and figures to demonstrate the intersections of commodity value and evolving Christian selfhood. The autobiography is, therefore, also a ledger book that uses economic events to narrate the conversion processes Equiano undergoes—from nonbeliever to believer, commodity to trader, and illiterate slave to free-laboring author. He tells readers, “I had but a very small capital to begin with…however I trusted to the Lord to be with me” (84). After a number of trips throughout the “general mart for the West Indies” he describes “finding my tumbler so profitable, with this one bit, I bought two tumblers more, and when I came back I sold them for two bits…when we went again I bought with these two bits four more…so that my capital now amounted in all to a dollar, well husbanded, and acquired in the space of a month or six weeks” (85). Equiano frames this catalogue of gains with invocations of trust in God, announcing his view of economic success as a sign of grace. He also primes the reader to view his economic exchanges as a kind of pilgrim’s progress toward a divinity that is communicated to the world through wealth, and toward the freedom that must be purchased at a particular price. As if to underscore the dual transformative significance of this potential exchange, Equiano relates it as a form of rebirth. Of a master’s promise to let him purchase his freedom, he writes, “The speech of the captain was like life to the dead to me” (93). The conversion and purchase process he outlines is here presented as a resurrection. Through sale, the commodity Equiano will die so that the expressive and freely purchasing Equiano may be born.
Choosing Salvation

Still, though providence presents Equiano with opportunities to advance, he must actively choose to embrace them. Perry Miller explains that “covenant theory was an extremely subtle…device within the framework of predestination for arousing human activity; it permitted man to conceive of divine grace as an opportunity to strike a bargain, to do himself a good turn, to make a sure profit, as an occasion that comes at specific moments in time through the agency of natural means” (Miller, Seventeenth Century 394). Miller’s decision to use the language of business here is not coincidental. Acceptance of grace was, for providential Christians, a matter of negotiation: accepting the offer of election by realizing God’s plans and seizing momentary opportunities for personal advancement toward salvation. Though Miller directs his gaze squarely upon New England settlers, this logic maintains, perhaps, even more currency among subjects like Equiano, who undergo constant dramas of exchange, conversion, and circulation around the Atlantic marketplace. The life Equiano narrates in his autobiography is replete with the kinds of negotiated opportunities Miller names, but, as an unfree subject striving for freedom, the stakes of the bargain are always higher. Naturally then, Equiano performs the same act of conflation as the Plymouth writers, viewing economic transactions as moments of potential spiritual conversion toward grace: each transaction in which Equiano was involved was, quite literally, a moment in which the terms of his life were up for negotiated debate.

So choice is both a sign of power and freedom, and a necessary precondition for accepting grace. To demonstrate this, Equiano narrates a debate over predestination with a fellow Christian. He asks “whether salvation by works, or by faith only in Christ” should ensure redemption. He allows his debate partner to answer in such a way as to reinforce Equiano’s own need to prepare actively for election. The man tells him “the law is a school-master to bring us
to Christ,’ who alone could, and did keep the commandments, and fulfilled all their requirements for his elect people...God would appear faithful in his judgments to the wicked, as he would be faithful in shewing mercy to those who were ordained to it before the world was” (141).

Ultimately, Equiano concludes that, though elect, he must actively accept the role offered to him by God and undergo the trials of preparation that God sets before him, in order to test and train him for salvation.

Equiano’s belief system allows the logic of commodification to reside comfortably within the logic of providence. A person is a valuable thing to be owned by God, a thing which can, through acts, enhance its value, and accept but not demand grace. The very first pages of his autobiography assert his elect status, but he still spends a great deal of the narrative preparing himself for salvation through conversion. He explains: “I determined to make every exertion to obtain my freedom...for this purpose I thought a knowledge of Navigation might be of use to me; for, though I did not intend to run away unless I should be ill-used, yet, in such a case, if I understood navigation, I might attempt my escape in our sloop” (90). This education process will prove necessary in his quest for liberation, and will also enable him to understand and freely embrace providential grace. He makes himself more and more valuable for the sake of a God who already owns him, hastening his union with his divine master.

However, Equiano suffers under human owners who deny God’s spiritual and legal claim on his body and soul. His antislavery position actually evolves from a sense that human pride raises one individual over others and, in so doing, “gives one man a dominion over his fellows which God could never intend! For it raises the owner to a state as far above man as it depresses the slave below it” (80). Here Equiano employs a similar logic to that of an older generation of abolitionist writers. For example, Samuel Sewall’s 1700 The Selling of Joseph also notes the
illegality of human sale by essentially arguing that morality is a contractual obligation between humanity and God that overrides any bill of sale made between man and man. Sewall describes “This law being of Everlasting Equity, wherein Man Stealing is ranked amongst the most atrocious of Capital Crimes” (Sewall 9). He also explains that “Joseph was rightfully no more a slave to his brethren, than they were to him: and they had no more authority to sell him than they had to slay him” (8). Equiano makes a similar point of collapsing the barriers between legal freedom and divine election through text when he insists that baptism means he is no longer the sort of body that can be legally sold as property (Equiano 64). Essentially, he cannot be purchased as a slave, because he already belongs to God. Nonetheless, he must work to achieve the legal right to free choice in order to extricate himself from an illegitimate state of ownership and accept the grace that comes with God’s possession.

**Compact, Contract, and Literacy: Learning to Read and Write in the Market**

Equiano sees value accumulation and legal negotiations as the means by which to transfer himself into the hands of God, his sole rightful owner. To complete this process, he must remain open to constant upward conversions, but also develop the necessary understanding of how the legal and economic systems of the Atlantic operate. Perry Miller explains that, for the puritans, “the gracious man must acquire a knowledge of good and evil before he can will the one and reject the other” (Miller 282). Similarly, the processes of value accumulation detailed in Equiano’s autobiography are also imbricated with Equiano’s developing literacy. This is essential because, if Equiano hopes to navigate the market, he must learn to understand the way language can be used to oppress or to liberate, depending upon how it is used, and by whom. He must learn to utilize and, ultimately, to produce the necessary textual proof of conversion from slave to free, from unpaid to paid, from unreformed to baptized, that signals his conversion into a
man with liberty, grace, and purchasing power. Such texts are his personal covenants, promising legal and spiritual freedom, manhood, and inclusion.

He first introduces the topic of literacy in the form of the hoary “talking book” trope, but subtly anticipates his growing desire to become an expressive writer, rather than just a passive reader. Though he admits putting the Bible to his ears and being disappointed to find “it remained silent,” he also explains that “I had a great curiosity to talk to the books” (42). From the start, Equiano’s relationship to books and, in particular, to divine text, is dialectical, premised upon a conversational back-and-forth that will continue throughout the narrative and culminate in the production of his own autobiographic account of providential deliverance. Later it will become clear that this dialogue must be carried out through the language of commerce and market economy, when a captain’s clerk teaches him to write “and gave [him] a smattering of arithmetic, as far as the Rule of Three” (62). This last point is essential, for it alludes both to the trinity and to the essential numeracy Equiano will need in order to navigate financial transactions. The language of Christian and capitalist symbolism collapses here into one overarching knowledge base that Equiano must master if he hopes to master himself. This lesson will make him a valuable member of any ship’s crew, but also empower him to challenge his commodified status and to claim his place among the Christian elect. In the Interesting Narrative, Equiano’s mastery of contract matches his mastery of text, and both allow him to overcome the power hierarchies of special and exclusive knowledge in the Atlantic world. Vincent L. Wimbush, referring to Equiano’s textual “scripturalization,” notes that the text presents reading as a kind of “magic,” practiced by specialized priests and guarded from unproven or unsanctified intruders. Wimbush observes that “insofar as the magic of the priests is held to be without limits, its operations and calculations held to be dazzling, mystifying, and left
unquestioned—to this extent it is lord and master” (Wimbush 47). Perhaps inadvertently, Wimbush’s language connotes the degree to which this gnostic interpretation of text explains Equiano’s relationship to the market as well. The “calculations” of priests are economic calculations, transactions that determine the course and nature of the lives of human beings like Equiano. Thus, Equiano’s growing ability to read and, subsequently, to lift the veil of secrecy surrounding scriptural knowledge parallels his increasing agency in the market. Atlantic trade is, like the Holy Bible, a text to be interpreted and understood only by the most acute and learned individuals, the priests of the new faith of Atlantic modernity. As his text wears on, Equiano inhabits this role ever more fully.

When Equiano, for example, invokes Columbus in his interactions with Mosquito villagers, he associates himself with the specialized knowledge systems of white Atlantic societies, among them literacy, scriptural fluency and, implicitly, capitalist economy. Wimbush explains that “insofar as the power is white men’s magic, Equiano understands his quest to be to pursue and obtain white men’s magic” (Wimbush 165). This is to say that Equiano deliberately sets out to use literacy and European Christianity as tools by which to position himself in mastery over the unlearned natives he encounters. Wimbush deemphasizes the economic nature of this mastery but, as Equiano’s many accounts of accumulation, exchange, and transaction make clear, economic knowledge went hand-in-hand with scriptural knowledge as the twin modes by which to achieve power and agency in the Atlantic. Wimbush writes, “Equiano understood that there really was no object or thing that contained power in either his or Columbus’s situation with the natives. All Columbus had, all that Equiano had, was a suggestion, an idea, an image” (Wimbush 165). That idea had to be housed in commodities, in
proclamations, contracts, currency, and bodies like Equiano’s that could be traded on the Atlantic market.

Equiano uses textual proofs, especially contracts for sale and manumission, as modern versions of the covenant, promising liberty, inclusion and protection by God, but in the legal and economic language of the Atlantic marketplace. When he buys his own freedom, for example, Equiano needs a bill of manumission, in order to instantiate his master’s promise as a legal reality. As if to reiterate his value and worthiness for freedom, Equiano writes that his captain tells his master “I know GUSTAVUS has earned you more than a hundred a year, and he will still save you money, as he will not leave you.” Then, he demonstrates the way a document necessarily functions as a covenant, embodying the promissory social arrangements that ensure freedom, protection, and inclusion. He writes “My master then said, he would not be worse than his promise; and, taking the money, told me to go to the Secretary at the Register Office, and get my manumission drawn up” (101). Finally, as if to reproduce this covenant for his own readers, Equiano transcribes it in full in the autobiography (122). Readers might also interpret his various catalogues of commodity exchange as performances of the roles numeracy and literacy play in ensuring his freedom and deliverance. The meticulous records he keeps demonstrate his own ability to understand and communicate the conversions he has both negotiated and undergone in preparation for grace. So the autobiography itself becomes the proof, the bill of sale containing the social processes that have permitted his freedom, and demonstrate its veracity. The autobiography becomes the covenant, the text that announces his deliverance and assures his election, and readers become its legal witnesses.

This is not to say that Equiano loses sight of the way that writing, the mysterious ability over which he slowly gains mastery, is a technology deeply and explicitly implicated in his own
subjugation and that of others. Indeed, Equiano understands legal processes, but remains
beholden to the logic of racial exclusion, because white people with more market power retain
control over the text agreements that should function as sacred words. He argues, for example,
that people like his Captain Pascal are untrustworthy and ignore the validity of freedom and plain
dealing when they choose to ignore documents and agreements with their crews and enslaved
laborers (123). Elsewhere Equiano comes to the defense of a freed man who has been robbed of
his wages and liberty, only to find that the captain “did not in the least assist to recover him, or
pay me a farthing of his wages, which was about Five Pounds. I proved the only friend he had
who attempted to regain him his liberty” (136). He writes, “I proceeded immediately to that well-
known philanthropist, Granville Sharp, Esq. who received me with the utmost kindness, and
gave me every instruction that was needful on the occasion. I left him in full hope that I should
gain the unhappy man his liberty, with the warmest sense of gratitude towards Mr. Sharp for his
kindness. But, alas! My attorney proved unfaithful: he took my money, lost me many months’
employ, and did not the least good in the cause” (136). Finally, he notes that the unjustly
captured man remained enslaved “till kind death released him out of the hands of his tyrants”
(136). All of this suggests the essential perilous nature of the market and admits that
understanding its processes is not enough. Literacy is necessary preparation, but Equiano
understands that he must also be delivered providentially by divine command. For Equiano, this
deliverance stems from his supernatural status as “a particular favourite of Heaven” and the
traders and captains with whom he interacts should—but frequently do not—recognize the text
agreements that communicate that divine favoritism (10). He writes “I made my obieisance to
my master, and with my money in my hand, and many fears in my heart, I prayed him to be as
good as his offer to me, when he was pleased to promise my freedom as soon as I could purchase
it” (100). His use of the word “pray” belies his belief that proper economic exchanges should be sacrosanct. Financial agreements, including and especially those concerning manumission, are built upon a foundation of covenant of inclusive election made with God, and to break them is to break the basic divine compact that sustains society. By focusing solely on Equiano’s status as a racialized and unfree subject, the men who ignore his covenanted legal and spiritual liberty also ignore his special status as a member of the elect and defy the will of God.

A failure to do as God and contract command can have profound and haunting effects. In fact, Equiano goes so far as to suggest that the refusal to honor legal contracts produces ghosts, an interpretation that illuminates his use of supernatural language and ideas to explain market forces and vice versa. He writes “Two gentlemen, who had been in the West-Indies, where they sold slaves…confessed they had made, at one time, a false bill of sale, and sold two Portuguese white men among a lot of slaves.” Later, the crew believe they see the men aboard the ship but “some time afterwards…found the man had been drowned at the very time [a crewman] thought he saw him” (62). This implies the constitutive nature of legal, economic and spiritual logics. Moreover, Equiano uses a supernatural frame to emphasize both the talismanic power of texts and the disordering gravity of disobeying their promises. Receipts and bills of sale are, for Equiano, sacred texts, pronouncements of conversion from one state to another, and they carry a sacred bond. To ignore this responsibility is to ignore the very foundation of the moral universe Equiano inhabits. The ghosts, then, are the social processes that should have been settled with an owner by text-based exchange, but find themselves loosed by betrayal. This interpretation carries special weight for Equiano as an enslaved person. If Equiano cannot trust the exchanges that dictate his fate, he too might be lost to the market, never to find a place to rest or identity to claim. He may never find his way through the market to God, his rightful owner, and might thus
be damned to an eternity as a powerless, nameless commodity—the ghost of a man who could have been.

When he commands text, Equiano ensures that he will have enough control over his own destiny to receive the rewards offered by providential election. In fact, later in life, he will use this same mastery of text to make himself into an extraordinarily rich man in England and he will take this as, perhaps, the clearest sign of God’s favor. 

Writing allows him to change his own “value.” Literacy is imbued with mystical properties, and, when he can wield it, he too has power. That power, however, only exists due to the presence of his own covenant, his proof of contract with society and with God, born of conversion, and announced by the autobiography. Equiano’s ideas about how to use literacy and negotiation to navigate an economic system that he believes reflects providential design coalesce in, perhaps, the pivotal episode of the narrative—the moment in which his freedom is promised and the process by which it is delivered.

**A Valuable Fellow: Exchange, Negotiation, and Ascension**

Equiano tells readers that, while preparing for a voyage to Philadelphia from Montserrat with “double alacrity,” as he hopes to purchase his freedom, he is summoned to his master’s house. There, his master, Robert King, tells him that he suspects Equiano intends to run away and explains, “I must sell you again…you are a valuable fellow” (91). King goes on to detail exactly what Equiano is worth (“one hundred guineas”) and why (Equiano “knew something of Navigation”) (91-92). Equiano, protesting, looks to his captain to defend his character. After the captain speaks in his defense, Equiano writes, “the speech of the captain was like life to the dead to me, and instantly my soul glorified God.” Then he tells readers that, despite his earlier suspicions, King now “thought by carrying one little thing or other to different places to sell I
might make money: that he intended to encourage me in this, by crediting me with half a puncheon of rum and half a hogshead of sugar at a time.” The ultimate end of all of this is “so that, from being careful, I might have money enough, in some time, to purchase my freedom: and, when that was the case, I might depend upon it he would let me have it for forty pounds sterling money, which was only the same price he gave for me” (93). This is a negotiated form of grace, a prophecy foretelling salvation and liberation. Equiano recognizes that, although grace originates with the divine, it must be prepared here on earth through market functions. If he wishes to command freedom, he must also command commodity exchange. His freedom and his body have an explicit and equivalent market price: forty pounds. So, he must exchange his body for the money that buys his freedom.

Such is the personal experience of commodification in the Atlantic marketplace that Equiano narrates: he must sell his body, time, and labor in order to purchase the freedom necessary to achieve God’s grace. In this way, the market of commodity exchange in which Equiano is trapped presents itself also as the potential medium of communication between worlds material and divine. Equiano’s miraculous accrual of value arises from a sense that his is a blessed body in the church of providential capitalism. He is a skillful agent of capitalism, a successful laborer, and a recipient of capitalism’s benefits. He is also an elect member of the divine Kingdom, the supernaturally protected property of God, and the recipient of grace as God’s “particular favourite.” He is a “valuable” man and, as such, accrues value wherever he goes. All of these attributes demonstrate his preparation and election, and will grant him the necessary leverage to bargain for his freedom on earth.

King’s assertion that Equiano is a “valuable” fellow, therefore, surely contains a double meaning: he is valuable in that he actually has a dollar value in the marketplace, and he is
valuable in that he is useful, indispensable, trustworthy, and favored by God. By realizing and exploiting his monetary value, Equiano can leverage it and negotiate to put himself in a position to receive expanded self-determination, personal agency and, eventually, providential favor. This then is the turning point, the place in the text and in Equiano’s life, in which he makes the most profound in his series of narrative and personal conversions—from commodity to buyer, and from unreformed to elected soul. The scene of transactional negotiation in the masters’ office allows the author to answer philosophical questions of the imbrication of value, conversion, and election, through legal processes, and to reveal the way those legal processes reflect and respond to divine will. The philosophical and moral questions of freedom, autonomy and mastery are questions of legal ownership of a commodity and vice versa. The bill of sale the master promises Equiano is, ultimately, written by the hand of God.

Moreover, the market of commodity exchange is a market of free and unfree persons and, as such, freedom itself becomes a commodity to be bought or sold, traded for an equivalent value of money, rum and sugar, and human bodies, including Equiano’s own. Equiano and his traders are acutely aware of his multivalent significance and “value.” He retains his direct use value as a laborer, even as his body becomes the symbolic repository for its trade value on the market, allowing him to purchase freedom at the price of work, and salvation at the price of his commodified body, and his soul is marked by a proprietary claim by God. In his overdetermined state as a commodity, a laborer, a buyer with agency within the market, and an object of providential interest, Equiano transforms himself into what Colin Dayan calls a fetishized “relic,” a repository of social memory, religious meaning and—here—economic power. God and the market are cooperative, working together to protect valuable assets—Equiano’s soul and body, literal and figurative—to deliver him, transformed, into a new position as a powerful self-
possessed agent in the market. Indeed, he insists that he “could very plainly trace the hand of
God; without whose permission a sparrow cannot fall” in all the events of his life (59). For
Equiano, providence is no dim abstract placeholder for a remote divine intelligence. Rather, he
sees it as a very literal and actively interventionist manifestation of God in the real world. In
particular, providence works through the economy to deliver Equiano to the place he needs to be,
and converts him into the form he needs to take, in order to receive and accept grace.

Conversion and the Importance of a Name

Because covenant is premised upon negotiation, mobility, and conversion, from unbound
to protected by God, from excluded to included membership in a divine community, and from
damned to saved, conversion is entirely central to the argument of the text—so much so that
Equiano claims that his given name means “‘vicissitudes or fortunate’ also, ‘one favoured, and
having a loud voice and well spoken.’” (18). Equiano's name combines fortune with favor to give
him voice, essentially anticipating the major arc of the narrative but also suggesting that
providence has marked Equiano for conversion from a young age. He was meant to experience
conversion, and, via that experience, to carry out God's plans. Later, he was meant to use his
position to spread conversion abroad. The title of the autobiography implicitly retains and
memorializes the conversion process. He is nominally both Gustavus and Olaudah, one man
converting into another, in order to become himself.

He repeats this act of transformative renaming again and again in the narrative. As he is
reshipped, traded or sold, he is constantly renamed. He tells us, “I was called JACOB; but on
board the African Snow I was called MICHAEL” (37). Later, after his master sets his price at
“thirty or forty pounds sterling…[his] captain and master named [him] GUSTAVUS VASSA.”
He protests and insists “I…refused to be called so, and told him, as well as I could, that I would
be called JACOB; but he said I should not, and still called me Gustavus. And when I refused to answer to my new name, which at first I did, it gained me many a cuff; so at length I submitted, and by it I have been known ever since” (39). Ultimately, he will earn the opportunity to name himself, but only after he has ascended to the position of a buyer in the market, someone with enough value and capital to purchase back his own identity.

The engine of constant personal, economic, and religious conversion that Equiano performs in title and narrates in text is an integral part of eighteenth-century black Atlantic narratives, and a powerful tool by which figures like Equiano transform experiences of displacement into trials of ascension. Similarly, the latter sections of John Marrant’s 1785 *Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant*... assert the need for these kinds of conversion experiences to be repeated as religious ritual and, in so doing, underscore the prevalence of the themes Equiano explores for other displaced Atlantic figures. Marrant’s is a narrative of sudden spiritual awakening, surprising reversals, and providential events that, like Equiano’s, suggests the way providential protection, special knowledge, and conversion might help one to navigate and even to escape the racist confines of eighteenth century mobility. For Marrant, it is not enough to be a Christian; he must convert himself into a Christian and replay the experience as much and as frequently as possible in order to reaffirm his faith. This focuses his religious feeling on the act of becoming, rather than upon being. Just as Equiano invokes a dual-state identity as Equiano and Vassa, Marrant embraces the flux that leaves the individual open to possibilities, but requires providential direction in order to produce positive personal and social outcomes.

Equiano also recognizes the way this play of identity conversion intersects with the hierarchies of race that dominate the economic system in which he lives. In the tragic story of
Equiano’s comrade who has gone unpaid and been jailed, he even describes wearing whiteface to gain access to means of legal assistance (136). This suggests the way these systems of race, power and trust are both assertive and malleable, fraudulent and intractable. So too does the fact that Equiano’s negotiation with his master requires the interpretation of his captain. And so, Equiano’s narrative of conversion and ascension still recognizes the capricious and arbitrary circumstances of racial exclusion that have allowed some men to use the language of providential capitalism to defy the will of God in the market, by transforming elect souls like Equiano into soulless, nameless commodities, even as Equiano’s status as an elect soul should ensure his freedom to accept grace.

**A Dangerous Commodity**

As the text continues, providence forces a confrontation between these competing claims on Equiano’s identity, by empowering Equiano as a commodity to such a degree that he must transform, and must escape the grasp of worldly owners, to be reclaimed by God. In this, the master’s description of the “valuable man” becomes a tacit admission of the slave’s Hegelian power to transform, through the kind of conversion undergone by Equiano, into a person with the potential and even necessity for liberty. A “valuable man” is a desirable commodity but also a dangerous potential liability. Hegel describes the way that the master becomes ever more reliant upon the slave until it is really the slave who wields the potential power to liberate, over the master who faces only the potential to lose. Here, Equiano performs that dialectic through dramatizing the power shift in his economic negotiation with his master. His overabundance of material and divine value accrues to such an extent that he becomes potentially dangerous to the system of ownership and commodification by which he is bound: thus the need for his master to rid himself of him; thus the need to direct Equiano’s energies toward the logic of the market—
toward saving and labor, to transform him into an agent of capital rather than an object of capital. Equiano becomes ever more valuable and his masters become ever more reliant upon him, forcing them to take him into the community of free business partners and religious persons, so as not to disrupt the power hierarchies co-instantiated by capital and religion. He realizes his providential freedom by making himself into a potentially explosive figure, a commodity with such great use value that he has leverage over his master, a commodity with the power to negotiate—even if through an interlocutor—and a commodity with the expressive power to insist upon his humanity.

In fact, at one point, Equiano’s emerging expressivity becomes literally explosive, dramatizing the destabilizing potential of such an empowered commodity by nearly destroying the ship that carries him. He describes his perilous and furtive attempts to read: “As I was writing my journal, that I had occasion to take the candle out of the lanthorn, and a spark having touched a single thread of the tow, all the rest caught the flame” (130). Equiano’s symbolic “flame” suggests that his emerging understanding of the world—his “illumination”—threatens the system that holds him in its grasp. The anecdote also subtly addresses the close metonymic conflation of Equiano with the ship’s cargo in order to further emphasize literacy’s role in his escape from commodification. He explains that “I had no other place…but a little cabin, or the doctor’s store-room, where I slept. This little place was stuffed with all manner of combustibles, particularly with tow and aquafortis, and many other dangerous things” (130). These are doctor’s implements, but gesture toward the other combustible materials housed throughout the ship, including powder, rum, and, implicitly, the bodies and minds of crewmembers slave or free, who could potentially wake to their own powers to liberate, convert, and accept admission into the community of the elect. With Equiano on the cusp of transforming from the confused witness of
the talking book and into the knowledgeable reader or even author of the book, the power of literacy is revealed as a spark with the potential to make knowledge explode out of the confines of the Atlantic economic system. His literacy and numeracy, his shipping and trading acumen, and his religious feeling all must be given space in the market, if they are not to become dangerous social revolutionary forces. So Equiano’s liberation at once rewards his forcible negotiation of self, fulfills providence’s dictum, and neutralizes him as a threat to the larger system of trade and finance.

This focus on literacy is just one of the ways in which Equiano argues that, if he can harness the same tools that have contributed to his confinement, he may come to master the system that has confined him. Nevertheless, the text is still rigidly structured to keep Equiano from full explosive mastery, until the very end, so such moments only hint at the potential that has been, thus far, contained within a rigid and crushing system of dehumanizing control. Aware that he must find some way to overcome the barriers to his escape from commodification, Equiano uses the faith-based promises at the heart of capitalism to realize his providential destiny. He crafts the covenants and exploits the sacred and exclusionary rites of capital in order to effect his own escape from capital dehumanization.

**Faith, Trust, and Mastery: Negotiating the Unfree Body**

Through labor, through “careful” husbanding of resources, through belief in the essentially divine logic of the market economy, capitalism promises that each individual may effect his or her own liberation, and, with it, become a fully realized autonomous person. Through faith in the trustworthiness of contract exchange, through a belief that such a testimony and compact reflects the covenanted will of God, the economy offers a stable basis of trust for society. If Equiano’s success in the market hinges upon his ability to believe in the otherwise
confounding system of capitalist exchange, it also hinges upon his ability to make others believe in the validity of his participation. Recognizing the role is expected to play in the rituals of trust and exchange in his society, he performs it in order to transcend it: he uses white men’s faith in each other to reward his own faithful service to God in the market. The captain’s station, his Christianity, his wealth, and especially his whiteness, all make him more reliable in the eyes of the master than Equiano. So Equiano uses the master’s adherence to a racist system of exclusive society for his own ends. He performs his subordinate commodified status in order to escape it, allowing free white men to engage in a financial negotiation that will present him with the opportunity to achieve freedom and grace.

In Robert King’s office, the legal sanctity of testimony requires two free men to establish mutual trust over the contracted body of the unfree third person. Equiano must allow the master and the captain to use the presence of his unfree body to reaffirm their own freedoms and mutual power to purchase. Moreover, he must permit them to reiterate the validity of their contract by announcing it in the presence of a person without the power to engage in such a contract on his own. As Saidiya Hartman notes, “The slave is the object or the ground that makes possible the existence of the bourgeois subject and, by negation or contradistinction, defines liberty, citizenship, and the enclosures of the social body” (Hartman 62). So, Equiano’s forced or willing scene of subjection and negotiation is both a dramatization of a white culture forming society over a black body, and a cannily strategic act of submission for later reward. This isn’t quite a revolutionary act; it does not challenge the structures of mastery inherent to the Atlantic’s market economy. It is, however, a potentially radical use of slavery’s mechanisms as a means to escape slavery’s logic. Equiano allows the white men to assert their social bonds over him, so that he can, later, assert his own free agency. Equiano’s status as the documentary proof of the other
men’s freedom gives him an opening to negotiate his own. Although this negotiation event is
forced upon Equiano, it is also the means by which he can transcend the legal limits of his
commodified instrumental status and ascend to a plane from which he can negotiate his own
price, with no need for an interlocutor. When he does, he enters into the community of the
economically and spiritually elect.

So Equiano’s captain speaks up in his defense, in the form of a kind of interrogation and
classic defense, which utterly reverses King’s suspicions and transforms them not only into
trust, but also into a new business arrangement. A new price is set—this time forty guineas
instead of one hundred—to reflect a new relationship that favors Equiano heavily. An offer of
sale is made—to Equiano instead of to another master. Equiano’s interrogation and the captain’s
recital of his virtues transform Equiano from pure commodity into a potential buyer within the
marketplace in which he has heretofore been embedded.

Equiano’s status as an unfree person attempting to infiltrate a world that trades freedom
as a commodity illuminates the way individuals can manipulate the market for their own gain
either properly and in accordance with divine will, or improperly to undermine that will. All
bodies are in circulation; all souls are the subjects of the divine economic cosmology, but only
those with purchasing power can make determinations about where to go and what to do. It is
their responsibility to choose to do God’s will, instead of to dominate or abuse others. Thus,
choice, the ultimate element of freedom and liberty, is perhaps the most valuable commodity of
all. The text is quite clear about what a tenuous position this is for an individual like Equiano. He
writes “Hitherto I had thought only slavery dreadful; but the state of a free negro appeared to me
now equally so at least, and in some respects even worse; for they live in constant alarm for their
liberty, which is but nominal; and they are universally insulted and plundered without the
possibility of redress” (89). This is not a situation unique to Equiano and, in fact, positions his narrative among a number of other texts written by black authors in the Atlantic that argue for a Christian-oriented form of economic interaction, in order to gain agency in systems that would deny it to them.

In his 1772 *Narrative of the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw*, Ukasaw Gronniosaw, another seafaring black Atlantic writer attempting to use Christianity, contract, and literacy to escape commodification, also notes the way ostensible Christians could use the market to subvert Christian values and exploit the disempowered. For example, at one point, Gronniosaw entrusts all of his savings to a woman who proclaims herself a Christian woman. The woman takes the money and denies it to him when he requests it back, leaving him to lament that he “had no friend but GOD” (20). The struggle of such authors, therefore, is not merely for liberty or even for grace, but also for security. The waters of the market remain perilous, even if they are the only available modes of spiritual transportation for men like Equiano or Gronniosaw. Equiano notes, for example, that his attempt to learn navigation, a skill which might help him to escape, “was much retarded by the constancy of…work” (90). Labor is the means by which he will achieve liberty, but labor for others can also distract him from the work of spiritual and personal preparation. Even worse, his legal possession by others leaves him at their mercy, even as he hopes to make his way, ultimately, toward his heavenly master.

Equiano never loses sight of the ambivalent nature of his exposure to the capitalist Atlantic. He tells readers “I have set before the reader a few of those many instances of oppression, extortion, and cruelty, to which I have been a witness in the West-Indies, but were I to enumerate them all, the catalogue would be tedious and disgusting” (82). But only moments later he writes, “Kind Providence seemed to be rather more favourable to me. One of my
master’s vessels, a Bermudas sloop…was commanded by one Capt. Thomas Farmer, an Englishman, a very alert and active man, who gained my master a great deal of money, by his good management in carrying passengers from one island to another…this man had taken a liking to me; and many times begged of my master to let me go a trip with him as a sailor” (83). Thus the market can work either diabolically or divinely, depending upon which men employ it and how. On the one hand, the Atlantic market can produce the “disgusting” excesses of the slave trade; on the other hand, it can offer Equiano the chance to rise by association with an especially profitable captain. It is, therefore, not a matter of capitalism itself being good or bad, but a matter of behaving as a virtuous capitalist or of using capital to enhance virtue. The mobility and flux of the market that makes it such a potentially dangerous space, also makes it a space in which an individual can experiment with identity and theology, test and prepare themselves through vocational labor, and even construct a universal understanding of divine nature, by drawing upon the similarities among diverse economic practices and religious traditions.

**Constructing a Universal Theology of Providential Capitalism**

For Equiano, economy is divinity given material form. And so, as the circulating exchange economy brings him into contact with different religious practices, he sees them as different interpretations of providential design and folds them into his autobiography’s argument in favor of providential capitalism. Equiano traces his development toward market-driven spiritual salvation by narrating his various experiments with religions as economic exchanges. He takes steps toward accepting providential election, but always punctuated with economic considerations. In so doing, he reveals a commonality of Atlantic religious practices, even as he makes it clear that both capitalism and providential Christianity are the only acceptable
ideological denominations that will bring the author the economic, spiritual, and legal freedom he craves, within the boundaries of system in which he lives. He craves personal freedom, recognizes the particular means that mainstream Atlantic providential capitalist society offers for him to achieve that freedom, and finds a way to navigate the system on offer.

As a result, Equiano internalizes the terms of evaluation proffered by both Christianity and capitalism, and projects them outward upon the diverse and shifting world, into which his travels put him in contact. For example, he narrates his time in Naples and Smyrna and comments, “Each kind of goods is sold in a street by itself, and I always found the Turks very honest in their dealings. They let no Christians into their mosques, or churches; for which I was very sorry, being always fond of going to see the different modes of worship of the people wherever I went” (127). In Equiano’s eyes, the Turks are good and virtuous because they deal honestly in the market, but they are lacking because they fail to permit those market values to blend with Christian vocation. Similarly, he tells us, “I went among the people called Quakers, whose meeting at times was held in silence, and I remained as much in the dark as ever. I then searched into the Roman Catholic principles; but was not in the least edified. I at length had recourse to the Jews, which availed me nothing…I really thought the Turks were in a safer way of salvation than my neighbours” (135). His travels in the Atlantic market bring him into contact with this diverse array of traditions. However, all of the religious practices he discusses touch on the values he holds dear, but don't quite arrive at the truth that the authorial Equiano has accepted and thus promotes. “I was continually oppressed and much concerned about the salvation of my soul,” he writes, “and was determined in my own strength to be a first-rate Christian” (134).

Equiano presents these religious experiments as insufficient, mistaken or incomplete in order to use them as the bricks with which to construct a more universal edifice of Atlantic
spiritualism, reflecting his own Christian providential and capitalist biases. Even the local folk religion of his earliest memories, before his forced entry into the market, bear similar ideological and philosophical features to the providential Christianity he’ll ultimately embrace. Though he remarks upon religious and ritualistic differences, he notes that “the natives believe that there is one Creator of all things…he governs events, especially our deaths or captivity…some…believe in the transmigration of souls in a certain degree” (17). The virtues of rising, predictable providence and hierarchy are all present, but in underdeveloped states. In the same way, he will find attractive elements in Judaism, Islam and Catholicism. Yet, these moments in particular should be read both through the lens of the authorial Equiano's argument for revealed providential Christianity, and in light of his mobile and diverse experiences with providential capitalism at sea.

Equiano’s exposure to these religious alternatives suggests the way capital creates interactive compatibility among the diverse theologies of the Atlantic world. Just as Equiano’s autobiographical narrative draws together the ports and distances of the Atlantic, a common set of beliefs connects West Africa, the Americas, and Europe, through trade routes that become conduits for theology. This is a point emphasized by Equiano's assertion that he finds true spiritual fraternity in Atlantic sea-work itself. He tells readers “Rather than stay amongst the wicked ones…as I was walking, it pleased God to direct me to a house where there was an old sea-faring man, who experienced much of the love of God shed abroad in his heart. He began to discourse with me, and, as I desired to love the Lord, his conversation rejoiced me greatly; and indeed I had never heard before the love of Christ to believers set forth in such a manner, and in so clear a point of view” (138). Equiano connects with the man both as a Christian and as a fellow seaman. So it is Atlantic trade, as much as religious affinity, which brings these diverse
religious practices together, and trade which draws out their common philosophical elements. He tells readers, “I had some further discourse with the old Christian, added to some profitable reading, which made me exceedingly happy” (138). His use of “profitable” here should be considered doubly significant, for, as he finds religion, his rewards are both spiritual and material.

He shows readers the way that networks of faith, virtue, and commerce offer material benefits to the people who learn how to navigate them. In his first negotiation over the price of his freedom, King offers to put Equiano into contact with his “two amiable sisters in Philadelphia” who will help him when he arrives (93). King likewise gives him “a large piece of silver coin, such as I had never seen or had before, and told me to get ready for the voyage, and he would credit me with a tierce of sugar and another of rum” (93). In London, the Quaker Guerin sisters recommend him for a job as a hair-dresser (124). Trust, relationships based upon family and religious affiliation, and, crucially, the bonds of labor and credit, create the necessary social relations to support Equiano, and help him to realize his providential destiny.

Moreover, he concludes subsequent editions of his narrative by informing readers of the way the autobiography itself has contributed to his profitable mobility, writing “Since the first publication of my narrative, I have been in a great variety of scenes…I was every where exceedingly well treated” (179-80). This leads to his political involvement when he “heard the debate in the house of Commons on the slave-trade” (180). He even marries “Miss Cullen, daughter of James and Ann Cullen, late of Ely” (180). Equiano believes that market-driven mobility has helped to correct his own belief, redeem his own soul and, consequently, make him a wealthy man as a sign of his special selection by God. He tells readers, “I could not but admire the goodness of God, in directing the blind, blasphemous sinner in the path that he knew not of,
even among the just; and instead of judgement he hath shewed mercy, and will hear and answer the prayers and supplications of every returning prodigal” (139). From commodity to trader, from ignorance to political engagement, and from national and familial outsider to insider, Equiano’s narrative is one of increasing inclusion and broadening autonomy through market forces that he credits to divine intervention. Thus, Atlantic capitalism is a vehicle for providential Christianity, as much as providential Christianity has, throughout the text, served as a vehicle for the successful navigation of capitalism.

And so, Equiano lives the very conversion process that animated earlier Plymouth texts and then uses the backward glance of his own autobiographical narration to fold his experiences into a larger narrative of spiritual and economic conversion in the Atlantic. Moreover, he recognizes the way that language in this society can function to draw the boundaries of freedom and to assert both value and virtue. In this narrative, the evaluative language of a captain or merchant and the predictive language of a prophet or priest work to create and maintain a confusing, mysterious web of exchange and uncanny conversion that demands faith in the unseen and creates divisions of the blessed and unblessed, the faithful and the damned. Equiano uses his awareness of providential capitalist exclusion to ascend as well, to position himself among the elect. As we will later see, he also premises this inclusion on the exclusion of others. First and foremost, however, he is concerned with proving that his economic successes, his liberty, and his power of self-direction, are not bracketed off from the world of divine action, but material manifestations of a mysterious, even supernatural providence that speaks through the market of human social relations.
The Wise Woman, the Unity of Atlantic Religion, and Capital’s Magical Thinking

In fact, he encourages readers to interpret the economic transaction with his master as providential, through a tidy metonymic conflation between scenes that adhere to the same providential capitalist logic, but in very different contexts. In the following chapter, Equiano essentially restages the negotiated promises of freedom, but in the parlor of an apparently supernatural fortune-teller. Arriving in Philadelphia just a page after the previous scene, Equiano sees everything working out as predicted: his captain gives him fair treatment and, in the busy metropolis, he observes how easy it is to sell his goods “pretty well.” He finds “every thing plentiful and cheap” (93). During this period, he writes of “a very extraordinary occurrence.” What he describes invites readers to consider a vast and cosmopolitan space that is both modern and connected to varied spiritual traditions. This space also reinforces the union of diverse social and cultural traditions beneath the banner of providential capitalism.

Equiano’s text itself serves as a bridge between the economic and the spiritual. One chapter follows the other, allowing one form of faith to mirror the other. He explains, “I had been told one evening of a WISE WOMAN, a Mrs. Davis, who revealed secrets, foretold events, &c” At first, he dismisses the idea of a seer: “I could not conceive that any mortal could foresee the future disposals of Providence, nor did I believe in any other revelation that that of the Holy Scriptures.” However, the power of the woman is too great to resist: “I was greatly astonished at seeing this woman in a dream that night, though a person I never before beheld in my life. This made such an impression on me… I then became as anxious to see her as I was before indifferent.” Going to her, he is surprised to find that he “beheld the very same woman in the very same dress she appeared to me to wear in the vision. She immediately told me I had dreamed of her the preceding night; related to me many things that had happened with a
correctness that astonished me; and finally told me I should not long be a slave.” Her vision becomes more specific: “She said I should be twice in very great danger of my life within eighteen months, which if I escaped, I should afterwards go on well; so, giving me her blessing, we parted” (93-94). This scene echoes the earlier scene in the King’s office by casting the former negotiation as a prophecy and the former declaration of faith in the market’s rewards as credulity in supernatural precognition. Equiano finds himself summoned—he does not explain who told him of this woman, only that he had been told. Next, he encounters an interpretation of events that he resists—here on the grounds that they might undermine his Christian faith, where, before, he resisted on the grounds that his character might be misrepresented. The skeptical Equiano is convinced through a detailed testimonial of his own past actions and character. Ultimately, Equiano receives a vision of the future, promising a series of trials that, if he manages them skillfully, will see him rewarded with liberty. This is the same transaction and negotiation, promising the same transcendent conversion, but written in a different generic mode.

The needs and opportunities of the capitalist Atlantic marketplace bring Equiano from Montserrat into the North American metropole of Philadelphia. There, in the heart of the burgeoning American republic, at one of its most important commercial centers and active trading ports, he finds the Wise Woman. Is she a witch? a mindreader? a practitioner of a transatlantic diasporic spiritual tradition such as Obi? It is unclear, but she is certainly imbued with magical abilities. However, rather than appearing as an anti-modern anachronism, the Wise Woman fits right in. Equiano’s visit to her does not disrupt the vision of modernity that he beholds in Philadelphia, but completes it. Moreover, Equiano uses her to demonstrate the way that the churning routes of Atlantic capital exchange can reconcile the fortune telling of non-Christian practices with the belief in revealed providence of Christianity. In essence, she acts as a
synthetic bridge between the Christian and non-Christian elements of Atlantic culture and as an avatar for the new belief system that increasingly encompasses both through shared faith in election, providence, exchange, and mobility, that is providential capitalism.

The Wise Woman suggests a fluidity of cultural exchange from the peripheral zones of the Atlantic world to its more developed centers, a journey enacted by Equiano, and a process common to other people living in the Atlantic. Certainly Equiano is not the only liminal nomadic figure in this text filled with individuals not easily nationalized or categorized, who navigate the complex web of relations that constitute the Atlantic world. Indeed, among the similarly displaced travelers Equiano meets readers could include both his captain and his master. The Atlantic society that Equiano presents is one in which the periphery is constantly in fluid conversation with the core, where the winding paths travelled by individuals and groups coalesce in ports and social centers, to mix, amalgamate, and produce something new but always in flux. Whatever mainstream there is, draws from these influences and, as a result, defies continuity or strict delimitation between cultural traditions. The dense and mysterious web of relations traced in the text presents Atlantic modernity not as an interactive society of nations, but as a market inhabited by individuals whose only inherent relations are commercial or providential—a market defined by the similarities, rather than the differences, between Philadelphia, the islands of the Caribbean, and West Africa.

The Wise Woman’s unique position within the world Equiano inhabits presents her as the nexus between the capitalist and religious networks that define Equiano’s journey but she, like Equiano, is a product of a very diverse and mobile Atlantic culture. As Toni Wall Jaudon and Kelly Wisecup make clear in their investigation of Obi practices in the Americas and the Caribbean, the religious traditions of groups and individuals in the Atlantic world were
enormously diverse. Equiano inhabits a world fluid enough to permit whatever religious practice the Wise Woman represents to fit comfortably beside concepts of Christian providence. Moreover, he comes to accept her prophecy because it adheres to the same logic as providential capitalism in the larger Atlantic marketplace and suggests the ultimate compatibility of multiple traditions under its universal banner. He meets with Quakers and priests and imams, with similar equanimity, treating religion itself as a competitive marketplace of ideas—including all the diverse faiths, permissive secularism, atheism, and even hopeless abjection. Equiano selects the one that best helps him to make sense of the world, to function within it, and to profit by his knowledge of it. However, the text allows each tradition to appear as different elements, combining in Equiano’s narrative journey, into a coherent philosophy of providential capitalism. Equiano implicitly draws all of these traditions together as different interpretations of the same divine providential will and uses the rewards of the providential market to reconcile their particularities. Acknowledging the compatibility of the full scope of Atlantic spiritual practice with Atlantic capitalism allows Equiano’s readers also to acknowledge the magical thinking at the heart of providence and capitalism.

Equiano’s encounter with the Wise Woman is really the culmination of his preoccupation with the supernatural aspects of providential capitalism. Here, it fully merges with the prior scene’s financially transactional logic, in order to suggest the constitutive nature of supernaturalism and market directives in achieving providential design. Nevertheless, Equiano presents his gradual acquisition of faith as a process requiring a successive series of conversions, including a gradual conversion toward rationalism, while still leaving room for providential faith. Commenting upon his first entrance into the Atlantic world, he describes, for example, feeling like he has entered another supernatural world. He explains “I was now more persuaded than
ever that I was in another world, and that every thing about me was magic” (35). Equiano’s interactions in the mobile Atlantic market contribute to his broadening understanding of the world, both natural and sublime. He writes “In the variety of departments in which I was employed by my master, I had an opportunity of seeing many curious scenes in different islands” (82). He likewise attributes earthquakes to supernatural causes, telling his readers, “I was exceedingly frightened, and thought it was the visitation of the spirits” (83). This is to say that the travels necessitated by his status as an enslaved seaman offer him access to a much wider, more diverse world than he otherwise would have known.

Yet he still must learn to comprehend this world if he wishes to gain any mastery over it. The first example of this comes early on and, characteristically, involves Equiano’s development of linguistic proficiency and his anticipated literacy. He writes, “I could now speak English tolerably well…I not only felt myself quite easy with these new countrymen, but relished their society and manners. I no longer looked upon them as spirits, but as men superior to us” (51). Although he does not lose his innate feeling of racial hierarchy until later in the text, Equiano here demonstrates the way education, mobile exposure to different Atlantic cultures, and a canny knack for navigating situations, allow him to incrementally transform from a state of complete subjection toward eventual collaboration. He stops seeing the English as magical because he uses both capitalism and Christianity to assimilate into the society of his captors.

Moreover, what begins as magical thinking develops, as Equiano’s text goes on, into an allegorical language with which to describe the inchoate machinations of the providential market, and into a literal sense that events in the market have divine causes and profound philosophical effects. For example, his prophetic dreams, which anticipate danger for his ship, signal his special relation to providence, the providential design of events in the market, and his
intimacy with the commodities he ships, all at once. He writes, “On the 4th of February…I dreamed the ship was wrecked amidst the surfs and rocks, and that I was the means of saving every one on board; and on the night following I dreamed the same dream. These dreams, however, made no impression on my mind” (109).Momentarily, Equiano will see that he should have paid them more mind. He writes, “the next evening, it being my watch below, I was pumping the vessel a little after eight o’clock…and being weary with the duty of the day, and tired at the pump…I began to express my impatience, and uttered with an oath, ‘Damn the vessel’s bottom out!’ But my conscience instantly smote me for the expression. When I left the deck I went to bed, and had scarcely fallen asleep when I dreamed the same dream again about the ship I had dreamed the two preceding nights” (109). Here, notably, it is not only Equiano’s life at risk, but also that of the other crewmembers and the other commodities for which he is responsible and metonymically related by proximity. The prophetic abilities introduced to the text through the Wise Woman become the means by which Equiano can note his symbolic and literal closeness to commodities, as well as the means by which he can escape a purely commodified status.

The commodity identification in these scenes of maritime peril underscores Equiano’s unique relationship to his crew and cargo as a highly valued, but unfree laborer on the ship. Equiano explains, for example, that he remained with the vessel because “I had little inducement to remain longer in the West-Indies, expect my gratitude to Mr. King, which I thought I had pretty well discharged in bringing back his vessel safe, and delivering his cargo to his satisfaction…but Mr. King still pressed me very much to stay with his vessel: and he had done so much for me, that I found myself unable to refuse his requests, and consented to go another voyage to Georgia” (108). Equiano’s linguistic apposition of “vessel” and “cargo” marks the
vessel as, primarily, a means to transport commodities. Equiano subtly draws readers’ attention here to the fact that he is both a commodity and a crewman responsible for the safe care of other commodities. What endangers the commodity goods aboard Equiano’s ship also endangers Equiano because, in ways both literal and metaphorical, he too is a commodity good. When providence confronts Equiano with prophetic dreams and challenges, it also implicitly presents him with an important philosophical question: is Equiano a thing or a man? A good to be passively traded or a buyer with the power to actively trade? Equiano’s moment of crisis requires him to assert his status as a capable crewmember, rather than as a good to be shipped, if he is to survive or, indeed, to fulfill God’s plans.

So he takes control of these prophecies, guiding his crew to safety and developing a complicated sense of providential responsibility in the process. He tells readers “All my sins stared me in the face; and especially I thought that God had hurled his direful vengeance on my guilty head, for cursing the vessel on which my life depended” (110). However, the captain being either frightened or ignorant, gives up the ship to be dashed. Equiano responds: “I told him he deserved drowning for not knowing how to navigate the vessel…I then advised to get the boat prepared…there were only four people that would work with me at the oars and they consisted of three black men, and a Dutch Creole sailor…had we not worked in this manner, I really believe the people could not have been saved; for not one of the white men did any thing to preserve their lives. Indeed, they soon got so drunk that they were not able” (111). His ostensible responsibility for the ship’s danger invokes his providentially elect status by presupposing the special insult to God of his sinfulness. But Equiano uses the opportunity to reaffirm his faith and his value all at once. By seizing agency, Equiano asserts the gifts of grace—his own intelligence
and humanity—in the face of a white supremacist hierarchy that would, without his help or the help of the black men they ostensibly command, have died.

In such moments, providence puts Equiano into a position to seize autonomy, humanity, and spiritual existence, by forcing him to interact with natural forces. In some cases, those natural forces include storms, in other cases, the market. For example, after surviving this trial and another near wreck, Equiano and the surviving crewmen find themselves in New Providence. Here the market offers Equiano his survival and his escape. He writes “One merchant, who had a large sloop, seeing our condition, and knowing we wanted to go to Georgia, told four of us that his vessel was going there; and offered us our passage free, on condition of our helping to load and work the vessel” (117). Again, he must labor; again he must ship himself; again he must use his position in the market to find his way to salvation. If Equiano is to master himself and become a full member of the elect, he must learn to interpret providential signs, navigate providential trials and, finally, leverage his own personal value as a laborer in the mobile market to move closer to his goals. Natural, supernatural, and economic trials are all the same—tests designed by God to allow Equiano to demonstrate his election.

Thus, Equiano’s belief in his own and the Wise Woman’s prophetic abilities is not a deviation from either Christianity or market capital logic, but rather a personalization of both. Equiano and the Wise Woman can foresee events because God has created a highly structured world and presented it to them in market terms. If the job of the elect is to embrace the grace offered, the job of the prophetic figure is to understand and accept the prophesized providential will. This too is to embrace the logic of a market economy that proceeds along predictable trade routes, even if it makes individual lives appear surprising. The market offers predictability or legibility to those with the willingness and acumen to read the economy as a part of nature. The
Wise Woman isn’t magical, so much as she is literate. She is capable of reading the cosmological cues of the market and putting them into narrative order for her audience. In the same way, Equiano’s acquired skill at reading folds in with his acquired skill at navigating the market. It was not just another skill acquired along his path toward divine election, but essential preparation to read, comprehend, and respond to the texts of God, including the market itself. Perry Miller writes that, for seventeenth century puritans, “a special providence differed from a miracle in that God wrought it through or with means, by natural instruments, by arranging the causes or influencing the agents, rather than by forcible interposition and direct compulsion” (Miller 228). Equiano’s interpretation of the market reaches back to this tradition, in order to see the economy as the “natural instrument” God uses to arrange his particular providential fate. The market is the text God presents the world, so that readers may know God’s will.

Christianity and capitalism are two ways of ordering and seeing the world—each with an inherent logic of causality, predictability, chance and will. In the providential capitalist Atlantic described by Equiano, these systems overlap, creating a singular cosmology that is predictable, if, ultimately, unknowable. Essentially, God’s will is the root cause, creating and guiding divine systems along relatively predictable ordered paths but never fully exposing itself to human view. The economy describes those paths in their clearest terms but requires expert interpretation and negotiation to comprehend. Trade routes, systems of commerce, commodity exchanges, are all the complex but ordered material reflections of the mind of God. The elect are thus drawn to and given the tools to navigate these systems. One such tool is predictability and revelation. In a later age, readers might call this financial speculation but, here, it is a form of reading God in the nature of things and human interactions. Though cloaked in exoticism, the Wise Woman essentially serves as the conduit through which God’s will is revealed to Equiano—and that will
is economic. It foretells transactions that will result in Equiano’s spiritual and material transcendence.

**Equiano as a Collaborator and Colonialist**

As Equiano comes to embrace the possibilities of Atlantic capital to develop a kind of universal theology, he becomes something of a collaborator in the project of colonialism and colonial discourse. First, his life onboard his ship creates nationalist solidarity despite his status as an enslaved sailor, so that he begins to refer to the English as his own compatriots. He writes of a battle in Cape Breton in 1758, during which he was “in a small degree gratified in seeing an encounter between our men and the enemy” (47). This sense of mutual belonging between Equiano and his fellow British sailors develops to such an extent that he actually comments, without criticism, upon his participation in an evidently violent colonialist action. He admits “I had that day in my hand the scalp of an Indian king, killed in the engagement: the scalp was taken off by an Highlander” (47). Such moments anticipate his eventual identification with the British and his full embrace of colonialist logic. Moreover, they reveal the way election can contort into violence and exclusion—on racial, religious, and nationalist terms—even for Equiano.

As a converted member of the capitalist elect, with all the purchasing power that comes from grace, Equiano discovers how to manipulate faith and credulousness in others, in order to position or exploit them for his own ends. Once free, he even goes so far as to associate himself with the broader colonialist projects taking place in the Americas. For example, while working for a trader in South America, he writes of taking inspiration from “A passage I had read in the life of Columbus, when he was among the Indians in Mexico, or Peru, where on some occasion, he frightened them, by telling them of certain events in the heavens, I had recourse to the same
expedient, and it succeeded beyond my most sanguine expectations” (159). He tells a group of natives, in no uncertain terms, that disobedience to God will result in their damnation. Explicitly, he presents obedience as adherence to the aims of a capitalist enterprise. Equiano writes, “I pointed up to the heavens. I menaced [them]. I told them God lived there, and that he was angry with them…If they did not leave off and go away quietly, I would take the book (pointing to the Bible), read, and tell God to make them dead. This operated on them like magic…I gave them some rum and a few other things…When the Doctor returned, he was exceedingly glad at my success” (159). This moment is the dark but logical sequel to the fortune-telling scene. Where once Equiano was more object of providence and the market than agent, where once he received prophecies, where once his faith was required for the successful completion of an enterprise, now, after the transformation of his freedom, his position is utterly reversed. He speaks to his naïve and captive audience, presents them with a prophecy and, essentially forces their compliance by employing the rhetoric of providential capitalism. He demands their faith and takes advantage of it for his own gain as a capitalist and as an evangelizing Christian.

Critics can read this moment to recontextualize and critique Equiano’s embrace of providential capitalist logic. Equiano does not quite admit to manipulating his hearers or of dealing with them dishonestly, but he plainly does manipulate them. He uses the guileless belief of his audience in his words to achieve his own selfish ends. Moreover, he uses their belief in the power of divine or supernatural forces beyond their control to achieve economic success. So Equiano’s shift from commodity to buyer actually encourages him to collaborate with a system of capitalist subjugation, against which he earlier struggled. This is, according to the rules of providential capitalism, as it should be. In order not to disrupt this system, the commodity person, Equiano, must be empowered as a buyer. After this conversion has taken place, he
returns to the Atlantic market and wields its tools—both economic and spiritual—to gain power over other potential subjects.

Similarly, the production and dissemination of his own autobiographical narrative seems to buttress the hegemonic systems of providential capitalism. Its appearance in the market seems to promise certain things to readers: if you are elect and do as I have done, you too will be rewarded with freedom, spiritual salvation, and purchasing power. Such a text is not written for an enslaved audience, but for sympathetic, and largely white, readers who, despite their qualms about or rejections of slavery, still benefit from the way slavery has brought about the modern amenities and political systems they enjoy. These readers wish to see examples of individuals raised up by the salvific powers of the divine market, from the lowest levels of dejection. Equiano provides just such a narrative.

Does this suggest that the relationship between religion and capitalism exists on a fraudulent basis? Perhaps. Certainly it signals an increasing willingness on the part of Equiano, the author, to reveal his own complicity in the darker aspects of providential capitalism as his character develops greater understanding of the way they operate. Once Equiano was a believer—in providence, in the unseen world, and in the promises of the marketplace; now he sees more clearly. Now he sees that all of these systems work mutually to take advantage of individuals and to bend them to their own ends.

Whether this relationship between capitalism and providence is sordid or sacred, the effect is the same: the native men accept Christianity and permit a situation whereby Equiano and his sponsor will both profit. Equiano clearly sees this as a positive outcome, on the grounds that the natives have now been exposed to Christianity through a capitalist exchange that has also made him wealthier. In fact, this very same logic will lead him to suggest schemes of African
investment that rely upon and advance the cause of colonialism. Far from diminishing the power of either providence or capitalist exchange, Equiano proposes a cooperative symbiosis of both that can be utilized for the positive end of “civilizing” Africa and expanding markets, freedom and Christianity.

Equiano’s participation in projects of African capitalist colonization recalls similar efforts by other figures who hoped to use the extension of idealized capitalism for their own ends. David Kazanjian, for example remarks upon the similarity of these goals to those of Thomas Jefferson. He writes, “colonization…values U.S. colonialism in Africa by positing an abstract equivalence between white Americans and colonized black Americans as abstract bearers of American imperialism…on one hand, colonized black Americans are racially different from and subject to white Americans…on the other hand, [they] are represented as equivalent to white Americans, and thus different from ‘aborigines’” (120). Indeed, in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson suggests a scheme of gradual emancipatory education, with the aim of colonization, in order to, at once, extend ostensibly American ideals of capitalist democracy and to rid the nation of its racial contradictions (Jefferson 146). If Equiano is unconcerned with American colonialism, in particular, he, nevertheless, appears to draw similar distinctions between the capitalist elect and the unredeemed, and equivalences between himself and his white colonialist counterparts. His mastery of capitalism and his identification with Anglo-centric modes of capitalist and even militaristic colonial expansion drift, in both the South American anecdote and in the African colonization scheme, toward dehumanizing or diminishing colonized others. The racially and nationally objectified figures in the market are necessary for his own success and freedom, and the unelect souls are necessary measures of his own providential election.
Moreover, Equiano’s perceptions of non-Christians and non-capitalists echo other portrayals of base savages to be either redeemed or exploited. Cotton Mather’s belief that the Devil has “hindered Mankind for many Ages, from hitting those *useful Inventions*, which yet were so obvious and *facil*, that it is every bodies wonder, they were no sooner hit upon,” communicates a belief that economy and Christianity must be used to redeem “salvages,” which Equiano reiterates in his travels throughout the Atlantic (Mather 61). Just like Mather, Equiano sees economic proficiency, literacy, numeracy, and even cultural superiority as preconditions for grace, even if he doesn’t go so far as to argue that those who lack these gifts of grace are demonic.

But he is hardly cynical. In fact, readers must here remember that Equiano firmly believes in the salvific powers of the Atlantic market. He insists that he “felt a deep concern for my mother and friends…and in the abyss of thought, I viewed the unconverted people of the world in a very awful state, being without God and without hope” (145). He firmly believes in his own election and, just as firmly, believes that he has not rescued himself, but been rescued by a benign divinity that acted upon him through the capitalist market. This is of a piece with his period’s view of providence operating through market forces to deliver the elect—a view that had special currency among black Christian writers. Gronniosaw, for example, goes even further than Equiano, positing that providence moves the elect—even those among non-Christian nations—to feel the impulse to God by any means necessary, and will maneuver them into contact with Christian teaching, even if God must do so through the mechanism of slavery. Gronniosaw’s advocate, Walter Shirley, articulates this point, saying “in the course of wisely and most wonderfully appointed Providences, he brings them to the means of spiritual information, gradually opens to their view the light of his truth, and gives them full possession and enjoyment
of the inestimable blessings of his gospel...he was sold for a slave, and so brought into a Christian Land” (2). Equiano stops short of saying that slavery was the means of his salvation, but seems fully to believe that the trade routes and systems of finance and exchange that have dictated his place in the modern Atlantic world have positioned him to accept the salvation offered by God. Moreover, as Perry Miller points out, sea-trading towns, especially, were the targets of jeremiads against sin and vice, during the eighteenth century (Miller, Colony to Provence 330). So Equiano’s narrative redeems the ports and routes of Atlantic trade, as much as it does its customs and crews—presenting all as vehicles to deliver one soul to providence, rather than as dens of vice and iniquity.

In fact, for many black writers of the period, seafaring offered an escape route from slavery and exploitation. Ukasaw Gronniosaw, for example, similarly went to sea, “Privateering” as a cook, in order to pay his debts (17). At sea, Gronniosaw also sees providence at work. For example, one particularly disrespectful sailor goes so far as to snatch Gronniosaw’s bible out of his hand and throw it overboard. Gronniosaw notes that this man is the first to die on the voyage, suggesting a providential justice that protects the faithful at sea and which seems to privilege literacy (18). Briton Hammon’s 1760 Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon..., also gestures towards providential deliverance, and insists upon the liberating potential of the merchant sailing industry. Hammon repeatedly finds opportunities to escape slavery and personal peril upon merchant ships when they come to the nearest port. His narrative attests to one of the primary elements of Equiano’s narrative: the way that an enterprising and knowledgeable enslaved man might make use of the complicated networks of maritime trade and war, to participate in a society that remains liminally positioned between nations. While jumping from ship to ship, men like Hammon and Equiano achieve their
liberty, in due course. For all its attestations to Providence, this is also capitalist enterprise as self-preservation.

When Equiano advances colonialist efforts to spread Atlantic capital to Africa, he does so because he has fully invested in a providential capitalist message of universal economic and spiritual uplift. He insists that, if British parliament should turn its attentions to Africa, “then will be Glory to God in the highest” (177). Then, he goes on to tell his readers that, “A commercial intercourse with Africa opens an inexhaustible source of wealth to the manufacturing interests of Great Britain; and to all which the slave-trade is an objection” (178). Economic investment, capital exchange, the opening of new markets, these are the means by which humans can glorify God and extend a righteous, capitalist imperial dominion.

Moreover, Equiano embraces the possibilities of capital exchanges in order to advocate colonialism while rejecting colonialist violence. The authorial Equiano thus contrasts his protagonist’s earlier involvement in violence with his later, more direct, arguments against “the inhuman traffic of slavery,” because he believes that “if a system of commerce was established in Africa, the demand for manufactures will most rapidly augment, as the native inhabitants will insensibly adopt the British fashions, manners, customs, &c” (178). As Equiano becomes more adept in the language and customs of capital exchange, he learns that it can be a more effective colonizing tool than even the sword or the bullet.

Equiano believes that this imperial capitalist operation can reverse some of the most troubling aspects of commodity market logic, including slavery and its bloody excesses. He writes “what a striking, what a beautiful contrast is here presented to view, when compared with the cargo of a slave ship!” (178). The imperialist project he proposes for investment in Africa will use capital, trade, and exchange to cleanse Britain of its slaveholding sins, but it will do so
through the very logic of exchange that instantiated slavery in the first place. Equiano writes,

“Every feeling heart, indeed, sensibly participates of the joy, and with a degree of rapture reads
of barrels of flour instead of gunpowder—biscuits and bread instead of horse beans—implements
of husbandry instead of guns for destruction, rapine, and murder—and various articles of
usefulness are the pleasing substitutes for the torturing thumbscrew, and the galling chain”
(178). Equiano here trades the capitalism of his history for the capitalism of his imagination. The
same mechanisms that brought the “thumbscrews” and “guns” to Africa for subjugation can be
exchanged for the implements of economic development. In this way, he reads the biblical
invocation in Isaiah 2:3-4 to “beat swords into ploughshares” in the new economic language of
commodity exchange, literally trading one for the other.

If the entire autobiography functions as an argumentative narrative, this is its most
complicated turn. It transforms Equiano’s personal experience with providential capitalism into
advocacy for that ideology’s Atlantic extension. In so doing, it is possible that Doyle is correct
and Equiano merely reinstantiates the mechanisms of exploitation he softly critiques (10).
Perhaps more critically, this suggests the nationalist and hegemonic motivations that tacitly
underline critical efforts to claim Equiano within a nationalist literary canon. Critical attempts to
verify Equiano’s description of the middle passage, along with his arguments and political
actions against slavery, tend to deemphasize his active role in reproducing colonization and
enhance his role as an antislavery figure. Taken together with ongoing fights to claim Equiano as
an American, British or African figure, these efforts work to associate a given national literature
with Equiano’s antislavery progressivism, rather than with his fraught and complex material
relationship with colonialist business practices.
Indeed, readers and critics should be very clear about just what Equiano’s proposals entailed and the degree to which they implicate him in the worst aspects of eighteenth century capitalism. For example, Alexander Byrd discusses the African colonization schemes developed in London in order to deal with the largely male and seafaring black poor, and in Nova Scotia, to deal with former slaves and freeborn loyalists who had fled the American Revolution. Equiano was deeply involved in the London scheme, although he quickly came into conflict with its white managers and even had to be dismissed before the ship carrying the colonists made it to Sierra Leone. All the better, because most of the people on this voyage died (122). Meanwhile, some of the Nova Scotia settlers, who had fled the Revolution and been promised land and jobs only to find poverty and wage slavery, wound up living in literal holes in the ground (Byrd 169). These colonists arrived, carrying democratic enlightenment ideals and Equiano’s belief in both capitalism and providence, only to struggle with local politics, inclement weather, and potential starvation (207). Many of these same settlers even joined the slave trade and a few were sold back into slavery (220).

Nevertheless, the migrations that came about in response to the revolutionary period resulted in more urban and more consolidated black American populations, among whom Christianity spread and grew in influence, dramatically. Furthermore, Byrd writes, “Settlers managed to build a society that honored the forms and practices of enlightenment democracy” (220). Equiano embraces these qualified successes and dismisses any concerns when he insists that “however unfortunate in the event [the expedition] was humane and politic in its design; nor was its failure owing to government; every thing was done on their part; but there was evidently sufficient mismanagement, attending the conduct and execution of it, to defeat its success” (Equiano 176). Nevertheless, if Equiano’s ideals of Atlantic capitalism imbricated with Atlantic
Christianity did spread among both African and urban European and American black communities, so too did the problems of urban poverty, displacement, and even slavery. Still, it is reductive to call Equiano’s text colonialist or even, simply, “problematic.” Rather, it reflects the deeply ambivalent nature of Equiano’s own personal experiences. If Equiano appears convinced of capitalism’s restorative, even beneficent, powers, it is because he has personalized the conversion and ascent process that he imagines for the entire African continent. As Equiano accrues more economic value as a laborer and earns the ability to navigate the market more freely, he also becomes a more potentially valuable member of the divine Kingdom and has the opportunity to sample and experiment with different means of arriving in God’s hands. Both economic and religious systems of value come together in Equiano’s moments of choice, in which he settles upon a religious practice, and also settles upon his own freely-chosen professional pursuits. The value and the mobility he experiences are both codetermined by economy and religion. He imagines all of these rewards extending to the reading public, and to the places where providential capitalist colonialism might spread.

Because the text actively challenges, even obliterates any distinction between systems of economic and spiritual advancement and election, readers are left to conclude that, while these systems and their relations might be legitimate or illegitimate, they may not be so independently—whatever one is, so too is the other. Moreover, they both operate through the same process of conversion to create the conditions—material and spiritual—of the world Equiano, his masters, and even the potential colonial subjects all inhabit—a world defined by the inexplicable and uncanny, and controlled by those with the ability to comprehend and engage with the inexplicable and the uncanny. This is a world that seems at turns magical, profane, market calculated and divinely ordained.
Nationalism or Universalism: Equiano, Benjamin Franklin and Revolution

To be sure, Equiano does not write in a vacuum. His belief in the enabling powers of providence and capitalism—both to help an individual to rise, and to make that rising individual into the model for a broader Atlantic hegemony—has great valence in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. If critics wish to call this the revolutionary period, readers should recognize exactly what ideology unites the revolutions in Europe, the Americas, and the Caribbean. Beyond vague gestures toward expanding democratic freedom, this period sees market capital and commodity exchange become primary mechanisms by which to define the individual and by which to expand society. Simultaneously, however, individuals and nations increasingly employ those mechanisms to define class, race, and political hierarchies, in order to limit the very same democratic ideals they espouse. The language and philosophy that presents capitalist accumulation as a divine virtue comes to center diverse cultural traditions around a universal philosophy in which God is most present and morality most clearly expressed through market interactions. Equiano’s autobiography reflects both the colonialist impulses that this philosophy enables and the individualist routes to personal conversion and transcendence it potentially offers. It does so by offering a vision in which repeated acts of conversion and mobility allow elect individuals to realize their unique providential destiny. Saidiya Hartman writes that “chattel becomes man through the ascension to the hallowed realm of the self-possessed,” a description that could easily be applied to Equiano’s case (Hartman 123). Other writers, however, exploit the implicit exclusivity of these ideas in order to steer the politics and social eruptions of the revolutionary period.

As a result, Equiano’s autobiography both mirrors and subtly challenges those of other Atlantic citizens, similarly invested in the cosmology of Atlantic exchange, and similarly
committed to the idea of capitalist individualism as a sacred virtue, such as the authors and political leaders of the American revolution, especially Benjamin Franklin. To be clear, Franklin is hardly a random figure to contrast against Equiano. As Sean X. Goudie explains, Franklin’s publisher and fellow member of the board that created the Philadelphia public library, Robert King, is the same Robert King who sent Equiano to Philadelphia in the first place. If readers consider Equiano’s autobiography in tandem with Franklin’s, the radical elements of Equiano’s narrative come into sharper focus. Franklin’s promotion of market-driven, mobile, and virtuous capitalists as model national citizens helped to usher in and reinforce the racial and class exclusivity upon which an American state was founded. In contrast, Equiano uses those same ideals to escape strict racial and class-oriented determinism, as well as narrative and historical erasure, by remaining mobile and open to constant conversion. Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography addresses a number of the same issues raised in Equiano’s, including the value of morality and individuality and the importance of literacy but puts them into more explicitly nationalist context. This suggests that Equiano’s preoccupations are common to Atlantic subjects and citizens of the time and could function either to erect a state or to escape a state’s limitations.

Franklin, for example, shares Equiano’s experience with perceiving freedom in relation to its opposite. He was a bound servant to his brother James, but escaped to pursue his own independent fortune as a publisher in another city. As David Waldstreicher notes “Franklin especially had much in common with the slaves and servants whose descriptions ultimately filled the advertising columns in his newspaper…in many cases like that of James and Benjamin Franklin, master and servant mirrored each other in acts of resourcefulness and guile. One’s freedom was, after all, another’s misfortune, even ruin” (17). The key difference between these
narratives then, is that Franklin folds his own story of independent liberty into a national project, while Equiano continues to identify his with a broader Atlantic culture.

Franklin and Equiano both premise Atlantic success upon a conversion process by which individuals forcefully seize independence and reject servitude. This done, both figures free themselves to pursue their own fortunes. Interestingly, they do so by turning their lives into model narratives for an Atlantic reading public that increasingly sees individual liberation as a model for political, social, and national renewal. In the Atlantic world Equiano and Franklin inhabit, freedom is very much predicated upon self-mastery in relation to others—bosses, indentured workers, and slaves. Moreover, if, in the British Empire, including colonial America “‘liberty came to be associated with private property,’” as Waldstreicher quotes, both Franklin and Equiano attempt to redefine it, even as they embrace the logic of property holding. Property remains vital to liberty, but property can also be mobile. In Equiano’s case, it can even be embodied in the self. Waldstreicher writes that “the interest of the master class in keeping slaves and servants ‘footloose’ helps account for their ubiquity and, at the same time, their historical invisibility” (22). However, Equiano insists upon making himself seen, both to his masters and to his readers. He does this through financial negotiation and also through asserting his belief that he has been seen and watched from the start by God. If Franklin presents his stubborn pursuit of personal independence as an essential element of his character and, eventually, a national ideal, Equiano presents his own as the result of special providential care. Yet both use their autobiographies to model broader projects in the Atlantic; both tell their readers that a citizen should look like they look and do as they have done. Yet, for Franklin that citizen is increasingly an American citizen, while, for Equiano, it is an Atlantic citizen.
We should, moreover, read Franklin and Equiano’s successful mastery of literacy and publication as further evidence for literacy’s power to confer autonomous personhood in the Atlantic marketplace. Franklin, for example, is quite open about his willingness to exploit politics for profit and, importantly, to use his connection to printing, literacy and books for economic, political and social advancement (Franklin 80). Literacy and writing are what put Franklin in positions again and again to propose civic projects and to advance politically. This too is in line with Equiano’s sense of literacy’s ability to expand personal horizons and, indeed, to expand ideological and social possibilities beyond the self. Both men travel and become wealthy through the circulating publication routes of the Atlantic, and both see a reading, writing public as essential to a productive, wealthy, and virtuous polity.

Moreover, for both Equiano and Franklin, autobiography serves a larger purpose in the eighteenth-century Atlantic, allowing individuals to embody the upwardly mobile capitalism they propose for the broader world. Even if Franklin uses his to model and argue for a national citizenry that would remain exclusive and Equiano uses his to model the universal possibilities of providential election, both use narratives of self to argue for the same kind of providential capitalism. They both argue for wealth as a sign of inclusion. They both argue for using the market to realize personal independence. They both argue for their own freedom by narrating their struggle to achieve it through an insistent drama of self-determination that takes place in market terms.

Although Franklin remains suspicious of organized religion, he echoes Equiano by arguing that moral virtues coincide with economic value, and vices tend to go hand in hand with economic dissipation. He takes up Deism because he is convinced by rational argument which, notably, leads to a morality of plain dealing and functional utility (43). He proclaims, “vice and
virtue were empty distinctions, no such things existing… I grew convinced that truth, sincerity and integrity in plain dealings between man and man were of the utmost importance to the felicity of life” (43-4). He is encouraged to write to model “frugality, diligence and temperance” as well as “modesty… disintegrates, without which you never could have waited for your advancement” (58). Franklin credits and conflates these virtues with economic advancement. His “bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection” includes a scheme by which to develop the “virtues” of temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility (63-5). All of these are virtues that, his text makes clear, work toward the dual goals of personal moral development and personal economic increase, such that both goals reveal themselves as the same goal: to use virtue to become wealthy, and to use wealth to become virtuous.

Moreover, like Equiano, Franklin sees universal capitalist virtues wiping away denominational religious differences, through emphasizing rituals and values that produce economic benefits. He suggests that the difficulty of traditional religious practices leaves moralists accepting the “speckled ax” approach to morality, rather than attempting to truly better themselves. Then he proposes that a new morality, based upon the “essentials of all religions” become the basis for a new universal religion, potentially called “The Society of the Free and Easy” (74). Given his continued emphasis on disciplined courses of “moral perfection,” readers should keep in mind what this morality would entail: thrift, productivity, and upward economic exchange—the very values that Equiano saw as bringing him closer to providence.

However, Franklin openly mocks providence in the same breath with which he mocks American colonial efforts at native extermination. He suggests that, if natives drink themselves to death and God wishes their extermination, then it must be a form of providence. He writes “If
it be the design of Providence to extirpate these savages in order to make room for cultivators of the earth, it seems not improbable that rum may be the appointed means. It has already annihilated all the tribes who formerly inhabited the sea-coast” (96). Though couched in a joke, Franklin’s unsettlingly blasé attitude toward a societal collapse is telling: while he scoffs at providence, he firmly believes in the coincidence of moral degeneracy and economic and social collapse or, conversely, in moral virtue and economic productivity.

Furthermore, Franklin’s dismissal of the “savages” illuminates one of the most troubling implications of Equiano’s view of providence and its relationship to economic, spiritual, and social rewards. If providence has selected Equiano for success and transformation, has it rejected the countless individuals caught in the same dehumanizing maw of slavery, yet unable to use the mechanisms of capital to their own advantage? In contrast to Equiano’s vision of spiritual and economic uplift is Venture Smith’s *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture* from 1798. This text reads as a catalogue of economic difficulty and ends with grief and exclusion that frames Equiano’s optimism in a more critical light. Smith demonstrates an overall emphasis on education of all kind as an important tool to elevate man so that he may not be “wholly destitute of every noble and generous feeling” (5). This is a theme to which he returns late in life in more pessimistic tones when he notes the way he has been “cheated out of considerable money by people whom I traded with taking advantage of my ignorance of numbers” (44). Throughout the text, Smith works to prove his obedience and dependability, only to have others—especially white masters and fellow laborers—cheat him or otherwise ruin his chances (21; 24).

Even though Smith works to earn enough money to buy his freedom, and then to liberate his sons and wife, as well as to employ a few former slaves, he remains frustrated and deeply circumspect about the ability of some to manipulate the market to cheat or abuse him. Though,
like Equiano, he leverages his own commodity value for personal resistance, he does so with no trust in providential salvation. On the one hand, when his frustrated master asks what his value is if he resists work, he responds “I could not give him the reason, unless it was to convert me into cash, and speculate with me as with other commodities” (32). On the other hand, he responds to the death of one son who dies whaling by noting that the “Church 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” (39). In all, Smith’s narrative is deeply pessimistic and rather cynical about the possibilities for community or individuality in a market-driven world. All of the people who figure in his story can be boiled down to their most rapacious capitalistic characteristics or their most frank commodity worth. Equiano’s sense of capitalism’s salvific powers is stripped away, leaving the reader to contemplate only the violence at the heart of slave capitalism. Equiano never quite answers Smith. Although he suggests that, by reaching his providential destiny, he will be better positioned to speak out against slavery, to promote reformist schemes, and even to work toward abolition, the specter of loss remains in the shadow cast by Equiano’s paean to economic and Christian optimism.

This points toward the potentially irreconcilable moral contradictions of the Atlantic marketplace. Both Equiano and Franklin appear cognizant of this issue, although they draw very different conclusions from their own moral convolutions. Franklin comments on them with characteristic humor, for example, when he reasons his way out of vegetarianism only to take it up again, almost ironically, to challenge his friend to be more religiously pure and, notably, more thrifty. Though he begins perversely, writing, “I promised myself some diversion in half starving him,” Franklin ultimately discovers that “the whim suited me the better at this time from the cheapness of it, not costing us above eighteen pence sterling each per week. I have since kept
several Lents most strictly” (Franklin 27-8). Franklin sees moral flexibility as an inherent element of the human experience that is open to play, but that might also produce a result that is both virtuous and economically efficacious, a “lent” that purifies even as it produces profits.

Of course, Equiano could be funny as well, and likewise in the pursuit of a larger point about moral development. While considering faiths, he writes, “A seraskier, or officer, took a liking of me, and wanted me to stay [in Smyrna], offering me two wives. But I refused the temptation, thinking one was as much as some could manage, and more than others would venture on” (127). However, on the subject of slavery, Equiano is deadly serious, allowing the text to reveal his own failure to reconcile his moral disgust with slave-owning with his occupational implication in the practice. He tells readers, “I will not suppose that dealers in slaves are born worse than other men. No, it is the fatality of this mistaken avarice, that it corrupts the milk of human kindness and turns it into gall” (80). Equiano approaches providential sanctification by textually presenting moral complexity and even inconsistency, and permitting his authorial self to witness the errors of his younger narrative self. The autobiography is structured to present a narrative of improvement, away from moral confusion and toward moral clarity. Equiano’s advances in the market are necessary to facilitate this shift, so he looks to the market as a tool for broader moral improvement, on a national, even international scale. Only after obtaining full liberty and autonomy does he bid “adieu to the sound of the cruel whip,” not only the one he felt, but also the one he held in his own hand (123).

If we forget Equiano’s participation in the slave trade, it is because he subsumes it into a narrative of personal and, he hopes, social preparation for grace. However, if we forget Franklin’s complicity in the slave market that defined so much of Equiano’s life, it is because Franklin wants us to. In fact, as Waldstreicher notes “if Franklin gained an antislavery reputation
during the 1760s…it was not primarily because antislavery activists successfully awakened his conscience. It was because they cannily fudged the truth” (195). He was antislavery, though slow to free his own slaves and slow to divest from business that profited from slavery. Franklin too profited from slavery, both holding slaves and through publishing ads for runaways in his
Gazette (Waldstreicher 24). In this, he is the living embodiment of Equiano’s fears that literary and commercial culture might be employed either for good or bad ends, or even for both at the same time.

As proponents of a specifically national culture, the authors of the American Declaration of Independence, including both Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, were forced, unlike Equiano, to reconcile a sentimental opposition to slavery at its worst, with an official embrace of the slave business or even an implicit belief in racist ideology. Goudie reminds readers that, “Franklin’s vision of a great white empire in the West relies on negating North American complicity in exploiting the British West Indian plantation economies...so too, his project of creole uplift depends on a parallel displacement of Southern slavery in North America onto the West Indies” (Goudie 42). By blaming the British for slavery, Franklin could denounce it as a form of imperialist tyranny, even while carefully protecting the business interests of slave-owning states (Waldstreicher 196). Similarly, Jefferson calls slavery “a great political and moral evil,” despite his apparent active embrace of that same evil (Jefferson 94). He writes of “most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other” (168). This does not stop him from disturbingly comparing Africans to animals and speculating about their innate physical inferiority (147). Nor does it stop him from suggesting the intellectual superiority of white classical Greek and Roman slaves to black modern African slaves (149). Both Americans presented slavery as a British imposition and, as Waldstreicher notes, emphasized the way “a
Green 113

virtuous America rested on a sense of difference from West Indian planters” (201). Furthermore, “by allying slaves with Indians and…treasonous Tories, Franklin and Jefferson insulated America from the Africans (as well as the Indians) who populated so much of the continent” (213). These authors therefore found a way to use a rhetorical antislavery position to craft an exclusive, pro-business and pro-American identity.

Equiano, however, hasn’t the authorial liberty or political clout to utterly erase his involvement in the slave trade—either as its object or its agent. Nor is he invited to contribute to the ideological and rhetorical constructions of nationhood that defined so much of Franklin and Jefferson’s bodies of work. He is, notably, “Gustavus Vassa, The African,” a subject whose essays into literature and politics will be considered, first and foremost, from the perspective of a white audience assessing a black figure. He recognizes that his text will be examined, even in his own time, by readers who question the abilities, cultivation, expressivity, and claims to inclusion of people of African descent. He understands that his authorial performance will be examined in relation to his status as an African, and will be used as a measure of African ability and potential. As a result, contemporary readers must approach his account, whether its events are verifiable or not, as a self-conscious effort to personalize the experiences of Atlantic African-descended peoples and to present them to the reading public. Contemporary readers should also keep this in mind when considering whether Equiano’s narrative history coincides with historical evidence. His text’s veracity is of secondary importance to its artistic examinations of the pressing philosophical issues of his day, and to its performative intent as a personal account and as a political proposal.

From his perspective as a mobile Atlantic citizen, Equiano rejects the compromises, which politicians like Franklin and Jefferson make, and posits providential capitalism as a
purifying and liberating mechanism that can and must be used for the purposes of extending liberty and salvation beyond the confines of nationality and race. In fact, the conflation of providential capitalism with projects of expansive and universal social uplift became widespread as well among anti-slavery writers and thinkers of the eighteenth century. John Marrant, for example, actually goes beyond Equiano in projecting a universal capitalist Christianity as an escape-route from slavery. He imagines a nonwhite counter-public that links black subjects and native Indians and actually helps them to share values and connection to the natural world, instantiated and sustained by both trade and Christianity. Marrant offers a number of instances of Christian faith operating to create community, a public founded on shared religious faith and capital exchange, rather than upon nationality or ethnicity. Like Equiano, Marrant became a sailor later in life, “pressed on board the Scorpion sloop of war,” and ends his life engaged in the same colonizing schemes that Equiano would help to engineer. He himself traveled to Nova Scotia, looking forward to a universal Christian fellowship, which he hoped would equalize all societies so that “Indian tribes may stretch out their hands to God; that the black nations may be made white in the blood of the Lamb...the kingdoms of the world are become the kingdoms of our God, and of his Christ” (127). Similarly, abolitionist and writer, Ignatius Sancho, for example, emphasizes the central importance of knowledge, reading and literacy to self-liberation and autonomy (87). He also, like both Franklin and Equiano, presents wealth and virtue as constitutive values. He likewise notes that the loss of property precedes a loss of morality (94).

By emphasizing the personally and universally salvific nature of providential capitalism, Equiano actually anticipates a marked shift that would occur in the way religious speakers wrote and spoke about their role in society during the revolutionary period, from envisioning a strictly scriptural ordering of society and its laws to imagining a shared cooperative space of religiously
motivated antislavery citizens of the state and in the market. For example, in 1786, only a few years after the American Revolution, Thomas Barnard, a Methodist minister, speaking at the ordination of Reverend Aaron Bancroft of the Second Christian Church of Worcester Massachusetts, announced a shift in how the church viewed its role in society (51). Rather than argue for a competitive model of religious practice within the shared space of the nation, Barnard asks, “Why Ministers of different denominations should not live harmoniously together, and even hold ministerial communion, no valid reason can be given; at least the members of their Churches would interchangeably participate in special ordinances, were thy not prevented by odious bigotry, or worldly policy.” His sermon argues that, as citizens of the same American state, different denominations must find a way to cooperate toward their shared religious goals, to collaborate for the sake of perfecting the new American state as a moral enterprise. That cooperation included both nascent abolitionism and the economic development of the new state, so that economic growth became an essential part of Christian antislavery vocation.

Moreover, after 1776, this scriptural antislavery basis gained new urgency in the United States and elsewhere, when linked to the cause of liberty. For example, when minister Jonathan Edwards Jr. asserts, “our fathers lived in a time of ignorance which God winked at; but now he commandeth all men everywhere to repent,” he typologically links American philosophy post-Declaration to the New Testament covenant and resigns pre-Declaration ideas as deriving their scriptural lessons from the Old Testament (27). No longer viewed as a distraction from Christian service, the labor of making and maintaining the nation founded for liberty—including free economic prosperity—now becomes the shared goal of the devout, no matter their denomination. Equiano, therefore, is not far removed from a larger movement to frame the events surrounding the revolutionary period as signs of providential intervention into world history. Where other
writers, like Edwards Jr. or Barnard emphasized the military victories of the revolution over its economic implications, Equiano sees capitalism as the universal constant, the apparatus that allows God to order history, whether in America, England, Africa or the Atlantic more broadly, toward the purposes of extending freedom and grace.

Though all of these figures share rhetorical conventions and even some argumentative goals, Equiano’s pursuit of a universal salvific providential capitalism differentiates him from his American counterparts. All of these writers regret the inhumane treatment of slaves in the Atlantic, especially in the West Indies—or claim to—but Equiano emphasizes the way his own personal navigation of the market demonstrates the similarities of Atlantic citizens, black, white, slave or free, while Franklin and Jefferson bracket off and protect the white, property-owning American patriots, even as they use the populist language of the antislavery movement. Sean X. Goudie writes that “Franklin frequently engages in acts of paracolonial negation in his writings, anxious to repress the potentially deleterious social and cultural effects of commercial excess on the emergent national character.” On the other hand, “[Alexander] Hamilton not only sustains U.S. paracolonialism in the West Indies as an affirmation of the United States’ special mission to spread liberal and republican values in the hemisphere; he also strives to build a U.S. commercial empire there” (63). Readers might see a similar logic in Equiano’s project in Africa. He intends to extend capitalism and its colonialist practices even deeper into the continent, and to entwine capital-colonialist ideals ever more closely with Christian mission, but not for national empirical purposes. Instead, he hopes to develop a universal ideology that he sees as liberating and uplifting, across borders of nationality, race, or degree of freedom.

These ideas coincide with those in the Plymouth texts, presenting expansion as the jeremiadic work of both the nation and the community of elect souls. Franklin and Jefferson
explicitly use the same language and logic of Bercovitch’s “English Traveler” to argue for the establishment and expansion of an American national polity. Later American politicians will lean on it even more heavily as the nation expands south and west.

Equiano, for his part, both participates in and challenges the logic of a godly venture into the wilderness. To Equiano, all the world is both a wilderness to be redeemed—especially of its slavery sins—and an expansive cosmopolitan space deliberately ordered by the “divine economist.” Yet it is also a society already suffused with economic logic, in which God has always used the mobility and exchange of the marketplace to make known his will. So, as much as providential capitalism offers Christian and capitalist societies opportunities to advance their hegemony, it also offers individuals opportunities to navigate, and potentially master that system, already in place. In her review of the rise of American evangelicalism, Christine Heyrman sees the projects of enlightenment revolution and born-again spirituality as being at cross-purposes. She writes that, the “Language of Canaan...a metaphor evoking the new awareness into which believers were initiated by undergoing repentance and rebirth” relied upon a process of conversion and reawakening and was specifically in combat with the rationalist discourse of deists like Thomas Jefferson and others who believed in a morality founded in good works and nationalism (4; 7). But Equiano uses his own body and his own narrative to reconcile these perspectives. As a result, he becomes a model for the way that revealed Christianity can encompass capitalist and even colonialist morality. Equiano’s readers can see the way that the motivating ideology of capitalism throughout the Atlantic draws political, theological, and geographical spaces closer together. At the same time, readers can appreciate the way such an ideology might be motivated to construct an exclusive model of nationhood, in Franklin and Jefferson’s cases, or to escape that exclusivity, in Equiano’s case.
That Franklin’s autobiography remains a font of humor and wisdom, while Equiano’s has all too frequently been reduced to questions of anthropology speaks to which of these possibilities became more powerful as the eighteenth century turned into the nineteenth. Equiano’s dream of a humanist capitalism that might cleanse the Atlantic of its slaveholding sins is ultimately undone by what he fails either to see or to admit in his own philosophical system. Providence and election rely upon the exclusion of some from the Kingdom and from grace. Capitalism too relies upon loss, as well as gain. Implicitly, Equiano’s successful navigation of the market comes at the cost of someone else’s unsuccessful attempts to do the same. Meanwhile, Equiano’s doomed attempts at African relocation reveal the same unstated problem: Africa can remain a source for capitalism’s constant churning renewal or even for Christianity’s expansion, but the rewards of providential capitalism cannot touch every individual equally, so African relocation becomes simply African colonial exploitation, and the providential Atlantic individual that Equiano embodies becomes a symbol of exclusive, rather than universal liberty. Franklin, Jefferson, and the other American founders seize upon this unstated cost and make it the foundational premise of their new and exclusive national culture.

However, the fact that Franklin and Jefferson felt any need at all to address the contradictions of slavery, liberty, grace, and business speaks to their own blindness or even anxiety. Nationalist and racist efforts to secure liberty by denying it to others only ever belie the fear that the members of the elect might lose their status. Thus, as the nineteenth century blossoms, more and more white American writers will see the potential to lose their own privileged status relative to the bondage around them. The commodification and indenture that they force upon others, in order to escape with their own freedom, will come to haunt them more
and more. Increasingly, the narrative of escape from bondage offered by Franklin and Equiano will appear reversible.

**Conclusion**

Precisely because Equiano evades easy nationalism, he demonstrates the way that the individual liberty, moral flexibility, and blessings of virtuous wealth preached and performed by authors like Franklin and Jefferson, could be used by less privileged, non-white, even unfree individuals. So his narrative, seemingly so synchronous with those of Franklin and Jefferson, is also an implicit rebuke to their conclusions. His success is a testament to their potential lack of control over the market forces and divine blessings to which they credit their own liberty and upon which they found their American state. Even more than Franklin, Equiano embodies the system of trade and commerce, as much as he is embedded within that system. His travels take him to every important center of Atlantic trade and he documents every step in the process of commerce and trade that the system entails. Moreover, as a slave and a sailor both, he not only carries the system’s most valuable freight from place to place, but also very literally is the system’s most valuable commodity. So modern readers might reconsider such a narrative to see is as a potentially radical performance and model of escape from the personally obliterative logic of capitalism and slavery. Equiano recognizes the mechanisms of his subjugation and comes to master them effectively.

When critics reduce Equiano’s text to questions of anthropological authenticity or antislavery politics, they do him a considerable disservice as an author. Critics and readers have long been willing to give Franklin credit for writing an autobiography that is entertaining, contradictory, instructive, and politically and ideologically engaged, even if it is not, properly speaking, true. If readers grant Equiano the same leeway, they will also see an author using a
narrative doppelganger to interrogate the personal stakes of life in the Atlantic marketplace. Moreover, they will find an author raising pressing questions about the philosophical possibilities of a divine providential intelligence that acts through the commodity trades and exchanges of the market. Just as much as Franklin’s paeans to virtuous saving and systems for a virtuous, personally wealthy citizen offer a model for national identity, Equiano’s presentation of personal wealth as a route to freedom, autonomy, and elect salvation, offers a model of human survival and flourishing in a providential capitalist world. But Equiano also recognizes the way that same market drive can work to dehumanize, cheat, commodify, or abuse individuals who fail to master it. Even more critically, Equiano recognizes the way that participation in such a system imperils the moral convictions of even the elect.

By presenting providence, prophecy and capitalist prognostication in the same register, with no differentiation in kind, Equiano’s text essentially asserts that what Susan Buck-Morss calls the “porosity” of the market’s “existential boundaries” defines the fundamental cosmopolitan space of cultural exchange. In such a space, religion, spiritualism and mercantilism exchange values, language and influence, until they are transformed into one unified system that Equiano describes in blended terms and readers, today, recognize as modernity. Capital is as much the author of events in this sphere as is the Christian god. In a world that not only permits but thrives upon different ideologies, religious traditions and national projects coming together for the common goal of capitalist enterprise, capitalism very nearly is the God of the Atlantic system. When readers accept this, it becomes easier to accept Equiano’s conflation of providence and capital less as heresy or fiction, and more as the nominal conditions of the world in which he lives.
Current readers should, therefore, reposition Equiano’s narrative as both the culmination of an evolving philosophy combining Christian and capitalist values and the vanguard of a generic tradition specifically tied to the Atlantic marketplace. Equiano reinterprets the redemptive narrative of social conversion and contracted inclusion that helped the Plymouth writers to turn their specific political and philosophical circumstances into the basis for an expansive but exclusionary society. He builds upon the protestant belief in providential grace but reframes it as a story of personal escape from bondage through the conversion processes of the capitalist exchange market. Moreover, he personalizes these experiences as autobiographical narrative events that serve as models for how the divinely-ordered market might offer individuals opportunities for mastery over commodification. Certainly comparisons to Benjamin Franklin’s own narrative of conversion are well-taken. So too would be comparisons to, for example, Herman Melville’s portrait of a much later Atlantic market that still initiates moments of uncanny conversion and still conflates providence and capital gain in such works as *Redburn*.

Far from demonstrating an unformed attitude toward the relationship between individuals and the providential capitalist forces that act upon him, Equiano’s critique proves him to be, in fact, utterly modern, capable of feeling awe and cynicism toward the same unseen forces of God and the market, and an early adopter of genre signifiers that would become especially important as the Atlantic market grew, transformed and, eventually, prefigured eras of global exchange. In the end, it is the text’s ambivalent relation to providential capitalism—sometimes reverential, sometimes suspicious—that most distinguishes Equiano as a keen analyst not merely of the Atlantic world, but of modernity, itself.
Chapter 2

Uncommon Suffering and Divine Deliverance: Atlantic Labor, Captivity and Community
Because Olaudah Equiano was especially skillful, lucky, and self-aware, he was able to trade on his talents and his virtues to rise in the philosophical and economic cosmology of the Atlantic market. He used the commodity value of his body and the allegorical value of his soul to achieve freedom and to realize providential design. His proximity to other commodities, in life and in text, ironically gave him the negotiating power necessary to take control of his status as an article of trade and to resist historical and narrative erasure. For all its complexity and even moral ambivalence, Equiano’s narrative is, therefore, an enormously optimistic account of the intersection of capitalism and Christianity in the Atlantic. It is a story of capitalism as a personal escape route from slavery and as a highly ordered system of divine communication. Even so, troubling questions appear fleetingly on the horizon for Equiano’s readers that the author never fully answers: if Equiano could use the market to realize his potential as an elect individual with unique value to God, what of the countless others who could not? If one man could use the market as a ladder by which to ascend toward divinity, could not another plummet in the opposite direction? Finally, what community was available to the masses of people displaced and uprooted by the mobile Atlantic market? With these questions in mind, it is important to remember that Equiano’s is not the only narrative to address the providential capitalist dimensions of Atlantic mobility. In fact, a number of writers who, like Equiano, navigated the fraught barriers between freedom and unfreedom, including Venture Smith, Briton Hammon, John Jea, Ottobah Cugoano, Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, and John Marrant offered more ambivalent counterweights to Equiano’s complex but ultimately optimistic perspective.

Equiano looms large in the narratalogical history of Atlantic literature and culture because he has been claimed as an originary figure in black Atlantic studies, a figure who Vincent Carretta has convincingly argued belongs both to American and British literary history,
and to a broader view of Atlantic literature. Because he told his story at the time he told it, in the pivotal period after the revolutionary period, his voice also reminds readers of the individuals caught up in the Atlantic’s ongoing competitions over personal and national liberty and mastery. Moreover, because he told his story in the way he told it, he has become the most prominent black citizen of the eighteenth-century Atlantic—the mobile, displaced, maritime Atlantic, rather than one of its many increasingly nationalist ports-of-call—to engage with some of the century’s most important generic and ideological traditions and even political movements. He presented the trajectory of his life as equally providential and capitalist. He used the dual economic and spiritual meanings of conversion to give shape to his mobile life at sea. He survived and even thrived along routes of Atlantic trade. Finally, he proposed important colonial investment ventures that advanced providential capitalism around the Atlantic as a project of simultaneous social uplift and economic and cultural hegemony. All of this goes some way toward explaining the importance of Equiano in history and in Atlantic literature. However, readers and critics would be wrong to assume that Equiano and Equiano alone embodies these numerous generic, ideological, philosophical, political, or narrative trends. Indeed, a rich body of literature exists to demonstrate the vibrancy of the Atlantic as a site of cultural creation and curation, as well as the source of a diverse array of literary figures who take up many of the same issues that Equiano observes, but with unique individual differences.

To be clear, texts that contend with these ideas cover a large swath of time and space. For example, Briton Hammon’s restless 1760 narrative wends its way among multiple nations within the Atlantic. Meanwhile, Ukawsaw Gronniosaw’s 1772 text suggests the providential nature of not only this sort of mobility, but also of slavery itself. Meanwhile John Marrant’s 1785 narrative uses multiple experiences of captivity and conversion to pursue a uniquely unorthodox vision of
Christian counter public. On the other hand, Ottobah Cugoano’s 1787 autobiography rejects the providential nature of slavery but uses a Christian lens to make sense of life in the maritime Atlantic. He was likely assisted in the publication of his work by Equiano, whose own narrative came to print in 1789. In contrast to both Cugoano’s and Equiano’s visions of providential capitalism as a way out of bondage, Venture Smith produced a deeply pessimistic account of life along the corridors of Atlantic maritime trade in 1798. In 1811, John Jea produced a multi-generic and pointedly abolitionist tract. It makes sense to read these narratives as a network of interrelated texts because they represent a network of interrelated and occasionally disputative ideas that were current, formative, and productive in and around the eighteenth-century maritime Atlantic.

For example, traversing the same Atlantic waters as Equiano and proposing the same colonization projects in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone as Equiano, Ottobah Cugoano may well have relied upon Equiano’s help securing the publication of his earliest autobiographical work. Nevertheless, his narrative is much more explicitly engaged in the fiercely debated theological elements of antislavery rhetoric in his age than was Equiano’s. At roughly the same time, Venture Smith experienced similar Atlantic mobility, and worked with similar Christian antislavery groups to publish an autobiography, but came to drastically different conclusions about the nature of providence and capital for the enslaved and even for the emancipated figures who traversed the Atlantic marketplace. A rough contemporary of both Cugoano and Equiano, he appears as a kind of pessimistic mirror, challenging their faith in the uplifting nature of the Atlantic market and even challenging their conclusions about the nature of freedom, itself, providential or otherwise.
It is useful to read all of these authors together because they represent something of a tripartite discourse among mobile black Atlantic thinkers who share a window of time, even as they share the broad and mobile space of the Atlantic. If Equiano has been imagined as the pinnacle of potential literary and economic success within the Atlantic economy and its providential capitalist system, Cugoano more fully realizes the antislavery critiques embedded within Equiano’s text, while Smith is a frankly pessimistic counter-example, whose experiences in the waters he shared with Cugoano and Equiano are painful and defeating. Optimistic or pessimistic, these authors share generic and philosophical concerns that are providential and capitalist at the same time. They all either advance Christianity through capitalism and project capitalism through Christianity, or respond to efforts to do so. But they are not alone in responding to Atlantic cultures, whether on land or, more frequently, at sea, that developed and projected notions of providential capitalism. As a result, readers, critics, and historians must acknowledge the contributions of other writers who more explicitly emphasize the elements of mobility, syncretism, and Christian belief that help to instantiate and to structure the Atlantic providential capitalist ideology.

Toward that end, Briton Hammon predates Equiano, Cugoano, and Smith, and represents an early example of the liberating possibilities of life in the mobile Atlantic. Although he too is, in part, animated by a belief in providential Christianity, his story is much more focused on his ability or need to remain mobile, and to curate a social and personal self through the experience of mobility. Later, John Marrant, a relative contemporary of Equiano, Cugoano, and Smith, uses a similarly displaced captive life to imagine himself within a uniquely heterodox but, to his mind, universalist Christian cosmology.
Meanwhile, Ukawsaw Gronniosaw uses his own experiences with captivity to propose a version of providential Christianity that utilizes even the worst excesses of the mobile Atlantic experience, including slavery, to position individuals within a hierarchy of Christian practice and election. On the other hand, the latest writer in this body of texts, John Jea, rejects any notion of captivity as a potentially ennobling or transcendent experience, but still envisions an advancing Christian community borne of the experience of mobile Atlantic life and social interaction.

There are certainly other writers who could, and probably should, share space with the above named writers. Stefan Wheelock, for example, points out that “Equiano would know [Phillis] Wheatley’s work, as well as Gronniosaw’s narrative and John Marrant’s writings through an Evangelical religious movement and loose connection in white patronage. The movement’s patron, Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon, as well as other Evangelicals stressed spiritual rebirth, personal salvation” (Wheelock 66). As a result, these interlocking constellations of ideas and generic trends were also material networks of patronage, support, and publication. These authors, in particular, represent different perspectives upon a similar experience of mobile displacement and the union of capitalism and providential Christianity in the Atlantic. In order to gain any clear understanding of the providential capitalist nature of life for enslaved and emancipated individuals who lived their lives along the corridors of maritime Atlantic trade, readers and critics ought to encounter these authors together. They ought to put these writers into a kind of conversational relation with one another that allows Hammon’s frantic mobility to share space with Marrant’s roving experience of constant translation and conversion, and permits Gronniosaw and John Jea to illuminate very different perspectives on the nature of Christian salvation in the Atlantic marketplace. Moreover, a writer like Cugoano should be read alongside both Equiano’s more optimistic anecdotes and Venture Smith’s
pessimistic diatribes against providential capitalism’s pronouncements of liberty, in order to
demonstrate the real and material links of working community and solidarity that the Atlantic
market’s free and unfree authors instantiated and nurtured, as well as the relative degrees of
liberation provided by those networks.

This element of community instantiation, finally, is the most important reason to read
these texts together. It is crucial to remember that Equiano’s was not the only voice responding
to the experience of life in the Atlantic marketplace. His was not even the only unfree voice.
However, just as important as it is to see the literary currents of the black Atlantic as discursive
and conversational, even occasionally combative, it is important to recognize what all of these
authors sought in common—namely: community. Out of the dense and diverse web of voices
speaking and writing in the Atlantic, a common desire arose to instantiate community among
networks of Atlantic trade, Atlantic Christianity, and Atlantic exchange. Sometimes that
community could only exist at the margins of societies that sought to deny the existence of
individuals like the writers in this body of text, and sometimes the desire to create community
remained just that—a desire unrealized or thwarted. Nevertheless, as the voices in this body of
texts sought to reckon with the providential capitalist Atlantic, they sought, at the same time, to
find or to create communities of like minds or of like experience.

In order to understand the place of any one of these writers in Atlantic history and
literature, readers, critics, and historians must understand it in relation to that of the others, who
traversed very similar routes of cultural exchange and economic transaction, but who came to
very different conclusions about the vicissitudes, displacements, reversals, and possibilities for
community in the Atlantic. At sea, the intimate connection between mobility and conversion is
made plain and so too are the problems of commodification and even dehumanization that
Equiano sought to minimize. Vincent Carretta calls Equiano’s autobiography “the culmination of the African-British tradition of the eighteenth century” (Carretta 13). However, taken together, autobiographers like Venture Smith, Ottobah Cugoano, Ukawsaw Gronniowsaw, and Briton Hammon, and missionaries and preachers, like John Marrant and John Jea, discursively engage with what Equiano appears to minimize: the philosophical uncertainty that occurs as a result of proximity to and confusion with commodities in a market-oriented moral universe. Moreover, Helena Woodard argues that “through personal beliefs and experiences in religious-centered publications, Gronniosaw and Cugoano mediate the dialectic between a universalist, moral theodicy and a hierarchal, racialist theodicy that was evident in social practice” (Woodard 32). Likewise, Stefan M. Wheelock notes that Cugoano actually used his 1787 text, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* to cast doubts on “the supposed advanced cultures of the Anglo Atlantic.” At the same time, he “would historicize race, slavery, and political fate in a way that criticized the progress of freedom and civilization in the slaveholding Atlantic” (25). Gronniosaw and Cugoano, therefore, embody the tension between attempts to create counter publics, adjacent to the Atlantic societies that worked hard to marginalize both the mobile working denizens of the Atlantic and the Atlantic’s free and unfree black populations, along with those populations who fell into both categories, and the desire to instantiate a universalist Christian cosmology, the “universalist, moral theodicy,” which uses even the most abusive elements of Atlantic trade, including slavery, forced mobility, and violence, to generate a Christian polity. Uniting the Atlantic as a singular divine space was, therefore, very much a subject for debate. Cugoano and Gronniosaw settle on quite different modes by which to reconcile the Atlantic’s rigidly hierarchical systems of power and submission, and their desire for community instantiation. These writers flesh out and
complicate the intricate relationship between religious conviction and capitalist embeddedness in ways both personal and abstract, focused on intimate histories but also critical of a broader system of providential capitalism.

Because slave narratives included in this body of work are related in the first-person, there is some temptation to consider their descriptions of abusive practices in the corridors of Atlantic trade as sentimentalist attempts to develop the sympathies of white audiences who made up the overwhelming bulk of the Atlantic reading public. In some respects, this is, indeed, how they have been imagined to function. As a result, even these narratives could serve to reproduce the very narrative, political, and economic structures they sought to critique. Saidiya Hartman, for example, contends that “the recognition of humanity” initiated by the frequent scenes of suffering and subjection found in slave narratives “acted to tether, bind, and oppress.” She also notes that, “It was often the case that benevolent correctives and declarations of slave humanity intensified the brutal exercise of power upon the captive body rather than ameliorating the chattel condition” (5). Conversely, Lisa Lowe asserts that “autobiography served as a particularly powerful genre for the individual achievement of liberty through ethical education and civilization,” and that this narrative mode asserted “a linear understanding of historical progress” (Lowe 46). Wheelock also notes that “black memoir was especially adept at manipulating this rhetoric —perhaps more adept than its polemical counterpart. If antislavery polemic was largely constrained by reason and argument, black antislavery memoir could represent complex historical realities as stories with surprising biographical plot twists and turns. These plot twists and turns had the capacity to draw out Atlantic slaveholding realities in their material (and oftentimes unsettling) complexity” (Wheelock 67). Certainly Equiano’s autobiographical history allows readers to trace not only his personal navigation of the networks of trade that structured
the maritime Atlantic, but also to see the contours of those networks, and to trace the links that
held together distant ports and Atlantic societies. Similarly, readers can approach texts like
Marrant’s, Smith’s, and Cugoano’s, as evidence of a semi-linear progression of ideas about
mobility, liberty, and election in personalized fashion. Briton Hammon, Gronniosaw, and Jea all
also use their autobiographies to reflect and to comment upon providential Christianity and
liberationist Christianity as personal experiences of freedom, election, and Christian
transcendence. Reading them together allows readers, likewise, to experience the discursive
development of entwined notions of elect Christian liberty in a capitalist market context. All of
these narratives use their protagonists’ “ethical education and civilization” to order their
experiences of mobility, liberation, and interaction with both providence and capitalism in the
Atlantic market. In so doing, they also provide the “linear understanding of historical progress”
that Lowe notes, by personalizing the experience of history and by individualizing debates over
the nature of providential Christianity as they played out in the Atlantic marketplace.

However, these narratives serve more than an autobiographical function and they do
more than reproduce the experiences of subjugation and violence they depict. They also allow
their author-narrators to interpret the logic and imperatives of the moral universe they inhabit.
Frequently that morality takes on economic features of exchange, equivalence, and conversion.
Because these narratives are told from the perspective of individuals who are, at once,
possessions of the market and active members of the economy, they are uniquely situated to
argue for a very particular interpretation of the lived reality of Atlantic modernity as an ongoing
struggle to gain personal agency through economic and Christian self-mastery. They show the
market to be a system in which mobility, disruption, exchange, and transformation are all divine
forces that work through the economy to position and communicate with the individual. They
also express the powerful need to construct community within the disruptive, mobile, and often marginalizing Atlantic.

This was critically important, given that the liminal spaces of the Atlantic that texts like these explore remained sites of imaginative possibility and potential moral transformation for Atlantic audiences. Catherine Hall describes this marginalizing and exoticizing perspective when she argues that, in the minds of many Atlantic denizens, “England was for families, Jamaica was for sex” (72). She suggests that the peripheries of empire and Atlantic society were figured by the inhabitants of mainland England or North America as places where the normal rules of morality might not apply. And yet, mobile figures who traversed the Atlantic, like John Marrant, Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, or even Equiano, suggest that distinctions of periphery and core are much less stable than Atlantic colonialist writers might like to imagine. Liverpool is a central port for these writers, receiving commodities and laborers from other parts of the Atlantic world, and always at the mercy of the swiftly changing political and economic currents of broad and mobile Atlantic society. xv Indeed, it is for this very reason that Ian Baucom describes Liverpool as the capitol of Atlantic modernity. Its position relative to the wide-ranging flow of Atlantic commerce and trade is emblematic of the Atlantic port city as a threshold to the culturally, economically, and ideologically circulating Atlantic world. Moreover, its close ties to the slave trade lay bare the nature of the business at the heart of this economic and ideological community. There was essentially no fortune in England or the Americas, for example, that was not, in some way, intimately connected to business in the Caribbean, and these writers, who narrate circular, recursive, and seemingly endless journeys throughout the Atlantic, attest to the centrality of the maritime slave and commodity marketplace to Atlantic societies.
In and around the Atlantic, the individual self was constructed in the context of hierarchies of power, nationality, economy, and spirituality. So too was the national self. Laura Doyle even argues that the racial constructions at play in the formation of modernity were expressed in letters and fiction and helped to instantiate the novel as a form. She insists that the literary and cultural fixation upon freedom and liberty developed out of an articulation of racial consciousness as a means establishing racial and cultural solidarity. Freedom as a subject came at the expense of the “other.” Moreover, individual and social liberty, she argues, were as much economic concepts as philosophical or religious concerns and rightfully adopted the language of contract and contract violation (60). The “Jamaica” that Hall describes, therefore, is an important imaginary other, a Jamaica of the mind, a periphery against which the national, ideological, and racial home could be defined. However, with the intimate connection between the ostensible peripheries to the ostensible core in mind, the moral assumptions of home admit their own instability. If, indeed, “England was for families, Jamaica was for sex,” what did it mean for the boundaries between core and periphery to break down? What did it mean for home states like England to create explicit peripheral colonial spaces, such as Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, which maintained direct links to home, but were forcibly, determinedly marginal? These questions suggest that England, itself, or any other Atlantic national space, was more porous and more elastic than it cared to admit. The distinction between “England” and “Jamaica” that Hall’s sentence indicates with an assertive comma, was an imaginary border between “home” and the marginalized, “colony.” Yet one could not survive without the other, suggesting that, rather than remain separated across the border of “home” and “colony” or the barrier of Hall’s comma, “England” extended to and included its own ostensibly marginalized peripheral spaces.
Although Anglophonic literature tended to privilege the perspective of the citizen of England or of North America, even the most self-involved texts could not completely evade the influence of the larger Atlantic world. Hall, for example, points out that the property in question in *Mansfield Park* derived in the West Indies (74). As North American and English writers imagined themselves at “home,” maritime Atlantic writers demonstrated that that home was financed and dictated to by business abroad. The imaginary self that these depictions of home helped authors to construct was also subject to events in the broader Atlantic. And so, even where authors actively marginalize references to the Atlantic marketplace, that marketplace is what shapes their stories, and, indeed, what defines the individual lives contained within their pages. Discussing other maritime novels, Eve Tavor Bannet notes that “Mercantilist efforts to exclude foreigners and unauthorized persons or groups from closed imperial trading systems designed to enhance each mother country’s power and wealth, and state efforts to police trade and control its flow, not only stymied commerce; they made smugglers and interlopers the true champions of international trade” (70). In short, even in the presence of rigidly enforced legal and social codes, the eighteenth or nineteenth century self could not exist, in letters or in reality, outside of the sphere of Atlantic influence.

This intersection of competing and overlapping identities led to the proliferation of syncretic cultural and religious forms throughout the Atlantic. For example, missionaries drawn to the center of the English sugar economy helped to establish “free villages” in Jamaica. Once established, however, customs, modes of worship, and even economic exchange practices all took on syncretic characteristics. Hall writes, “black men and women and their children…brought their own culture, shaped by slavery, the middle passage and the plantation.” Once established, these communities “honored through their encounter with Christianity and the
missionaries, [began] to build their own syncretic forms of religion, their own rituals, their own practices, their own African-Jamaican way of life. The missionary project to ‘colonise the interior’ and create a civilization of a new kind, was to be overtaken by the emergence of that distinctive [syncretic] peasant culture” (Hall 138). In the most literal sense, these communities were created through the marriage of capitalist and Christian directives. That marriage immediately produced a syncretic and mobile spiritual and economic culture, held together primarily through the logic and machinery of exchange between the different ports of the Atlantic. Given the outsize influence of a place like Jamaica in the economy and geopolitics of the eighteenth century Atlantic, it is impossible to dismiss such an experience as fringe, exotic, or extraordinary. Rather, it is an endemic and emblematic product of Atlantic modernity. Texts written by mobile inhabitants of the Atlantic market, therefore, directly reflect the syncretic nature that truly empowered Atlantic societies.

Economic, racial, and ideological flux challenge Hall’s proposed Jamaica-England binary because tight bonds of exchange link the Atlantic’s geographic and ideological centers. Ian Baucom’s description of Liverpool, a port city, a central hub of commodity exchange, and an important fixture in the slave market, as the capitol of Atlantic modernity also challenges the more conservative dichotomous perspective that Hall outlines. Baucom describes “the geographies of circulation that supersede and interrupt the borders of the nation-state, these spaces of flows thus belong less to the particular cities or states they link or to the individual places.” Observing the needs and dictates of such spaces, Baucom explains that “they exist by serving the needs of sovereign polities but exist to serve the sovereign principles of exchange they embody, the financial flows they regulate, the capital imperative which they incarnate and whose chief purpose is the conversion of endless variety into a single, general equivalent:
money” (36). This is to say that spaces around the Atlantic serve the needs of sovereign states but are primarily directed toward the flow and production of money and transactional economies. What narratives of maritime life, both slave and free, underscore, however, is the extent to which both Hall and Baucom underestimate the spiritual and philosophical needs and effects of these processes. Just as the nation that Hall describes desires a home for the national and social “family,” and just as the circulatory economy that Baucom describes desires the production of a “general equivalent,” the mobile black writers who circulated within the eighteenth-century nineteenth-century corridors of Atlantic commerce desire a spiritual kingdom to call their own. Yet that desire remains ambivalent and, perhaps, unresolved. Atlantic writers, writers like Equiano, Cugoano, Gronniosaw, and Jea, whose lives occurred very literally within and along the Atlantic’s important trade routes, rather than in any fixed national space, find the home they seek within the economy and within the expansive frontiers of an empire that largely rejects them. In so doing, the alternative communities they create both challenge and adhere to the logic of economy, nation, and spiritual community.

Moreover, the syncretic nature of maritime narratives allows the critiques they contain to extend beyond denunciations of slavery, to include arguments about the very nature of the modern world their authors inhabit. Saidiya Hartman asks “what if the recognition of humanity held out the promise not of liberating the flesh or redeeming one’s suffering but rather of intensifying it?” (Hartman 5). This certainly seems to be the question posed in Venture Smith’s autobiography, in which freedom only further binds him to the pitiless mechanisms of a dehumanizing market universe. If, as Hartman wonders, the suffering depicted in so many slave narratives “reinforce[s] the ‘thingly’ quality of the captive by reducing the body to evidence in the very effort to establish the humanity of the enslaved,” Smith critiques both slavery and
ostensible freedom on the same grounds. Even in his freed state, the encounters and incidences of Smith’s post-slavery life insist upon his subjection, his “thingly” position in the market (Hartman 19). At their core, both freedom and unfreedom are experiences of subjection to and within a market-oriented moral and practical reality.

In Equiano’s autobiography, his body allowed providential tenets of vocation as virtue, and constant conversion through equivalent exchange to thrive and to spread to a community of Christians, laborers, and fellow travelers. At the same time, however, his body’s special totemic commodity status incarnated all the exclusionary practices and effects of the socio-economy in which he lived. The market needed to trade upon or exchange his body as a form of currency in order to function. It needed him to exist as a body, both central to economic exchange and excluded from social transaction, before he could enter society as a freely participating member of capitalism’s elite free class. Sailors, free or unfree, lived under the same dominating hierarchy, in which the individual was obliterated for the sake of a more smoothly functioning trade system, and in which the persons most necessary to the function and existence of Atlantic societies were rendered least visible.

Equiano knew that freedom was practiced on the backs of the unfree, and implied that election necessitated exclusion, but used this knowledge to convert from unfree to free, from excluded to elect. However, if the providential capitalist system that united Equiano’s economic and spiritual journeys could grant freedom, grace, and revealed divine intent, it could also take these gifts away. In fact, even Equiano’s optimistic account tacitly admits the reality that the experience of some degree of unfreedom was, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, more representative and widespread than that of freedom. Even Equiano’s freedom was exceptional, a personal escape from a more common experience of subjugation.
Beyond the personal stakes outlined in narratives like Equiano’s, Venture Smith’s, John Marrant’s, or Ottobah Cugoano’s, these narratives challenge readers to confront this implicit ambivalence as they demonstrate the tense relationship between competing perspectives of Atlantic modernity. The binary view, the one that insisted that “England was for families, Jamaica was for sex,” relied upon a deceptively distancing logic. That logic forcibly marginalized these writers and forced them, if they hoped to avoid becoming the implied opposite of the transcendent Equiano, to carve out or to embrace alternative societies, counter-publics of acceptance constructed around ideals of providential Christianity, and held together along the routes of Atlantic trade. That logic also established the official or imaginary geography of core and periphery that was so important to Atlantic citizens. At the same time, these writers reveal the ways that that logic frequently failed to account for the realities of economic flux, spiritual exchange, and cultural production that kept the supposed home state of England bound inextricably to the supposed frontiers of empire. Jamaica, as well as Colonial Sierra Leone and Nova Scotia are all spaces created in order to facilitate and realize the logic outlined by the England-Jamaica binary. Although these colonial projects were championed by writers like Equiano, they were still figured as distant, remote, culturally distinct. Jamaica was a space reserved for plantation labor and exploitation, including the sexual exploitation that Hall suggests. Sierra Leone was a space created as a field for the displaced black poor of England. Nova Scotia was intended as a refuge for black loyalists moving North after the American Revolution. All of these spaces were, in some sense, imagined as home for populations with which a national polity struggled to know what to do. Full incorporation was, evidently, out of the question. So they were bracketed-off, made a part of empire but, simultaneously, excluded from the full embrace of empire.
At the same time, they were the engines that kept empire running. If the question arises whether the binary definition of society presented by Hall or the circular and mobile definition of Atlantic culture presented by Baucom is more accurate, readers are forced to consider the power of both descriptions at once. The oppositional definition of culture outlined by Hall existed in the minds, and even in the legal codes of Anglophonic Atlantic society, even as the market-driven definition of mobile culture proposed by Baucom underwrote its expansion.

These spaces were part of the extensive hegemony of an extending Atlantic nationalized polity. The borders of “England” were growing to include colonies in the Caribbean, North America, and West Africa. At the same time, England worked hard to maintain racial, political, and ideological difference from its colonial holdings. And so, Jamaica, Sierra Leone, and Nova Scotia were isolated, even as they were absorbed into the national empire. They became part of a national culture, but a subordinate part, without political voice or authority, their inhabitants composed of loyalist subjects, fleeing the American Revolution or landless poor, rather than fully-embraced citizens, invited into the English home. With this in mind, readers might also consider the creation, publication, and dissemination of texts that, like Equiano’s, Cugoano’s, and Smith’s, in particular, dealt with the question of colonization and resettlement as assertive attempts to resist marginalization. They spoke through text, because they were not supposed to speak at all.

The deep ambivalence about the nature of the economic, political, and, especially, moral universe that enslaved or emancipated maritime authors share encourages all of them to seek out and to establish alternative communities within the Atlantic market. Whether they view the market as obliterative and demeaning, or transcendent and uplifting, whether they view slavery as a means toward Christian election or as an innately sinful practice, all of these authors concern
themselves with the ambivalent, often tense, relationships they create with other fellow travelers in the Atlantic. What holds them together, what binds these alternative communities, is a consistent belief in a divine intelligence that acts within the marketplace. Though much less certain about the transcendent nature of market exchange than Equiano, these authors use the language and philosophy of Christianity and syncretic spiritualism to make sense of their place within the market and as a means by which to produce and sustain networks of support, in the face of harsh experiences of abuse and alienation. At the same time, they use the ideology of market capital to make sense of their souls’ place within the swiftly churning and often confusing kingdom of the Atlantic that their god has made.

**Venture Smith’s Alternative Vision of the Atlantic**

Anxiety over the relative liberating potential of the Atlantic is particularly stark in Venture Smith’s *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa* from 1798. This text, in some respects the argumentative and even stylistic opposite of Equiano’s, reads as a catalogue of economic difficulty and ends with grief, exclusion, and a sense that Christian fellowship does not extend as far as it should. If Equiano saw the Atlantic economy as a blessed social arrangement that offered him opportunities to advance personally, economically, and spiritually, Smith stands utterly opposed. He too inhabits a world defined by finance; he too looks for signs of divine intention in the economy. However, he encounters only frustrations, disappointments, and betrayals in the ostensibly divine economy he shares with Equiano. With his frustrated attempts at advancement in mind, Smith keeps his narrative focus squarely upon the economic arrangement of the Atlantic world. Martha Schoolman observes, “Venture came from a culture of commerce. Like his father, who gave up his life to not surrender his capital. But, as events would later demonstrate, he was not a miser who worshipped money for its own
sake (70). Similarly, Robert P. Forbes, David Richardson, and Chandler B. Saint note that "Venture was enmeshed in market-based activity and the processes of accumulation that it facilitated. Moreover, as he relates his life and describes his journey from Africa to America, he provides insights into how markets interacted and, even in a world of mercantilism, became more globally connected (Forbes, Richardson, Saint 57). The biography that Forbes, Richardson, and Saint outline for Smith helps to locate him, and writers like him, including Equiano and Cugoano, in the proper Atlantic context. If Smith had a “home” it was within the “culture of commerce,” the Atlantic market, itself. Though he would ultimately look toward stable settlement in Connecticut, the formative events of his life transpired within an Atlantic market that used free and unfree laborers, like Smith, himself, to link nationalist and colonial ports. He lived his life in between places, in a constant state of mobility, so that his home can only be described as the Atlantic itself.

His suspicions about the market are initiated by European instigation of African wars, and also demonstrate the transactional, acquisitive and capitalist directives that have empowered the commodification, dehumanization, and captivity the author experiences. Smith writes that his homeland was invaded “by a numerous army, from a nation not far distant, furnished with musical instruments and all kinds of arms then in use; they were instigated by some white nation who equipped and sent them to subdue and possess the country” (11). He continues, “The enemy laid siege and immediately took men, women, children, flocks, and all their valuable effects” (14). In Smith’s account, white invaders have not only instigated violence and captivity in Africa, but have also done so through transactional means, through the transfer of commodities in exchange for violence and through the conflation of persons with their effects, and the essential transformation of people into commodities.
Smith frequently notes that capture and violence go hand-in-hand with the processes of valuation and commodification. He writes, for example, “My father was closely interrogated respecting his money which they knew he must have” (14). Indeed, Ford, Richardson, and Saint note that “Venture's narrative also illustrates that his own, apparently relentless, pursuit of economic gain aimed at something more than personal freedom and respect, and at something still more unobtainable: a sense of redemption and closure from the trauma of witnessing his father's violent death in defense of his buried wealth” (Ford et al 75). Here, Smith’s father, a resident of a pre-capitalist society, is at once evaluated by and initiated into the violent world of Atlantic capitalism. His father remains a figure of resistance who “died without informing his enemies of the place where his money lay” (Smith 14). His death allows him to escape the cruel transactional and equivalent logic of forced capitalism by denying his captors the money they seek in exchange for his life.

This is of a piece with Smith’s general sense that relationships of transaction within the Atlantic world are untrustworthy tools of personal and cultural violence. He learns to distrust, for example, the white, Atlantic, capitalists’ “pledges of faith and honor proved no better than those of other unprincipled hostile nations” (12). In fact, throughout the text, Smith works to prove his obedience and dependability, only to have his white masters and fellow laborers cheat him or otherwise ruin his chances. The system in which he finds himself embedded is one of complete mastery, premised upon abusive violence and duplicity. Even his attempts at resistance are tainted with the logic of competitive advantage inherent to capitalism. For example, he enters into a scheme with an indentured Irish workman, Heddy, to escape from an American plantation, but, realizing that Heddy plans to betray him and steal what few goods he owns, he rushes to tell his master that the Irishman planned the escape and pulled him into the enterprise (25). Both
men are punished. In Equiano’s autobiography, the mutual needs and obligations of co-laborers brought them together, even, at times, across the barriers of race and relative freedom. Smith, on the other hand, sees the way capital warps these social interactions. If he learns to navigate the codes and hierarchies of capitalist bondage, it is only through learning to cheat before he can be cheated, to step aside from the lash, even if it means placing another in front of it.

Smith’s narrative also relays an experience of frequent but remarkable violence that appears as a common feature in Atlantic maritime narratives. Alexander Byrd describes the way that West African slaves, among whom would have been counted Smith and his fellow survivors, regularly “averaged losses per voyage of around 15 percent, [while] ships calling at Biafran ports routinely lost more than four percent of the slaves put on board” (Byrd 38). This loss rate was noted by buyers in the Caribbean and the Americas and many slave-owners requested other sources, knowing that the slaves travelling these routes were exposed to higher levels of disease, bad conditions, and violence (54). Like Smith, Equiano gestured toward this pervasive physical and sexual abuse, especially in his depiction of the middle passage. However, Equiano represented that violence as a kind of trial through which he could pass toward divine election. For Smith, that violence only communicates his dehumanization and subordinate status. It has no spiritually ennobling function, and has meaning only as the mode of communication for the system of mastery and control that holds sway in the Atlantic.

As a result, the violence that Smith experiences conforms to the logic of capitalist commodification. At one point, for example, he notes that his master “took [him] to a gallows made for the purpose of hanging cattle on, and suspended [him] on it” (24). Smith experiences the same violence usually reserved for animals because, within the system of Atlantic slavery, he is a commodity of like kind. The text hints at the deeper symbolic violence of capitalist
exchange. That is: in a system in which people can be possessed or used as chattel, in which they have a value as laborers that can be traded and exchanged internationally, people can also function as currency to be exchanged for and transformed into things. Similarly, Forbes, Richardson and Saint observe "that…[an] iconic molasses barrel makes two dramatic appearances in Venture's narrative...both of these encounters with molasses, a basic by-product of slave labor, seem emblematic of coercion and bad faith...deceit, as well as violence" (69). In such moments, Smith lays bare the “thingly quality” thrust upon him by the market, and recognizes the coinstantiation of the market’s equivalent logic and its systems of violent mastery and control.

Here readers might also note the significance of the author’s name. Smith explains “I was bought on board [the slave vessel] 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” (18). Smith’s entire identity is shaped by his experience with commodification, violence, and transaction. Equiano too noted the way his names and identities could shift as he wended his way through capitalism’s labyrinthine trade routes, yet he, ultimately, arrived at a place of self-identification as Olaudah Equiano, the African. Venture Smith, on the other hand, remains Venture Smith, if not property of Robertson Mumford, then still, at least, property of the system that has commodified, violated, and abused him through life. Capitalism is a form of violence in this narrative, and a mode of total social and personal domination.

That violence is also a mode of personal identification for Smith, a narrative event that both presents the violence endemic to slavery as typical and singles Smith out as an individual worthy of the reader’s attentions. Baucom suggests that the rise of capitalist ideologies gave rise
as well to conceptions of the individual and his reading helps to illuminate Smith’s presentation of self. Baucom writes, “The speculative rise and fall of the value of paper monies function…as the preconditions for the invention of an abstract, anonymous, mode of personhood invested not in the inalienable claims of the locale but in the well-being of an anonymous collective” (56). That conflation of finance and personal identification appears fully alive in Smith’s text. Smith’s personhood arises because he is an economic subject involved in economic exchange. Moreover, his victimhood within an economic context gives rise to his novelistic subject status and generates the reader’s sympathies, all while making the case for Smith meriting a place within the collective community that he imagines emerging from the interaction between Christianity and capital.

Smith’s narrative is, therefore, both sentimental and anti-sentimental, an appeal to the hearts and minds of abolitionist readers and potential sponsors, but also an implicit indictment of the system that forces him to make that appeal. Sianne Ngai addresses this need to perform feeling when she writes, “it is the cultural representation of the African-American that most visibly harnesses the affective qualities of liveliness, effusiveness, spontaneity, and zeal to a disturbing racial epistemology, and makes the variants of ‘animatedness’ function as bodily (hence self-evident) signs of the raced subject’s naturalness or authenticity” (95). An emphasis on animated “naturalness or authenticity” goes some way toward explaining Smith’s narration of his own disappointments in the Atlantic market. Even as Smith performs feeling for his audience, he also performs their failure to act. His narrative does not end with a gesture toward salvific community, but with a relatively frank assessment of the limits of community. Ngai, discussing contemporary examples of animation of racial subjects notes that “there can be ways of inhabiting a social role that actually distort its boundaries, changing the status of ‘role’ from that
which purely confines or constricts to the site at which new possibilities for human agency might be explored” (117). Smith both inhabits and distorts his role as a subject in an autobiographical antislavery narrative. He situates himself within a role elsewhere occupied by Equiano, but demonstrates the rigidity of its borders. Smith presents himself as a narrative figure, but one who has been failed by the very community to which his narrative is addressed. He uses his own autobiography to give life to, or “animate” that failure.

Smith’s account also reveals the fact that the violence he experiences was hardly limited to the officially unfree. In fact, as Smith recognizes, freedom could betray the cruelty at the heart of the entire Atlantic capitalist labor system, whether for the slave brought from Africa, for the slave on the plantation, or for the ostensibly freed man struggling to stay above poverty. Alexander Byrd likewise compares the experience of black English subjects emigrating, through colonization schemes, from London, North America, and the Caribbean, to West Africa, and to British Nova Scotia in the revolutionary period. He notes the way that many of these colonizers sought a separate social space after having experienced hardship in America and, later, as loyalists fleeing to Nova Scotia who found the promises extended to them never delivered upon (Byrd 4). Given this hardship, and the disaster of disease, death, and indigence that greeted London settlers in colonies like Sierra Leone, experiences of ostensible freedom frequently resembled those of enslaved Africans coming to Jamaica. Smith’s suspicions about the limits of freedom, then, are well-founded, and represent an all too common experience in and around the Atlantic.

Smith’s text is also a testament to the scope of Atlantic mobility, including an economy of multiple nations, within the grand schema of Atlantic capitalist exchange. At one point, Smith notes, “I was sold to Thomas Stanton…to this place I brought with me from my last master’s,
two Johannes, three old Spanish dollars, and two thousand of coppers, besides five pounds of my wife’s money” (26). Smith is a commodity to be bought and sold on the market, and he finds himself in circulation with multiple different national currencies. In fact, his body acts as the one stable currency that binds all of the others.

On its face, this might seem ironic, given that his identity is, in large part, the product of a process of cultural mixture and transfer, held together only through the dictates of capitalist exchange. Byrd, for example, explains that Igbo, the generalized Africanist identity deployed frequently by people involved in the Atlantic slave trade, is a term that came to be a catchall for the African in the Americas only during and after the middle passage. Byrd argues, “In many parts of the Biafran interior, the term Igbo was an insult and expression of contempt. No village group used it to describe their ‘we,’ rather it was almost always employed to denote a ‘they.’” (20) For Smith to call himself “A Native of Africa,” is for him to admit the totalizing identification of the Eurocentric gaze. Only as African groups came into contact with Europeans did their African identity come to define them, so Smith embraces the logic of a system that uses his unfree flesh as both a valuable commodity and as a marker against which to define white freedom. As Byrd explains, Smith would have come from one of a number of splintered disconnected groups among whom “sometimes, for all intents and purposes, cross-dialect communication was simply impossible [because] an abiding localism...characterized society and culture in the eighteenth-century Biafran interior” (Byrd 19). Thus, Smith’s self-identification as an “African” represents his embrace of an identity that has been produced by Atlantic exchange and which has meaning primarily in an Atlantic context. He appears to understand the reductive nature of his identification as an “African,” but uses that same reductive language and ideology in order to instantiate a community within the framework of Atlantic exchange. Given this, the
seeming contradiction of Smith’s status as a stable commodity in an unstable, international economy is less surprising. European nations defined and particularized themselves against an Africanist other that could be lumped together, despite unique cultural peculiarities, at the same time that they traded “African” bodies in the equivalent exchange marketplace. Smith, therefore, presents himself as the stable African presence at the center of Atlantic trade and through which Atlantic commerce can flow and convert from one form of currency to another.

Indeed, the Africanist identity that Smith claims simultaneously gives him a sense of communal, and perhaps resistant, identity, and animates the processes of racial and national subordination that Atlantic societies enacted through codes, customs, and laws. Moreover, it suggests the way individual and communal identification occurred even amidst efforts to marginalize both individuals and communities. Byrd observes, “In British North America, free blacks looking for a better place to try their liberty followed news from Sierra Leone as closely as they could, and in Jamaica planters and merchants whose livelihoods depended on the slave trade paid more than passing attention to the purpose and prospect of free black migration to Africa” (4). On the other hand, John Thornton argues that “the slave trade and subsequent transfer to New World plantations was not…quite as randomizing a process as posited by those who argue that Africans had to start from scratch culturally upon their arrival in the New World.” Thornton explains, “Quite the contrary…slaves, although no longer surrounded by their familiar home environment, village, and family, were nevertheless not in a cultural wilderness when they arrived in America. They could easily find others who spoke their language and shared their norms in the new environment” (Thornton 204-5). Smith’s narrative is not strictly “New World” or African or European. Rather, it arises from a culture of mobility, labor, and flux that persists in the maritime Atlantic. As Byrd puts it, “connections between migrations to and
from western Africa were themselves embodied, sometimes perfectly, in the lives of contemporaries. Among the emigrants who made for Sierra Leone were settlers who had been born in Africa, who were previously slaves in the Americas, and who had themselves survived earlier transatlantic voyages as prisoners aboard European Guineaships” (4). And so, Atlantic trade remained an engine of simultaneous cultural disruption and production, generating a universally syncretic culture bound together by transactional exchange and providential spirituality, and embodied by displaced, syncretic individuals like Smith.

As his narrative goes on, Smith learns that he must use the market for his own ends, but, even as he does, his experience remains demeaning. He learns, for example, how to use work resistance as well as the innate mobility of his condition to his own advantage. Recalling the time he spoke back to an abusive master, Smith writes, “I answered him, No. Well then, said he, I will send you to the West-Indies or banish you, for I am resolved not to keep you. I answered him I crossed the waters to come here, and I am willing to cross them to return...[eventually] he tried no more, and said he would not have me as a gift” (29-31). This was a real and visceral threat because of the West Indies’ well-known reputation as a space marked by death. But Smith appears willing to embrace this possibility. In this way, Smith learns that he still retains power, even in his commodified status. It is a limited and provisional power, but it is a power nonetheless—a power to refuse to work, even to court death, and thus to become less valuable. He even notes the peculiar circumstances of his life when his frustrated master asks what his value is if he resists work, “I could not give him the reason, unless it was to convert me into cash, and speculate with me as with other commodities” (32). Unlike Equiano, Smith never relates a moment like this as an ascendant or transcendent experience. Rather, it is practical, necessary, and forced upon him by a commodifying logic that he disdains.
Smith here demonstrates a subtle understanding of the allegorizing apparatuses of market capital that structure his own life. In so doing, he bears out one of Baucom’s major contentions that “under mature capitalism, allegory is no longer simply a literary technique but is rather the phenomenology of the entire social-material world” (Baucom 21). In text, Smith uses an allegory of his body being converted into cash in order to comment upon his lived reality as a commodified individual with equivalent market value. As Baucom puts it “commodity is, in essence, practical allegory—allegory in the sphere of social practice” (Baucom 18). In Smith’s narration, direct allegory describes the allegorical nature of Atlantic capitalist modernity. As a live commodity, Smith is, in fact, well-situated to understand these allegorizing processes. But, for Smith and for other similarly displaced laboring writers, that allegory extended to issues of the soul as well. The conversion that Smith describes is primarily economic, but it has profound spiritual effects too. When he later converts to a form of Christianity, he expects his value to convert in kind. When these hopes are disappointed, when his son, for example, dies without material recompense, Smith’s frustrations only grow, underscoring his sense that market capitalism has rigged the mechanisms of life and reality, including the divine mechanisms, against him.

As a result, after he has worked to earn enough money to buy his freedom and he uses the market to liberate his sons and wife, as well as to employ a few former slaves, his contempt for capital logic only intensifies. For example, he responds to the fact that one of his sons dies whaling by lamenting that “[Captain] Church 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” (39). Despite this frustration, Smith's ultimate ability to procure proper burial for himself and for his family allows him to become, in the words of Forbes, Richardson, and Saint, "a ranking member of the Yankee
establishment [who]...at the end of his life...engaged in one final estate transaction—the smallest and most permanent of his land purchases and the ultimate signifier of the accomplishments of an African-born American whose understanding and respect for his own father's values helped him to transcend the violence that brought him to America" (76). Smith has come to see the world and personal relations through the commodifying gaze that he has been taught. Yet, even given this final, conditional victory in procuring land for burial, thus establishing himself as a member of capitalism’s elect, all he sees is loss, both personal and financial. His capitalist success is one he can only look forward to enjoying in death. Even his sense of personal development is tinged with the bitterness of a man deeply wounded by his encounter with Atlantic capitalism.

It is important to note that Smith’s gloomy appeal perhaps targets one of the number of post-revolutionary charitable organizations, such as The Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor, whose membership would have made up his ideal readership. Vincent Carretta points out, for example, that “According to a report in the newspaper The Public Advertiser (6 January 1787), sympathy for the Black Poor was so widespread that White beggars disguised themselves as Blacks to increase their incomes” (Carretta 10). Carretta’s annotation also signals the material connections that held together the displaced black populations of the Atlantic market through publication. Even as individuals like Smith were marginalized, antislavery groups, in their very protest against the home state’s treatment of the black poor, maintained intimate connections among marginalized subjects. Moreover, implicit to Carretta’s point, and, indeed, implicit to Smith’s account is the reality that Smith’s text would never have existed if these networks did not work to maintain connections, even across the expanse of the Atlantic, between a mobile, overwhelmingly black underclass, and the home that nations like England or the United States
imagined to be distinct, separate, and pure. Smith, therefore, both appeals to charity and communicates the bitterness of his own experiences when he notes that he has been “cheated out of considerable money by people whom I traded with taking advantage of my ignorance of numbers” (Smith 44). If Equiano’s experience in the market was one of upward personal mobility and freedom as election, Smith’s is of downward mobility and freedom as another form of capitalist debasement. Yet both men use the narration of their lives to establish some form of financial or communal stability in a deeply unstable Atlantic world.

Even so, Smith resists extending this charitable appeal to colonial capitalism, as did Equiano. In fact, Smith seems to have anticipated the disaster that would come from an expansion of capitalism driven by ostensibly productive colonialism that was nevertheless driven by local exploitation, if not by deportation, which Equiano proffers at the end of his narrative. As Byrd notes, colonizing schemes developed in London to deal with the largely male and seafaring black poor, and in Nova Scotia to deal with emancipated slaves and freeborn loyalists who had fled the Revolution. Equiano had been deeply involved in the London scheme, although he quickly came into conflict with its white managers and even had to be dismissed before the ship made it to Sierra Leone. All the better, because most of the people on this voyage died (Byrd 122) The Nova Scotian settlement plan, organized by Granville Sharp, was similarly disastrous (169). Furthermore, Byrd argues that these schemes did not only fail because of ill-preparedness for natural conditions, but were actively destroyed by English companies. He contends that the failure of these plans can be explained “because the settlers socialized toward a politics of antislavery that...was substantial enough when combined with…growing civil and institutional capacity to render the settlement noxious to prominent British and Temne traders in the region” (169). And so, the vision of white capitalist traders exploiting differences between West African
cultures and inciting violence and ruin that began Smith’s narrative anticipates Europe’s relationship to West Africa.

With all of this in mind, Smith’s thoughts on presumed Christian civilization are circumscribed at best. After finding himself cheated by yet another business partner, he writes “Such a proceeding as this, committed on a defenceless [sic] 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” (47). Smith’s pessimism offers a forceful rebuke to Equiano’s optimistic view of capitalism as a technology of spiritual and cultural uplift. Christianity is just one more tool of oppression practiced by untrustworthy capitalist operatives and masters in the Atlantic. Smith’s narrative is remarkably similar to that of Equiano: stolen from Africa, enslaved in North America, involved in the shipping industry of the Atlantic. And yet, he concludes his narrative here, on a note of resolute pessimism about the potential for capitalism or Christianity to create social bonds or to lift even a talented and resistant individual like himself above depredation and degradation.

Smith’s disappointment makes him, in some ways, a literary and ideological foil for Equiano, surveying similar Atlantic experiences, but experiencing disillusioned frustration where Equiano experienced optimistic transcendence. Nonetheless, both authors similarly reflect the need and desire of displaced, mobile individuals and communities to carve out personal and social identities in Atlantic societies that actively frustrate their attempts to do so. Smith endeavors to embody the vicissitudes of Atlantic life that Baucom presents as prototypical but, at every turn, finds himself thwarted by society’s insistence upon the distance between the
imaginary home of England or the United States and the imaginary Jamaica, Sierra Leone, Nova Scotia, or even the only provisionally free Connecticut where Smith settles. Similarly, he tries to achieve the same kind of personal liberation and transcendence that Equiano represented so vividly, but finds himself tumbling down the same economic, social, and philosophical ladders that Equiano ascends.

**Briton Hammon and the Liberating Experiences of Captivity**

Smith’s pessimistic take on maritime life asserts displaced mobility as the central universal experience of Atlantic life. Implicit to this perspective is the author’s palpable desire to instantiate, through Christian fellowship, through authorial production, and through direct appeals, an alternate community that might rescue him from his material and spiritual dejection. In fact, this implicit need links Smith to a rich body of enslaved and emancipated maritime authors, who similarly seek out the alternate communities to be found within networks of religious affiliation and testimonial publications, and along the trade routes of the Atlantic. This project was vital particularly in the context of increasing colonial and national expansion. For example, Briton Hammon’s 1760 *Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and Surprizing Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man…*, makes the same gestures towards providential deliverance as does Equiano, insisting upon the liberating potential of the merchant sailing industry, but casts its eye toward a displaced mobile community. Just like Smith, Hammon looks to this community out of necessity, in response to his relative exclusion by colonialist and national capitalist projects. However, the counter-public that Hammon imagines remains held together by the market and its divine operations. Hammon repeatedly finds himself imprisoned or impressed as a frequently unwilling laborer in the multiple, overlapping economies and polities of the Atlantic. He likewise repeatedly finds opportunities to escape from the particular
circumstances of his captivity when merchant ships come to the nearest port. All the while, he weaves his way among and between national powers that would claim him as property of a national economy, and finds fellowship among the Christian sailors who similarly live their lives as mobile citizens of Atlantic trade routes.

Like Equiano’s autobiography, Hammon’s narrative attests to the way that an enterprising and knowledgeable enslaved man might make use of these complicated and sometimes chaotic networks of maritime trade and war, to participate in a society that remains liminally positioned between nations, while jumping from ship to ship, and, in due course, secure his own liberty. However, Hammon’s narrative emphasizes experiences of captivity as the necessary ports of call toward his final destination of Christian elect liberty, in much more explicit terms than did Equiano’s. As a result, Hammon’s narrative uses the experiences of the mobile Atlantic economy as the structure by which to draw him toward providential deliverance, but presents Atlantic life as a successive series of captivity experiences.

Even when liberation does come for Hammon, it ironically arrives in the form of new experiences of captivity. Early in the narrative, for example, while shipwrecked off the coast of Florida, he alone is spared by the natives who kill the rest of the surviving crew and, though they “us’d [him] pretty well” he finds occasion to escape when a Spanish merchant ship arrives (7). The Spanish captain makes a bargain with the natives to pay them ten dollars for every prisoner they capture, so that they will not simply kill them. After his time among the Florida natives and Spanish sailors, Hammon recalls, “At the Havanna I lived with the Governor in the Castle about a Twelve-month, where I was walking thro' the Street, I met with a Press-Gang who immediately prest me, and put me into gaol…when we were all brought out, and ask'd who would go on board the King's Ships…bound to Old-Spain, and on my refusing to serve on board,
they put me in a close Dungeon, where I was confin'd Four Years and seven months” (8). The
reversals come quickly in this narrative, but they retain a consistent sense of international
mobility for the impressed maritime laborer. Slave or free, Hammon finds himself confined to
and potentially liberated by the same forces of market need that keep his body in circulation
around the Atlantic.

Narratives of travel have long functioned both to extend the purview of the national
imaginary and to define the nation against what it sees. They continue to serve this purpose to
this day. Neda Atanasoski, for example, argues that “as cultural documents invested in mapping
spatial, as well as temporal, fault lines, travelogues were crucial in fashioning new political,
journalistic, and popular racial fantasies” (35). That she is describing “the postsocialist Eastern
European landscape,” affirms the persistent importance of narratives of mobility as tools of both
intranational hegemony and international cooperation. In their day, Atlantic maritime narratives,
texts written and published for increasingly nationalized readerships, did so as well.

However, because authors like Hammon were so often nominally excluded from the
national polity that Atlantic societies attempted to create throughout the eighteenth and
nineteenth centuries, their travel narratives also demonstrated the way a different, mobile public
could be created in the Atlantic, at the same time as the landed national imaginary took hold. The
Jamaica-England dichotomy that Hall describes takes shape precisely because individuals like
Smith or Hammon were intentionally excluded from participation in the political, spiritual, and
social life of the ostensible national core. So these writers were forced to create new centers of
culture, exchange, and cooperation at the peripheries of empire. However, in so doing, they
retained and even strengthened the links between home and frontier, thus demonstrating that the
core-periphery model that relegated colonial spaces like Jamaica, Sierra Leone, or Nova Scotia
to the margins was only ever imaginary, if still ideologically powerful. Even as their labor helped nations to develop and become sustainable, sailors like Hammon were rendered invisible. Forced to create alternative communities of inclusion, these communities adhered around common traits of capitalist labor and Christian vocation.

Within an increasingly nationalized context, Hammon retains his sense of the divine element of transactional economic and national experiences. He writes, “kind Providence so order'd it, that after I had been in this Place so long as the Time mention'd above the Captain of a Merchantman, belonging to Boston, having sprung a Leak was obliged to put into the Havanna to refit” (9). “Providence” here works both through the intercession of sympathetic parties and via the needs and dictates of the maritime market. He continues, “While he was at Dinner at Mrs. Betty Howard's, she told the Captain of my deplorable Condition, and said she would be glad, if he could by some means or other relieve me…accordingly, after Dinner, [the captain] came to the Prison…and after the Captain had Interrogated me, told me, he would intercede with the Governor for my Relief out of that miserable Place, which he did, and the next Day the Governor sent an Order to release me; I lived with the Governor about a Year after I was delivered from the Dungeon” (10). Hammon is a valuable laborer, so he is set free. At the same time, he is a valuable commodity, so he is kept in bondage. He remains in this liminal state, somewhere between freedom and unfreedom, because of both the opportunities and limits of the maritime trade. Nevertheless, Hammon remains committed to pursuing the liberty offered by the maritime community. He notes, “I endeavour'd three Times to make my Escape, the last of which proved effectual; the first Time I got on board of Captain Marsh, an English Twenty Gun Ship, with a Number of others, and lay on board conceal'd that Night; and the next Day the Ship being under sail, I thought myself safe, and so made my Appearance upon Deck, but as soon as we were
discovered the Captain ordered the Boat out, and sent us all on Shore” (10). Constantly challenging his captive status aboard these ships, Hammon is constantly presented with the possibility of freedom through mobility. “Providence,” therefore, is the guiding hand, the force that uses market mobility to position Hammon in such a place so that he may continue to pursue freedom within the international Atlantic marketplace.

Hammon’s status as a runaway slave keeps him constantly in the process of escape and capture. Yet, in this state of flux, he maintains a kind of agency. Hammon recalls, “After being on Shore another Twelvemonth, I endeavour’d to make my Escape the second Time, by trying to get on board of a Sloop bound to Jamaica, and as I was going from the City to the Sloop, was unhappily taken by the Guard, and ordered back to the Castle, and there confined” (10). Discussing runaways, David Waldstreicher writes, “The striking mobility of runaway slaves reflects their experience of often having served several masters, for slaves and servants alike were regularly sold and rented. In a booming economy, strikingly modern mixes of bondage and wage labor emerged. Slaves sought to rent themselves out on behalf of their masters, often gaining some real autonomy in the process” (Waldstreicher 21). Waldstreicher makes clear that Hammon’s experience is emblematic, but hardly unique. “Having served several masters,” Hammon is very much used to a life of displacement and forced mobility. What makes his narrative unique, however, is the extent to which it demonstrates an unfree person’s ability to take the reins of that mobility, to use it as an occasion to curate a personal and social identity.

In fact, Hammon occupies what Rebecca Ginsburg terms the “black landscape,” a space of fugitive black community that thrived among escapees from slavery. Ginsburg describes the “black landscape as the system of paths, places, and rhythms that a community of enslaved people created as an alternative, often as a refuge to the landscape systems of planters and other
whites” (54). This definition might usefully help to describe the mobile experience of many of the authors in this body of texts, who sought or were forced to seek community along the “paths” of Atlantic commerce, within the “places” often marginalized by Atlantic societies, and in line with the “rhythms” of black community that emerged from the blend of syncretic providential Christianity and Atlantic commerce. However, the definition is particularly apt for Marrant, who, among all of the authors in this body, holds to his fugitive status as a form of identification and community creation. Moreover, the paths he followed were carved by other fugitive figures and only intersected with the world of white captivating power tangentially and, often, accidentally.

Again, this issue of adjacency might relate to all of the authors in this collection.

Ginsburg writes that the black landscape was “a static network composed of discrete places” (56). We might think of the refuges of the free but limited Connecticut of Smith’s account or of colonial resettlement in Nova Scotia or Sierra Leone as official “discrete places,” while Marrant’s encounters with aboriginal tribes and other slave societies occur in unofficial “discrete places.” In any case, community springs up adjacent to the captivating forces of white slaveholding Atlantic societies. Like the relentlessly mobile Equiano, Hammon maintains agency through mobility and gains the knowledge necessary to navigate a system that is both mobile and dependent upon his captivity.

It is not until he finds the sort of work that unites maritime trade and Christian vocation that Hammon truly finds the means of self-liberation. He writes, “in a short Time I was set at Liberty, and order'd with a Number of others to carry the Bishop from the Castle, thro' the Country, to confirm the old People, baptize Children, &c. for which he receives large Sums of Money” (10). This work explicitly draws together the goals of maritime economy with those of the church. As both Christianity and commodities circulate among the mobile market of souls
and goods, Hammon successfully attempts to join in the mercantile and spiritual trade, in order to pursue his own liberation. Only through this fusion of divine and commercial goals can he transform his captive experiences into the trials necessary to achieve his ultimate reward of liberty. For Hammon, election therefore does not mean possession by nation or even by a covenanted community, but inclusion among a population that remains mobile, even as individuals pass through stages of relative captivity. This is an alternative view of society and election that sees providential community in the population of the constantly displaced, the liminally free, and the laboring, suffering bodies of Atlantic trade.

The nature of mobile Atlantic texts allows Hammon to present a counter-public maritime culture that is both adjacent to Atlantic societies, and central to the health and production of those societies. Atanasoski further explores the meaning of this kind of adjacency when she pivots from the Christian separation of secular and sacred time to argue for the “chronopolitics” of transition, settlement, upheaval, and redefinition (39). Again, this indicates the prevalence and power of the providential capitalist mindset, even as it suggests what was so unique about it. The providential capitalist texts written by the Atlantic’s mobile citizenry united secular and sacred to create a temporal economy, one that is always in transition, always in a state of becoming, always in a state of economic and significatory conversion. The “chronopolitics” that Atanasoski describes overlaps with the unique geopolitics of Atlantic life. Writers like Hammon, and, later, Equiano, Cugoano, and Smith, were forced to make displacement their residence, finding in spacial and temporal adjacency an ironic home. That flux would go on to define the modern and postmodern periods to which Atlantic commerce gave birth.

This too challenges the binary depiction of periphery and core that Hall describes. These counter-publics yoke Jamaica to England, and, furthermore, yoke both to Africa and the
Americas more broadly. Writers like Hammon use Christian fellowship and economic mobility to create alternative communities both within and against the national polities that, on their face, reject or marginalize them. In so doing, they challenge the logic of marginalization altogether. “England” could not exist without “Jamaica” or without the mobile, displaced communities of laborers that link the two together through trade. The philosophical and material realities of conversion and flux are not aberrances against which to compare the relative stability of home, but signs that that stability was a flimsy ideological construct enabled by a system of mobile labor and social displacement. If Smith’s account is a record of failure to find and join a community of faith or nationality, Hammon’s is one of conditional success. He does find community and does cultivate a relatively liberated identity. However, he only does so by remaining peripheral, mobile, and relegated to life as a runaway on the fringes of a society that works hard to commodify or dominate him, or even to deny his very existence.

**Ukawsaw Gronniosaw and Slavery as Divine Instrument**

Ukawsaw Gronniosaw’s 1772 *A Narrative of the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw* similarly presents a non-national community held together by divinity and economy, but emphasizes the way that providence maneuvers those it has named among the elect to “feel the impulse of God” by any available means, including slavery. In this way, Gronniosaw implicates the ideology of transcendent providential capitalism, upon which writers like Equiano and Hammon relied, in the very business against which they argue. If we follow Gronniosaw’s logic, the ascension of these writers to elect status was premised upon the experience of slavery. If Equiano and Hammon stop short of asserting slavery as a part of a divine plan, Gronniosaw does not.
As he develops the logic necessary to reconcile providential election and the diverse religious backgrounds of the mobile Atlantic, Gronniosaw, like Hammon, relies upon experiences of captivity to instantiate freedom. But he goes even further, suggesting that a figure like Equiano could arrive at his place of personal and social transcendence not in spite of slavery but because of it. Stuart Schwartz emphasizes the way theologians and writers struggled to reconcile Catholic orthodoxy on the damnation of pagans, with the impulse to convert, by questioning how and why God could condemn huge swaths of people who had never even had a chance to hear of Christ’s coming. Gronniosaw’s advocate, W. Shirley, answers this challenge, saying “in the course of wisely and most wonderfully appointed Providences, he brings them to the means of spiritual information, gradually opens to their view the light of his truth, and gives them full possession and enjoyment of the inestimable blessings of his gospel...he was sold for a slave, and so brought into a Christian Land” (2). Gronniosaw also expands the scope of potential election, so that it can include even non-Christians. He writes, “Though born under every outward Disadvantage, and in Regions of the grossest Darkness and Ignorance, he most amazingly acts upon and influences their Minds, and in the Course of wisely and most wonderfully appointed Providences, he brings them to the Means of spiritual Information, gradually opens to their View the Light of his Truth, and gives them full Possession and Enjoyment of the inestimable Blessings of his Gospel” (3). In this formulation, captivity in the Atlantic flesh market is a potentially necessary trial and, certainly, a helpful means by which God uses the mechanisms of the Atlantic market to coordinate individuals to conform to divine intention. Slavery becomes the means by which individuals achieve personal liberty, and the mobile Atlantic slave market becomes the arena in which God collects and organizes his elect population.
Indeed, Gronniosaw argues that signs of his election were always available to him, but that only slavery could reveal the full scope of their meaning. He insists that, from childhood, he felt “strongly impressed...that there was some GREAT MAN of power which resided above the sun, moon and stars, the objects of our worship” (3). Ridiculed by his disbelieving family, he also feels anxiety at his family keeping the Sabbath improperly and failing to adequately comprehend divine and scriptural signs and challenges (4-5). As a result, he very willingly goes with a Dutch trader who offers to bring him to the Gold Coast. The narrative presents this as the first in a series of events that will ultimately bring Gronniosaw to Christ.

Gronniosaw’s self-presentation is strategic, especially in this passage. In a careful examination of Gronniosaw’s likely Muslim heritage, Jennifer Harris notes that “in order for Gronniosaw to construct himself as a knowledgeable innocent, he must conceal from the audience the tenets of Islam which elevate Allah as the ‘one god’…Instead playing on European assumptions about African paganism and ignorance of a ‘one true God,’” Gronniosaw conveys the image of a young man dissatisfied with his indigenous religious practices and in doing so sets himself above other Africans in his awareness of something ‘more’” (Harris 46). In part, Gronniosaw is simply playing to his audience, currying favor among Christian readers and potential patrons. However, it is important to note that he is also using generic convention to establish himself as a providential capitalist figure, an individual capable of ascension because he is capable of navigating the Atlantic’s interrelation of capitalism and Christianity.

Among those events runs a recurrent conflation of labor, captivity, and Christian self-sacrifice. Gronniosaw’s paternalistic view of both Christianity and slavery becomes strikingly clear when, threatened with being thrown overboard, Gronniosaw clings to the trader saying “Father, save me” (9). He is then sold to a preacher, Mr. Freelandhouse, who essentially makes
prayer into his labor, thus explicitly conflating slavery with Christian vocation (11). Helena Woodard observes that “Gronniosaw is unable to reconcile the contradiction between his belief in predestination or divine providence and his belief in personal responsibility. Similarly, he is unable to recognize the contradiction between his own denial of worldly treasures, while his [ostensibly Christian] Enslavers…reap great wealth from him and others” (38). But Gronniosaw comes close to reconciling these competing ideas by focusing on an economy of value that intertwines with the theology of grace. Stefan M. Wheelock even points out that Gronniosaw “circles back to the commercialist dimensions of this moment through the way he imagines himself as a precious resource among others to be extracted from the African continent” (71). Even if he is cheated, he accrues value in the eyes of God, and likewise accrues monetary value. However, he does not yet fully understand to what degree, noting at one point, “I was then worth about thirty pounds, but I never regarded money in the least” (20). Throughout the narrative, Gronniosaw remains filled with self-loathing and doubt that he could be saved until he receives a vision of light shining upon him. Immediately following this, he is offered liberation by his dying master (16). Readers might see the conflation here as a moment wherein spiritual liberation leads to economic liberation from slavery and the two are imbricated as the same endpoint, the same reward of acceptance among the spiritually and legally elect, after the necessary trial of slavery and captivity.

Once again, this narrative calls to mind Baucom’s view of the production of the individual within a capitalist marketplace, because Gronniosaw’s involvement in and participation with the logic and discourse of his economic world have allowed him to carve out a narrative space for himself as an individual worthy of attention and remark. We read him because he is special. He is special because the market and providence have selected him and
given signs of his election. Baucom describes the way that actuarial logic and writing produces the “invention of the ‘average’ and the typical.” This, in turn, “most clearly [reveals] a preromantic historicism’s intimate entanglements with the operations of finance capital” (44). Although he does present his story as a model for how to successfully navigate the divinely ordered marketplace, Gronniosaw does not develop or express his individuality only in economic terms. Rather, he uses economic language to assert his spiritual significance, and uses providential language to assert his economic free-agency. Finance and spirituality are bound together and, in order to understand Gronniosaw’s view of his own individual identity, readers must recognize the full scope of his providential capitalist identification.

Ironically, the value of that Christian fellowship was relatively circumscribed. Wheelock notes that “Gronniosaw’s memoir, written down by an anonymous woman from Leominster and published under the patronage of the famed Countess of Huntingdon, was reprinted at least ten times in Britain and America before Equiano’s autobiography appeared on the scene. But Gronniosaw died in obscurity” (Wheelock 60). It would be unfair to say that Gronniosaw failed to instantiate community either through text or through antislavery political action. At the same time, his death should remind readers that the rigid limits to power, autonomy, and self-expression in the Atlantic placed barriers on the utility and material power of any efforts to create such a community in the Atlantic for Christians, for sailing laborers, and for authors, alike.

Nonetheless, even in moments of frustration and failure, Gronniosaw sees economic and spiritual interactions as closely linked. For example, at one point, he entrusts all of his savings to a woman who proclaims herself a “Christian woman.” She takes the money and denies it to him when he requests it back, leaving him to lament “I had no friend but GOD” (20). Woodard points out here that “Gronnoisaw could only blame himself personally if he could not criticize a
society that regarded him as one who was well suited to a fate of enslavement and poverty. Numerous inconsistencies in religious, as well as legal practice—had he been more knowledgeable of them—might have explained at least some of his personal dissatisfaction was not so personal after all but amounted to the protection of profits from slavery (36). However, his frustrations reveal his understanding of the economic, political, and practical hierarchies that are aligned against him.

For example, both his attempts at fellowship based on Christian lending and his disappointing experience of betrayal suggest the important role that debt played in the development and articulation of morality for writers like Gronniosaw. Similarly, Saidiya Hartman notes that, in the post-bellum period, “emancipation instituted indebtedness,” a sense of owing freedom to the emancipating state (Hartman 131). Moments like this one demonstrate that this formulation of debt extends even earlier, to at least the revolutionary period. In an unstable and potentially untrustworthy world, the free owe their freedom to the unfree, and the freed owe their freedom to those that have facilitated their emancipation. In texts like Gronniosaw’s, obligation and debt become literalized to the point that the author finds himself struggling against a state of penury. He has purchased his freedom and incurred a debt so great that he may not survive it.

In order to pay those debts, Gronniosaw goes to sea, “Privateering” as a cook and, finding, in the experience of mobile Atlantic maritime labor, a route toward divine election (17). Gronniosaw finds both class affiliation and Christian fellowship in his experience among the other Atlantic sailors. Even given the fact that, as Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker note, sailors were relatively “irreligious, “Gronniosaw sees providence at work in his maritime labor and among the laboring community (Rediker and Linebaugh 171).xvi For example, one
particularly disrespectful sailor goes so far as to snatch Gronniosaw’s book out of his hand and throw it overboard. Gronniosaw notes that this man is the first to die on the voyage, suggesting a providential justice that protects the faithful at sea (18).

The co-instantiation of class and faith continues, even when Gronniosaw leaves the maritime life. Eventually, for example, he is baptized and brought into a Christian community. At this point, the text suggests that baptism is a kind of class advancement because, once he is brought into the faith, his fellow Christians advise him against marrying a poor white woman, as if association with poverty will be a form of backsliding (24). Indeed, he does slip into poverty and, at his lowest, one of his children dies and is denied Christian burial because he is unaffiliated. The text here implicitly suggests that his slide into poverty denies him entry into Christian fellowship (29). Of course, the text ends on a hopeful note that brings all of these elements together, explicitly positioning the text as the thing that will bring about a miracle of Christian community and charity to help Gronnoisaw care for his impoverished family. He writes “As Pilgrims, and very poor Pilgrims, we are travelling through many difficulties towards our HEAVENLY HOME, and waiting patiently for his gracious call, when the LORD shall deliver us out of the evils of this present world and bring us to the EVERLASTING GLORIES of the world to come.—To HIM be PRAISE for EVER and EVER, AMEN” (39). Even this optimistic conclusion to such an ambivalent narrative maintains Gronniosaw’s overall sense of ongoing mobility and constant trial on the way toward divine reward. To the very end, market mobility has determined the events of Gronniosaw’s life and encouraged his affiliation with a non-nationalist, mobile community of both laborers and laboring Christians. Even as he looks forward in these concluding passages, he looks forward to a mobile economy to bring his published entreaty to a reading Christian public who will, hopefully, help him to find both
economic and spiritual security. Like Equiano and Hammon, Gronniosaw seeks personal, spiritual, and social liberation from within a hostile capitalist context. However, Gronniosaw goes further than both Equiano and Hammon, embracing the marginalization and even violence of a mobile Atlantic life as necessary trials through which he passes on his way toward acceptance into the community of saints in the Atlantic economy.

**Providential Interpretation: John Jea, and Ottobah Cugoano Reading the Market’s Signs**

Gronniosaw’s belief in the power of the market to position individuals to receive grace is not unique, but his belief in the ordering function of even the worst abuses of the Atlantic is also hardly universal. Even so, his belief in the liberating potential of labor, Christian vocation and, particularly, of writing and self-expression, crosses this argumentative boundary. For example, John Jea’s 1811 narrative, *Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea* maintains the signposts of Atlantic life as a series of captive experiences but refutes Gronniosaw’s notion of divine election through slavery. Jea, who announces himself “The African Preacher” produces a multivalent text, a personal history that frames a moral sermon in such a way as to use the events of his own life as allegorical stories of sin and redemption for his audience. The text notes the perversions of Christianity and Christian morality so rampant among Europeans, who focus on the punitive aspects of the gospel without acknowledging the inclusivity of Christ’s message, and who essentially stage dramas of power that, Jea argues, constitute forced idolatry (5). Moreover, Jea evinces belief in election on new terms, suggesting that the blessed can squander their blessing and vice versa, a suggestion meant to strip election of its racist possibilities. Quite in contrast to Gronniosaw, Jea notes that the relations of mastery and captivity can pervert God’s essential plan for election. He writes that “This was the case with the man of God that disobeyed God by eating and drinking in the place where God had forbidden him. This was also the case
with the Jews, who were the chosen and elect people of God; for he hath declared because of their unbelief, they should not enter into his rest, although it was appointed for them from the foundation of the world; as the Scriptures saith, ‘Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us, of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it’’ (87). Throughout the text, market dictates determine the course of an individual life and may, in fact, express the will of God. Yet the way that individuals behave within that system, whether they use it for abusive gain or to develop inclusive and Christian community, determines the state of their providential election.

In response to a remarkably violent, disrupted life, Jea fully embraces the mobile world of the Atlantic in which he will see more and more signs of potential providential will and in which he will gain power through his ability to interpret those signs. At sea, for example, he witnesses repeated examples of God’s favor or disfavor as men who mock his religiosity or who are simply cruel are killed (52). Moreover, life at sea offers Jea not only an escape from his failed attempts to establish a home and family, but also the means by which to thrive, and to achieve prosperity through the cultivation of special knowledge. Jea passes through numerous episodes of imprisonment and impressment, weaves his way through multiple national polities, and finds vocation on the merchant trading vessels that traverse the Atlantic. All the while, he asserts a sense of community that develops out of labor affiliation and out of networks of providential Christian belief. Community is predicated upon proper comprehension of providential will and successful navigation of the market. That community also develops out of specialized knowledge systems, particularly those centered on reading and scriptural communication.
This narrative element becomes particularly important in Jea’s inversion of the “talking book” trope. Jea insists upon his miraculously developed ability to read the Bible as a sign of providential power bestowed, literally, by an angel (35). Implicitly, Jea uses reading to mark himself as a particular and elect recipient of divine favor. But Jea goes one step further when he claims that, at the time of writing the text, he can still only read scripture and no other texts (38). In so doing, Jea uses his ostensibly miraculous communicative abilities as the material from which he hopes to create stability in an unstable and violent life. While engaged in the labor of the maritime market, God has selected Jea and empowered him as a preacher and as an oral communicator. Jea will then go on to use these gifts to establish a presence in the publishing market. Jea’s text reflects this, interspersing his autobiography with long digressive sermons. In this way, Jea converts his own past into the scriptural material around which he will develop Christian community, and into the textual material by which he will, presumably, profit. This also calls to mind Jennifer Harris’ point that moments like this one are possibly strategic. She argues that Gronniosaw, coming from a Muslim nation, would likely have known how to read, despite his narrative presentation of his own early illiteracy (48). Similarly, whether Jea can or cannot read may be part of his larger argument but, as literal truth, is a matter that is essentially beside the point. He presents his connection to scripture and, therefore, to literacy as providential as well as material. For example, Vincent Carretta points out that “For most of the Black writers, Protestant Christianity with its emphasis on direct knowledge of the Bible was the primary motive for literacy” (Carretta 9). What Jea’s narrative demonstrates, then, is the way that Christian literacy could become an important tool by which to assert agency, community, self-command, and autonomous voice, in a disruptive Atlantic world. In fact, Jea shares this focus upon a text-oriented, mobile Christian community with Venture Smith who similarly
demonstrated an overall emphasis on education as an important tool to elevate an individual and to instantiate community, so that he might not be “wholly destitute of every noble and generous feeling” (Smith 5). Both of these texts use literacy as a sign of election, a tool of communication and, implicitly, a means to achieve prosperity. xvii

Literacy helps these writers to assert personal identities, as well as to establish community affiliations. Brycchan Carey notes that both Briton Hammon and Ukawsaw Gronniosaw relied upon amanuenses, so there is a greater distance between author, reader, and reading community than in a self-authored text like Equiano’s (Carey 61). Nevertheless, the publishing market allowed these texts, whether they were directly narrated, or presented through the potentially distorting pen of an amanuensis, to function as valuable tools with which to seize a greater share of both personal agency and community involvement. Texts like Equiano’s were published, in some respects, to demonstrate the expressive abilities of black authors. Jea’s interpolated text was presented as an argument on multiple fronts. Even Hammon’s and Gronniosaw’s narratives served a necessary purpose for abolitionist communities, helping to develop and sustain sentimental feeling for their subjects. In effect, they sacrificed demonstrations of authorial ability in order to develop an interracial and trans-national community of feeling. Even so, they avoid the usual pitfalls of sentimental texts. As Carey writes, “sentimental heroes have to be established more quickly and with greater economy of language. For this reason, tears, sighs, and other indicators of sensibility appear more frequently” (73). The prose in these texts elicit feeling not by tugging upon the audience’s heartstrings, but by insisting that the events they depict are true.

Jea insists that readers, black or white, confront the reality of historical circumstance in two ways: economic and typological. Baucom strongly emphasizes the ledger book and
insurance accounting as narrative modes, perhaps the most important modes of this period. Here, Jea communicates through these seemingly anti-sentimentalist tones. However, he goes one step further, projecting accounting narration through a typological frame in order to show how economic processes could be divinely ordered as they descend upon the bodies and souls of individuals in the market. Wimbush describes the way that Equiano presents “a text in which the figure of Equiano weaves himself into the social-cultural *textures* of Britain, strategically using the nation-defining *texts* as a wedge” (Wimbush 87). That is: Equiano uses both biblical and nationalistic typologies to narrate his own upward trajectory. The same might be said of Jea, who writes in the increasingly dominant modes of narration in the Atlantic—namely: the economic and the scriptural—to both situate himself within the Christian-capitalist Atlantic, and to force a wedge by which he can gain entry into the textual cultures of Atlantic society. Baucom, insisting that accounting logic produces the dominant generic modes of market capitalist history, writes that “while particular genres arise as the means of resolving, or at least coding, the concrete experiences and ideologies of their particular historical moments, as genres survive the moment of their fashioning, they survive by carrying within themselves, as a sort of ghostly aftereffect, the signature ideologies of their formative moments” (Baucom 19). With regard to Jea, this strikes the right chord, but it does not go far enough. By limiting his perspective to the economic logic and generic discourse of the day, Baucom does not account for the vitally important generic markers of Christian typology that also linger as “ghostly aftereffects” in narratives like Jea’s.

Jea writes a multivocal text, one that is semi-novelistic in its personal recollections, infused with accounting logic in its focus on economic exchange, and explicitly typological in its many references to scripture and scriptural models. By blending these generic modes together, Jea composes an essential representative document for his age and allows later readers to see the
way Atlantic society was produced by the mixture of market, church, and a burgeoning sense of the individual’s place within the econo-spiritual cosmology of the period.

The choice of narrative voice is representative of authors like Jea’s desires to use their own expressive abilities both to communicate personal and social histories and to instantiate potential social networks going forward. Phillip E. Wegner writes that “if ideology creates the synchrony or place of a given social reality, then utopia marks its potential for diachrony or historical becoming” (18). Confronted with the imaginary utopia of nations that, in law and ideology, reject them, writers like Jea use language to assert a separate form of inclusion. Wegner insists that “Utopia becomes ‘useful’ as a literary form precisely to the degree that it enables its audiences to think through…various scales of personal, cultural, and epochal transition” (31). The communities that these writers embrace operate through a trans-national culture that is held together only by the maritime marketplace, and which thrives along routes of trade and exchange. Moreover, they are figured as specifically Christian, so writing in a mode that is simultaneously financial and typological allows writers like Jea to insert themselves into a semi-utopian cosmology that is highly ordered and expansively inclusive.

Jea actively rejects national identification as he cultivates and embraces a universal Christian community that exists in the Atlantic and which operates providentially, to position and reward the elect. Throughout his life, he continues to preach and occasionally finds himself called upon to fight as an impressed soldier, only to refuse due to his commitment to nonviolence and his resistance to nationalism. He writes, “I was not an American, but that I was a poor black African, a preacher of the gospel” (90). Jea more forcefully asserts his non-national status when he insists that he comes from “Old Callabar.” Nevertheless, his identity remains syncretic. He is an “African” but also a preacher of a gospel written in a language he cannot read unless
illuminated by divine light. Furthermore, he only uses his anglicized name and uses the same convention for his parents, despite the fact that their experiences with European cultures were limited and violent. His text argues that his knowledge of mobility, whether impressed or embraced, his belief in interventionist providential spirituality, and his experiences with captivity and violence have helped him to develop a community consciousness that is not national, but mobile, affiliated with all of the unfree Africans among whom he labors on ships and in ports, despite their denominational differences.

Moreover, Jea’s self-identification reflects the synchrony of Atlantic culture, rather than its binarism. His presentation of himself as an “African” suggests that the term acts as it did for Smith, as a kind of placeholder for the diverse subset of cultural interactions that have produced his mobile Atlantic community and identity. In this way, Jea represents Lisa Lowe’s view of “intimacy” much more than he fits in with the “Jamaica” versus “Family” distinction that Hall defines. “African” as a term for identity blur and blends distinctive cultural differences as it produces a new broader identity that allows Africa, the Americas, and even England to reside within one body. On the other hand, this identity is also more easily marginalized from white, Anglophonic “home” states like England or, increasingly, North America. So Jea expresses the ambivalent nature of self-identification in the Atlantic. The alternative communities that writers like Jea describe suggest both resistant and inviting counter-publics, and the nationalist, racial, and ideological ostracism that necessitated their creation. His “African” identification expresses both the interrelation of diverse cultural currents and the concerted efforts to evade, obscure, or sideline the existence of those same currents of identity and community. Perhaps most notable in a text like Jea’s is its sense that life in the mobile maritime Atlantic pivots around experiences of
captivity and violence that, nevertheless, help individuals to found and to maintain alternative communities that espouse Christian beliefs and that thrive on Atlantic trade.

Jea strives for a delicate balance, embracing providence, along with a syncretic Atlantic identity, but denying the providential nature of slavery. He was not the first maritime Atlantic writer to attempt to thread this argumentative needle. For example, Ottobah Cugoano’s 1787 *Narrative of the Enslavement*...also explicitly rejects the notion that slavery, an innately sinful and lawless practice, could in any way be redeemed, even as it acts as a vehicle by which individuals find Christianity. He calls slavery in every way “not natural and innocent” despite the fact that it, ultimately, brings him to Christian acceptance (51). He explains that “Sovereign goodness may eventually visit some men even in a state of slavery, but their slavery is not the cause of that event and benignity” (23). Frequently he refers to slavers as “pirates” or “European Pirates” (62). Nevertheless, his experiences with the violence and displacement of Atlantic trade help him to find and embrace Christian community when he fully assumes his role within the Atlantic market.

Throughout his literary and political career, Cugoano remained engaged with the argumentative work of promoting antislavery ideals and of dismantling the framework of providential capitalism that posited slavery as a social, economic, and spiritual ideal. For example, in *Thoughts and Sentiments*, what Wheelock calls Cugoano’s true “major text,” Cugoano actually addresses the Zong massacre in his critique of Atlantic slavery as blatant proof of just how debased a spiritual condition slavery has brought to western civilization (Wheelock 26). Moreover, in that text, Cugoano “wanted to point out the extent to which the Atlantic plantation complex was perverting the historical evolution of politics and religion in what was ostensibly an ‘advanced Christian era’ in the Atlantic” (Wheelock 27). Cugoano is explicitly
aware that Atlantic exchange has yoked Christianity to capital. As a result, he is also pointedly aware that Christianity has become tied to the primary business of the Atlantic—namely: slavery. With this in mind, Cugoano joined writers like Granville Sharp who believed that “Britain’s imperial expansion of chattel slavery augured apocalypse” (28). Wheelock explains that Cugoano’s argument rests upon a careful refutation of logical and scriptural defenses of slavery as well as upon a broader and much more destabilizing notion of Atlantic cultural rot. Wheelock explains that Cugoano was engaged with “undercutting an anchoring premise in modern historical self-understanding: that the march of history forward into modernity evinced progress” (47). Cugoano, engaged with the same political movements as his contemporary Equiano, is frank in his assessment of the political, moral, and theological position of nations engaged in Atlantic maritime exchange. Their view of progress is not only wrong, but entirely reversed. An ostensibly Christian society, Atlantic Britain had become debased, savage, bloodthirsty, and immoral in its pursuit of profits.

All of this makes it all the more intriguing that, like Equiano, Cugoano would call, in both *Narrative of the Enslavement*… and *Thoughts and Sentiments*, for a system of paternal, colonial investment and uplift. Wheelock likewise recognizes the complexity of Cugoano’s position. He writes “Cugoano has already shown how religious instruction can be turned into the cultural handmaiden of imperial hegemony. Ironically, his proposal appears to extend the logic of cultural and economic paternalism” (57). However, readers can understand Cugoano’s reconciliation of these two seemingly irreconcilable positions by recalling that he frames *Narrative of the Enslavement*… around his own autobiographical experience. Like Equiano, he uses his own relative success as proof of the potentially uplifting powers of providence, capital, and providential capitalism, but only if used correctly.
Cugoano retains the sense that Atlantic life resembles captivity and unfreedom, and rejects the notion that this experience is a necessary trial that might ultimately reward him, but he also plainly uses these experiences as the material with which to create a community, and with which to develop a political identity in debates over slavery. Cugoano relied on the same networks of antislavery publication, as did Equiano, to disseminate his texts. He shares with Equiano a desire to craft community out of an experience of personal displacement and mobility but diverges greatly from Equiano in tone and tenor regarding his antislavery critiques. Where Equiano used his autobiography as an example of the “ethical education and development” that Lowe describes, Cugoano opts for a direct antislavery appeal. Vincent Carretta calls Cugoano’s narrative “the most overt African-British challenge to the slave trade and slavery ever published” (Carretta 11). In so doing, Carretta interestingly asserts an “African-British” identity that Cugoano does not articulate for himself in his narrative. Nonetheless, from his position as a liminal figure within the “African-British” Atlantic, Cugoano develops a vocal presence in antislavery circles.

To a much greater extent than writers like Gronniosaw, or even Hammon, Cugoano offers the reader a visceral experience of being torn from peaceful Africa, rather than simply presenting the event in brief. As he does so, he confronts the complex expressive and interpretive challenge of representing the experience of commodification, arguing against it, and striving not to succumb to its logic. He describes, for example, having “heard the groans and cries...the rattling of chains” (124). The narrative also includes long digressive accounts of Atlantic history, including a fairly clear and thorough discussion of South America and its colonization as well as a history of the Royal African Company (79; 94). In this way, Cugoano links the historical to the personal, insistently reminding readers that Atlantic trade, politics, and history rely upon the
abuse and captivity of bodies like his own. In response, Cugoano does not shy away from wishing divine, even violent retribution on enslavers who “are those cooks and men that would be roasted and saddled, it certainly would be no unpleasant sight to see them well roasted, saddled and bridled too” (16). Even as he does so, however, Cugoano tacitly admits the way that the logic of the market undergirds all moral questions and debates in the Atlantic. It is true that Cugoano pushes hard on the logic that slavery constitutes man-stealing and argues that it is “opposite to every precept and injunction of the Divine Law” (Cugoano 4). Yet, although he argues against seeing men as property, his argument against man-stealing rests upon seeing men as things over which to debate questions of possession and ownership (114). His argument that “as reason must tell every man, that he himself is of more value than his property” is, therefore, ambivalent. A man is more valuable than property but, like property, can be valued (54). A man is a person, but also a thing to be owned. A free man, then, is a thing that can own itself. Yet what is perhaps most interesting about Cugoano is how he finds his way out of this logical bind: through the production and dissemination of text.

The communities that writers like Hammon, Jea, Cugoano, and Equiano formed around the written word were real, mutually beneficial, and politically active. Like Jea, Cugoano addresses the personal experience of these kinds of economic communities by focusing on the cohesive power of literacy. Wimbush, for example, notes that “Cugoano and Equiano were known to have collaborated on letter writing and other projects, challenging slavery, the slave trade, and the general humiliation of Africans; working with resettlement projects; and encouraging commerce with Africans. It is speculated that Equiano assisted Cugoano with the writing of his manifesto” (Wimbush 203). This suggests a close-knit and collaborative community centered on textual self-expression, which allowed black writers to turn their
experiences with violence, maritime mobility, commodification, and Christian conversion into the productive means by which to assert their own power in Atlantic culture and in the Atlantic market. In this way, divinity operates in both the maritime laboring market and in the publishing market to reward the elect, even as it communicates to its special favorites through sacred texts.

**John Marrant, the Captive Prophet**

Mobile Atlantic maritime narratives like Jea’s and Cugoano’s recognize the violence, displacement, and mobility of Atlantic life, as well as the opportunity to turn traumatic experiences into providential Christian vocational messages. In so doing, they acknowledge the complex and ambivalent experience of Atlantic culture that, for better or worse, undergirds so much mobile Atlantic writing. These narratives run the gamut from the primarily quotidian account of the disappointing realities of mobile Atlantic life produced by Venture Smith, to the ostensibly freeing experiences of life at the frontiers of empire in Briton Hammon’s narrative. They include the frank assertion of the spiritually and economically liberating potential of life within a slave economy in Ukawsaw Gronniosaw’s autobiography, and the typology of self in John Jea’s multivalent text, as well as Ottobah Cugoano’s assertive autobiographical case against slavery. If these narratives present a fractious and contested view of life in mobile Atlantic society, they still share certain important ideological, social, and philosophical fixations. Namely: they all present individuals grappling with their desires for community within an Atlantic society that seeks to marginalize them. Moreover, whether they take the fact for granted or examine it closely, they all present Atlantic society as a circulatory system of exchanged ideas and goods, held together by the tightly entwined directives of providential Christianity and market capitalism. In so doing, these authors enshrine certain markers as important tropes for the maritime slavery or emancipated black Atlantic narrative. Conversion, a process with both
economic and spiritual dimensions, remains productive and necessary in the Atlantic market society. Expressive communicative power and literacy are important tools for the cultivation and presentation of individual identity. Christianity and exchange offer important opportunities to create communities, even within an increasingly nationalistic Atlantic space that would otherwise minimize or marginalize emancipated or unfree mobile laboring classes.

All of these trends occur as an extreme form of self-liberation through self-expression in John Marrant’s *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, A Black* published in 1785. Marrant offers a number of instances of Christian faith operating, at times mysteriously, to create community, to forge a public founded on shared religious faith and mercantile enterprise. At the same time, his marginal status focuses the reader’s attention upon the generative potential of frontier spaces, and upon the power of community instantiation that occurs at the fugitive periphery to return to society’s core. Moreover, Marrant’s expressive abilities, evidently supernatural in nature, help him to develop an individual identity in text, and to extend the reach of providential Christianity wedded to labor, commodity identification, and market exchange.

Marrant’s narrative blends many of the generic trends addressed in other texts, and amplifies them, presenting a life defined by captivity, transactional exchange, and marginalization as a supernatural experience of transcendence through captivity. A freeborn New Yorker who moves to Georgia with his family, Marrant soon discovers his talent for playing the French horn and a penchant for trouble. His sister first informs him that the former might be his means of making a living and escaping the effects of the later. She tells him, “You have now no need of a trade.” In fact, Marrant’s journey will see him discovering both piety and vocation, and discovering the constitutive nature of both as a route to salvation. One day, intending to disrupt a
worship service with his horn, Marrant is suddenly overcome with God’s power. He recalls, “I was struck to the ground and lay both speechless and senseless near a half an hour.” Revived by the preacher who remarks “JESUS CHRIST has got thee at last,” he falls sick and seems threatened by the preacher’s repeated prayers, until the prayers revive him and open his eyes to Christian vocation. Marrant then becomes an aggressively devout proselytizer. Finding his own family insufficiently pious, he sets out. In the wilderness, he seems to wish for death as a release from the body. He writes, “I prayed to the Lord upon the ground that he would command the wild beasts to devour me.” Instead, God fills him with powers, described, at times, as a preternatural connection with nature. He writes, for example “I got across the tree without my feet or hands touching the ground…I bit [grass] off like a horse, and prayed the Lord to bless it to me” (16). All of these transformations are abrupt, violent, and total. He transforms from playful mischief-maker to devout evangelical to semi-transcendental Christian with equal abruptness. He becomes nearly bestial in his renewed connection to the wilderness, guided and protected by God. His conversions are complete transformations of identity, as he sheds his youthfulness, his secularism, even, apparently, his humanity, on his way toward accepting divinity. These conversions are significant for, as in Equiano or Hammon, they mark a state of flux as powerfully open to the equivalent logic of divine exchange. All of these figures survive and even thrive because they remain in states of mobile conversion. This suggests the way these authors have looked to their own experiences with disruptive mobility as a source of power and freedom, when linked to both capitalism and a sense of Christian election.

There are multiple interlocking symbols at work within this strange, meandering text but, for the moment, let us consider the horn to which Marrant attaches so much importance. It is a disruptive thing, but also the thing that invites God’s grace to enter with stunning force into
Marrant’s life. Perhaps most intriguingly, it is a thing. Elizabeth Maddock Dillon thoroughly examines both Marrant’s narrative and the importance of the horn within it, first noting that “The French horn is an object that we are unlikely to readily place in the hands of the eighteenth-century black youths of our historical imagination. But precisely the thingly, material quality of the French horn…and its striking presence at the center of the scene lends a certain allure and potency to the conversion narrative” (319). The “thingly quality” to which Maddock Dillon refers ought to remind readers of the “thingly quality” of Atlantic commodities in general, and to remind them that both the horn and the man are productions of a circulating Atlantic culture that connects France to the Caribbean to North America. As Maddock Dillon points out, “a French horn would seemingly bear no relation to the implicitly African horn (the abeng, for instance) blown to signal slave rebellion or to communicate among slaves. The French horn, as we have seen, is understood as a European, rather than an African horn, and one that is sounded in the performance of European orchestral, dance, and military music (333)”. Marrant’s knowledge of how to play the horn, then, is revelatory on two fronts. First, it suggests the intersecting cultures of music, communication, and knowledge that have conspired to teach him the skill to use the “orchestral” instrument, rather than the banned African horn. This is, in fact, a point that Maddock Dillon examines in detail. However, perhaps more interestingly, is the implicit route that the two figures—the man and the horn—have taken to meet one another in the church. They, or their direct ancestors, have both traveled routes established and sustained by the Atlantic marketplace, in order to bring together the under-classes of the Atlantic—Marrant is not a slave, but is asked or required to perform for a higher racial and class order—and the cultural products of Europe, to create a new and syncretic communion that literally takes place in a religious setting.
Moreover, the horn and its role as a public instrument suggest Marrant’s navigation of public communities. Marrant’s is a text in which communication remains a persistent problem. For example, he goes to the church meeting intending to play music but, instead, emits a noisy “halloo,” the same church service initially seems unintelligible and then expresses deep spiritual truths, and when he returns home after his many wanderings, only his sister recognizes and can communicate with him. The moment the horn sounds, a conversion takes place within Marrant that initiates his shift from one community to another. Maddock Dillon writes, “one can clearly see Marrant’s own movement from an aesthetic and political community in which the sounds issuing from [Reverend] Whitefield’s mouth are mere noise…to a community in which the same sounds are deeply meaningful and serve as the central organizing language of the community” (322). Marrant’s use of his seemingly out-of-place “thingly” object allows, or even forces, his entry into a wider world of communication with other Christians. He becomes a valuable commodity who uses another valuable commodity to instantiate Christian community.

It is precisely the oddity of this moment that allows community to spring up, that permits very different worlds to begin to communicate and interact. Maddock Dillon, for example, argues that “the possibility of equality is mobilized in moments of dissensus—moments when the limitations and exclusions of existing framings of the public sphere are rendered visible rather than naturalized under the guise of the self-evident, under the guise of the sensible” (325). Marrant’s seemingly senseless, discordant use of the horn reveals the barriers of race, class, and communication that separate him from the Christian community that his text presents as his ultimate goal. In rendering these barriers visible, Marrant begins to dismantle them. This, in fact, is a recurrent motif in the narrative: Marrant does something that seems quite strange and, in so doing, makes visible the difficulty of inter-community relation and conversion. When he does, he
is able to pass from one stage of his life to another, along his journey toward free salvation. Maddock Dillon notes this when she writes, “What Marrant seems to be particularly skilled at is creating a sense of community (an assemblage) in locations where sense itself does not initially seem to be shared between Marrant and those around him….we might say, then, that Marrant has a marked ability to make publics around him by means of performance” (336-7). Readers should not forget the nature of those publics. They are communities built upon the intersections of otherwise disparate communities, moments of communication across the breach of miscommunication, and always instantiated by a Christianity premised upon Marrant’s own mobility and his status as a commodified subject capable of inhering and transposing value and expression. He is, like the horn, a seemingly out-of-place thing around which a Christian community forms, and a direct production of the Atlantic market’s most powerful forces of mobility and exchange.

He is also, of course, a person and, as such, develops identity and, in fact, material and even literary community from these events. As Maddock Dillon reminds readers, Marrant’s ability to create community was used “such that it became ‘common sense’ for an evangelizing Christian network to publish his narrative” (338). Marrant’s focus on the need for conversion experiences to empower and to liberate is an important element of eighteenth-century religious texts, in which conversion is the most fundamental spiritual experience for the individual and for the community at large. It is not enough to be a Christian; one must convert one’s self into a Christian and replay the experience as much as possible to reaffirm faith. This focuses on the act of becoming, rather than upon being and argues that a state of constant flux should be embraced and guided in positive directions, rather than resisted in favor of a false stasis. In particular, conversion was an important element of the antislavery text. Vincent Carretta points out, for
example, that “the emphasis on religion in the narratives of eighteenth-century Black authors was the long-standing belief that conversion to Christianity merited emancipation from slavery, a belief so strong that it led to colonial statutes denying its validity” (8). Narratives like Marrant’s attest to this belief, but they also attest to the way mobile, Atlantic Christianity could help displaced black authors to produce identities out of displacement and transformation.

When Marrant meets an “Indian Hunter” and, later, becomes captive of the Cherokee nation, his faith in a Lord his captors cannot see changes from an external force that works upon him, to a power he can use to convert others and to instantiate community. After gesturing toward the tortures he should face as a captive of the Cherokee, Marrant describes how his prayers in English, translated into Cherokee and accompanied by the “talking book,” convert his would-be executioner, the daughter of the King and, ultimately, the King himself. He writes, “The Lord appeared most lovely and glorious; the king himself was awakened and the others set at liberty. A great change took place among the people; the king’s house became God’s house” (27). He then visits a number of other affiliated tribes, while under the protection of his Cherokee friends. In these interactions, Marrant’s captivity narrative has transformed into a jeremiadic narrative. His forced captivity in the wilderness becomes an opportunity to bring Christianity to the uninformed and to learn and embrace a vocation as a preacher. If his first abrupt conversion marked him as specially elect, his captivity has truly been the vehicle by which he receives his vocation.

It is only right to call his proselytizing a vocation, for it is, at root, a form of profitable labor. Certainly it is his calling as an evident providential favorite of God, but it is also the transactional work of Marrant’s life. He offers Christian catechism in exchange for protection, mobility, and a certain degree of freedom, even within his captivity. The narrative of Christian
liberation becomes quite literal in this narrative in which Marrant’s captivity becomes an opportunity to transform the wilderness and to “civilize” a non-Christian population. As Cedrick May points out, “Marrant engaged in the spread of a Christianity tailored to the specific social and political needs of Africans and African Americans living throughout the Atlantic world” and especially in the Nova Scotian settlement he would later work to make prosperous (64). Nevertheless, as May concedes, Marrant was ambivalently positioned within Atlantic Calvinism. May writes that on the one hand “Marrant, like [Johnathan] Edwards and [George] Whitefield, emphasized the Pauline tenet of irresistible grace and the subordination of the human will to divine sovereignty” (65). This “gained him entrance into one of the major theological discussions of the time and gained him the patronage he needed to be a major missionary voice between England, Nova Scotia, and Boston.” On the other hand, “Marrant also advanced some new theological ideas dangerous to established authority. Marrant’s ideas were egalitarian in nature…[he] preached that the New Testament was the sole authority…he also advanced extemporaneous or ‘inspired’ preaching and prayer as indicators of one’s development as a Christian and of a true connection with God” (65). All in all, Marrant’s Christianity gives him occasion to turn his captivity not only into a narrative experience of survival, but also into a kind of hegemonic jeremiad, bringing the values of Atlantic Christianity into the frontier and bringing the benighted into Christian fellowship.

Yet the experience also transforms his Christianity, so that it becomes a kind of syncretic cultural production. When he returns home after months away, he returns to a family who does not recognize him, for his “dress was purely in the Indian stile.” He acts with his neighbors as a prophet, “a wild man...come out of the woods to be a witness for God and to reprove our ingratitude and stupefaction.” He is only recognized by his youngest, and, therefore, most
innocent, sister. Christian catechism began Marrant’s transformation, but his experience with the wider, more syncretic world among the non-Christian people who also populate the Atlantic has made him into the prophet who can bring the word of God back to society. In this way, Marrant partly conforms to the dichotomous distinction between the colonial “Jamaica” and the home-state “England”—or, in this case, North America—of Hall’s description. Marrant explores the peripheral frontiers of empire, in order to bring its lessons back home. However, even as he does so, his text reaffirms the inescapable contamination that occurs as a result of his own mobility. The links between center and periphery keep them in contact, so Marrant’s exposure to the frontier marks him as both a peripheral “wild man” and a prophetic voice returning to society’s core. Even in his journey back to the center, he brings his wildness with him. This process is repeated throughout the maritime Atlantic, so that individuals and communities are, at once, marginalized, estranged, or made wild, and necessarily bound to the home or core that claims distance from them.

As a sailor Marrant similarly discovers that he must accommodate himself to the syncretic and unsettling mobility of maritime life. When he does, he fully realizes his potential as a “prophet” who can fuse Christian, capitalist, and colonialist practices in one person. He remains reunited with his family “till the commencement of the American troubles.” At this point his narrative becomes more anecdotal and he finds himself “pressed on board the Scorpion sloop of war.” During this time, Marrant seems to backslide, although he does not dwell on the experience except to note his recommitment and deliverance from danger. He writes, “I continued in his majesty's service six years and eleven months; and with shame confess that a lamentable stupor crept over all my spiritual vivacity, life and vigor; I got cold and dead.” However, the violent powers of God again use the natural world to demonstrate divinity to
Marrant. He recalls, “We were overtaken by a violent storm; I was washed overboard, and thrown on again; dashed into the sea a second time, and tossed upon deck again. I now fastened a rope round my middle, as a security against being thrown into the sea again; but, alas! Forgot to fasten it to any part of the ship; being carried away the third time by the fury of the waves, when in the sea, I found the rope both useless and an encumbrance.” He continues, “I was in the sea the third time about eight minutes, and the sharks came round me in great numbers, one of an enormous size that could easily have taken me into his mouth at once, passed and rubbed against my side. I their cried more earnestly to the Lord than I had done for sometime; and he who heard Jonah's prayer, did not shut out mine, for I was thrown aboard again; these were the means the Lord used to revive me, and I began now to set out afresh” (38). He closes these recollections with an invocation that ties together all of the strands of providential capitalist maritime life: “I have now only to entreat the earnest prayers of all my kind Christian friends, that I may be carried safe there; kept humble, made faithful, and successful” (38). Humility, faith, and success—for Marrant, these are all signs of grace and of the community that his providential election has helped to instantiate and that he hopes to maintain.

Marrant’s text remains interested in creating publics, communities of affiliation in which persons, especially persons of color, could exercise their communal bonds with other Christians, as opposed to a national community that explicitly rejected them. This is a point also raised by Alexander Byrd, who notes that “Christianity offered a space not dissimilar to the one that prevailed ruling the course of the American war...Christianity in the Maritimes was also a place where blacks could exercise their liberty under terms increasingly denied them across the region at large” (175). Marrant imagines a Christianity that bonds black subjects and indigenous people and actually helps them to share values and connection to the natural world. He relies upon
tropes of the talking book, even a sounding horn and upon the power of conversion to create society, but he is notably creating a nonwhite counter-public through Christianity that might run parallel to the white mainstream that rejects him. In fact, he ends his narrative by travelling to Novia Scotia in order to join and to help establish a literal counter-public on the ostensible frontiers of the British Empire.

**The Kingdom on Earth: The Dream of Home and Colonial Disappointment**

It bears remark that, in a number of these narratives, particularly in those of Marrant and Equiano, colonial schemes, like the one in Nova Scotia, intended for loyalist black refugees from the American Revolution, and the one in Sierra Leone, intended for the displaced black poor, loom large, allowing these writers to imagine a potential refuge even within spaces of liminal exile. If “Jamaica was for sex,” Sierra Leone and Nova Scotia were, in the British imagination, for dislocation. Indeed, the very name asserts the peripheral status of Nova Scotia to the British Empire by linking it to Britain’s own internalized colonial territory to the north. Nevertheless, Marrant and Equiano both saw in it a potential alternative to the white national societies that rejected people of color in more explicit legal terms. The difficulties of Nova Scotia’s free black refugee colonies admit the unofficial or official rejection by the home state. At the same time, the important space that such a colony occupies in the minds of mobile emancipated Atlantic writers, like Marrant and Equiano, asserts its ideological significance as a site of potential refuge and community.

Britain officially declared legal emancipation in 1834 but the run-up to freedom hardly assured the extension of citizenship rights to former slaves. With this in mind, Novia Scotia and Sierra Leone functioned as a means of extending national influence by simultaneously offering freedom to the emancipated and rejecting black claims to political inclusion. Byrd describes the
way that, for British antislavery groups “organizing a black settlement at Sierra Leone was, among other things, an attempt to strike at the Atlantic slave trade by demonstrating that free labor might produce much—even if not all—of what was asked of slave labor in the Americas” (4). Nevertheless, “black settlers across the Maritimes [in British Canada] were continually denied the privileges due loyalists and the rights of free subjects…the more that circumstances in the Maritimes made it clear that black settlers were neither loyalists nor free subjects, at least not in the manner of their white counterparts, the more black society seemed to crystallize in defiance of such facts” (170). So the British black settlements carried the ambivalence of the sea to shore: they were spaces of both freedom and unfreedom, inclusion and marginalization. Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone fulfilled the desires of unsettled black populations for a Christian, politically-recognized, and economically participatory kingdom on earth, but also permitted the empire to maintain the hierarchies of race, periphery, and citizenship that were so important to the function and development of Atlantic societies.

These colonial opportunities remained ambivalent concepts in the minds and lived-realities of displaced individuals and maritime communities in the Atlantic. Marrant, for example, makes his late-in-life pilgrimage to Nova Scotia for reasons both providential and practical. xviii He writes, “I used to exercise my gifts on a Monday evening in prayer and exhortation, and was approved of, and ordained at Bath. Her Ladyship having seen the letter from my brother in Nova Scotia, thought Providence called me there: To which place I am now bound, and expect to sail in few days” (127). He looks forward to a Christian community that becomes universal and overcomes all manner of nationalist or racial boundaries. He hopes that, “Indian tribes may stretch out their hands to God; that the black nations may be made white in the blood of the Lamb…the kingdoms of the world are become the kingdoms of our God, and of
his Christ” (127). Throughout this narrative, providence has served to deliver the specially selected individual, even as that individual, and his message, have become the centers around which universalist and syncretic cultures cohere. This cultural instantiation would have been impossible without both Marrant’s captivity experience and his vocational experience in the mercantile Atlantic, but it is also a necessary response to the social exclusion he experienced as a marginalized figure in Atlantic society.

Furthermore, Marrant’s optimism is belied by the harsh realities that await him in Nova Scotia. Lauren Benton describes the potential and problems inherent to this colony as frontier-space when she discusses the way “sovereignty in empire formed as multiple agents positioned themselves to act as subjects of and proxies for imperial powers, and as polities and populations negotiated scope for their own autonomy, sometimes urging radical reconfigurations of rule.” She writes, “multiple anomalous legal spaces in European empires developed not merely in opposition to imperial centers but also in response to shifting interimperial relations and cross-imperial comparisons, forming in the process part of a broader geographically uneven regulatory web, or another source of international law” (Benton 280). We might consider Nova Scotia or Sierra Leone as similarly contested and contestable legal spaces within but at the borders of empire. These spaces allowed the empire to extend itself, even as it subordinated the very communities it used to assert its legal claims to territory. What David Kazanjian describes as the “colonizing trick” of using subjects, rather than citizens, to plant the seeds of colonial expansion is on full display here. Moreover, this “trick” conflates legal, political, economic, and spiritual identifications, so that the subjects relegated to spaces like Nova Scotia find themselves absorbed into a socio-political culture that is both economic and religious, even as they are rendered subordinate, objectified, or commodified.
Reading through these texts, Atlantic historians, critics of the black Atlantic, and readers of the texts that mobilized and remained mobile within the black Atlantic can see the hopes and disappointment of colonization play out as the drama of empire and frontier in miniature.

Equiano helps plan and petitions to join a colonial expedition to Sierra Leone in order to extend both Christianity and capitalism as well as to plant a body of British colonial subjects on the African settlement. At the same time, despite Equiano’s optimism, the difficulty of this project is clearly evident. Equiano for example, makes a point of narrating the untamed savagery of one of these would-be colonial communities during a visit to Nova Scotia in 1758. He writes, "One thing remarkable I saw this day:—A lieutenant of the Princess Amelia, who, as well as my master, superintended the landing, was giving the word of command, and while his mouth was open a musquet ball went through it, and passed out at his cheek. I had that day in my hand the scalp of an Indian king, who was killed in the engagement: the scalp had been taken off by an Highlander. I saw this king's ornaments too, which were very curious, and made of feathers" (47). Any doubts about the nature of British colonial resettlement there should be put to rest with this in mind: Nova Scotia was, indeed, a frontier. The "highlander" and the native retain their wildness, their violent savagery in this wilderness. Nevertheless, in 1785, John Marrant expects to find in the North American frontier a space open to conversion and, like Equiano's plans for the Sierra Leone colony, a land and people receptive to the advancing powers of both the church and the market. He writes of his hopes "that the black nations may be made white in the blood of the Lamb; that vast multitudes of hard tongue, and of a strange speech, may learn the language of Canaan, and sing the song of Moses, and of the Lamb; and, anticipating the glorious prospect, may we all with servant hearts, and willing tongues, sing hallelujah; the kingdoms of the world are become the kingdoms of our God, and of his Christ. Amen and Amen” (Marrant 127). Both
authors present their respective colonial projects as opportunities for a displaced population of former slaves to bring to stable land what they’d found only at sea: inclusion through cooperative labor, class affiliation, and the breakdown of racial barriers through Christian fellowship. However, the catastrophic failure of these settlements comes close to vindicating Smith’s disappointed perspective of his so-called liberty. The dream of social inclusion devolves into the reality of continued national exclusion.

All of this is to say that the history of alternative maritime community-creation is not an entirely happy one. It is also evidence of the same processes of social exclusion that necessitated the cultivation of alternative spaces within and around the Atlantic in the first place. The union of mobile capital to mobile Christianity certainly helped some of these writers to achieve community but, for others, it only exacerbated and doubled the exclusion experienced by so many. Just as such figures found themselves brought into both the market and the empire, they also found themselves subordinated in terms that forced them to consider the potential devaluation of their political, economic, and even spiritual identities.

**Conclusion**

The experience of sailors and individuals like Smith, Hammon, Cugoano, Jea, Gronniosaw, and Marrant is, ultimately, emblematic of the ambivalent nature of life in the Atlantic market. Especially for these writers, who traverse the corridors of Atlantic trade while navigating the uncertain routes of freedom, captivity, fellowship, and alienation, a syncretic and sometimes universalist identity was crucially important. It allowed them to assert agency as laborers, and to instantiate communities, even as they served societies that often wanted to reject or ignore them. It allowed them to use their experiences of disruption, mobility and exchange to develop syncretic Atlantic, rather than strictly national, identities. Moreover, it allowed them to
use these experiences as the material with which to craft their own stories, and to use those stories to assert their presence in the politics, and the market, of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century Atlantic world.

However, this productive and often inclusive counter-public was also, in large part, a forced remove from other supposedly mainstream Atlantic societies. If, as Hall suggests, national cultures increasingly viewed “Jamaica” and “England” as distinct and distant spaces, this binarism created an enormous class of displaced people and cultures. This dualistic view of Atlantic life both obscured and admitted the links between the interior and the periphery. As a result, the individuals and communities that traversed the geographical and ideological space between the ostensible core of Atlantic society and its supposed margins were forced to create or to embrace identities that could exist within a society that largely sought to deny their existence. Baucom’s contention that Liverpool was the capital of Atlantic society applies not only because slavery was so central to the economies and ideological formations of Atlantic societies, but also because its very nature as a space through which passed commodities marked by the diverse people who carried them is so emblematic of Atlantic cultural formation.

Such a space tacitly admitted that the increasingly nationalist conception of “home” could not exist without the active participation of the mobile Atlantic communities that nationalities sought to deny. The displaced, the marginally free, or the mobile laboring classes, therefore, embraced an identity that was partly forced upon them and, in the process, came to embody the currents of Atlantic life more profoundly than writers or politicians cared to admit. For so many people, Atlantic society resembled the churning constellation of the Atlantic market, with its many counter-publics and alternative communities, much more than it resembled any stable definition of “home” or its othered opposite.
Places like Nova Scotia or Sierra Leone, therefore, serve as both literal and imaginary instantiations of this peripheral nature. Both enforced and embraced, these alternative communities are emblematic of the parallel alternative society that so many of these writers imagined for themselves and of the political and ideological rejection that attended such a fantasy. They served as the conceptual kingdom of freedom, Christianity, and free market participation that the providential market promised and, at the same time, demonstrated the way the providential market could facilitate the marginalization of whole communities, and use the language of individual liberty, election, and advancement, to create hierarchies of conditional freedom, and subordinate market agency.

Even so, sometimes more hesitant to embrace the colonialist nature of providential capitalism than Equiano, all of these authors demonstrate the way that a providential capitalist frame could help individuals to understand the moral and practical cosmology of the world they inhabited, even or perhaps especially if that providential capitalist ideology made their lives difficult, disrupted, and constantly mobile. Woodard writes, “Through their lives and experiences, Gronniosaw and Cugoano forced the spotlight on the contradictions between certain Christian doctrines and their embodiment in social practice in the eighteenth century,” and this is true of all similar maritime slavery narratives (56). At times, they assert and project the nature of mobile communities of laborers and, especially, laboring Christians that, far more than nationalism, could hold together classes and collective identities in the fractious market of the Atlantic. At times, they suggest the way that narratives of mobility and captivity could help authors to assert the primacy of nationalist, racial, or otherwise hegemonic projects. Moreover, these accounts are not outliers. Indeed, this fractured view of Atlantic society was, in some ways, the model upon which Atlantic nations were premised. Eve Taylor Bannet, for example, points
out that “Jeffersonians sought to persuade the small farmers of America that their free and independent way of life was compatible with republican government by speaking of the new republic as a collection of small, independent farms—and why the more firmly the new Republic established its grip on its wayward population, the more paeans to republican Liberty were sung” (86). Similarly, Martha Schoolman notes “The growing field of hemispheric American studies is often predicated on the assumption that the hemispheric frame is perforce more radical, multiracial, and multilingual than the regional or the national, but such assumptions do not sufficiently account for the conservative aspects of British West Indian Emancipation” (Schoolman 5). Even so, sometimes despite their authors’ intentions, these texts suggest that life in the maritime Atlantic market was personally, racially, philosophically, and spiritually perilous. If Equiano was looking at the lighthouse, these writers looked to the rocky shoals beneath, and found new ways to navigate, to collaborate, and to survive in the treacherous waters of the Atlantic.
Chapter 3

A Driver Over You: Piracy, Abuse, and National Vulnerability in the Atlantic
Reading narratives of mobile, maritime negotiations of freedom and captivity, it is impossible to ignore their racial emphasis. Whether mobile black Atlantic authors attempt to integrate themselves into white society, resist white abuse, or create alternatives to Eurocentric hegemony, they were all bound to project personal and cultural identities against the seemingly monolithic totem of whiteness in the Atlantic. Yet, when readers encounter narratives from white authors that share similar preoccupations with mobility, transaction, captivity, and the development of identity, they discover that that whiteness was hardly static. In fact, authors of frontier captivity narratives, Barbary captivity narratives, and even white maritime free-labor trade and travel narratives all observed the ways whiteness and freedom, like blackness and unfreedom, could shift, depending upon circumstances within the Atlantic cultural economy. Black Atlantic authors had to come to terms with their own forced mobility, and with the symbolic meaning forced upon their flesh. Although the mechanisms of confrontation were different, white Atlantic maritime authors also had to confront the significance of their own mobility and the meaning of their symbolically fraught racial and national status. As they did, they discovered that the protective shield of white supremacy and national affiliation could be unreliable or even deceptive. They also revealed that the white body was a site of transaction and equivalence, and that white skin could also hold an exchangeable commodity value in the marketplace.

Writers like Ottobah Cugoano and Venture Smith used a focus on the body’s symbolic meaning to turn Equiano’s optimistic vision of an Atlantic market, which allows individuals to encounter and freely embrace the will of God, into a philosophically complex vision of commodity misidentification. In so doing, they demonstrated a particular and prevalent fear of the power of the shipping trade to turn human beings into commodities. Given that black and
white sailors shared space in the Atlantic trading market and, as a result, shared in so many of its ordinary, abusive, transcendent practices, this was a fear that crossed boundaries of race. Like the black narrator of Briton Hammon’s *Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings*..., the white narrators of Royall Tyler’s *The Algerine Captive* and Richard Henry Dana’s *Two Years Before the Mast*, for example, struggle to maintain their humanity as the degree to which they are embedded in the Atlantic market becomes increasingly, disturbingly clear.

In fact, anxiety over the personal nature of commodification and subjugation became especially fraught for white American writers of the period leading out of the revolutionary era and through the expansive Jacksonian period. Writers like Richard Henry Dana drew upon the experiences of captivity, commodification, and wage slavery to recognize the elements of unfreedom contained within the liberationist promises of providential capitalism in the Atlantic market. Particularly in light of Barbary captivity, maritime impressment, and abusive labor practices at sea, such writers recognized that the same proximity to commodities that could restore the humanity, identity, and spiritual complexity that slavery sought to deny the unfree, could also take those same gifts away from individuals whose only claim to secure humanity was the tenuous logic of white supremacy.

Black freedom—and its implied opposite, white bondage—presented a vexing problem for the white subject. As Saidiya Hartman asks “if race formerly determined who was ‘man’ and who was chattel, whose property rights were protected or recognized and who was property, which consequently had the effect of making race itself a kind of property…then how did emancipation affect the status of race” (Hartman 119). This is as pressing an issue for white authors who traverse the same trade routes as their enslaved counterparts as it would be for a white middle class contending with the reality of nationwide emancipation a generation later. For
writers like Royall Tyler and Richard Henry Dana, for instance, the possibility that whiteness was not a reliable guarantor of freedom destabilized their cultures’ operative notions of racial, class, spiritual, and national affiliation in the Atlantic. Moreover, the “property rights” to which Hartman refers are premised upon the authority of a national, economic, racial, and philosophical order. She argues that their disruption constituted an assault on the very notion of nineteenth-century manhood. Barbary captivity narratives and free-labor maritime narratives demonstrate that, at least as early as the eighteenth century, writers were concerned with the destabilizing meaning of events that could untangle the knot of nationalism, racial difference, Christianity and claims to property upon which so much weight was placed in the Atlantic marketplace.

In the face of abusive maritime labor practices, in the wake of ascendant black figures like Equiano, who challenged rigid strictures of racial, economic, and spiritual hierarchies, and in light of ongoing Barbary piracy and British impressment, whiteness was at risk of becoming an empty signifier, a text with no meaning. Lisa Lowe notes that “the seas were an open, uncharted, and yet undetermined domain for mercantile expansion and imperial experiments beyond the nation-state” (Lowe 43). She goes on to observe that “an older economic logic based on colonial conquest and slavery coexisted with a newer economic rationality that included the desire for maritime superiority and the command of…goods and peoples” (76). The new “domain” that Lowe describes is important in two respects: first, it represents the transformation of Atlantic economy away from landed property-holding and toward exchange-oriented commodity capitalism; second, it suggests the increasing national importance of binding together notions of racial hierarchy, geographic frontier, presumed Christian affiliation, and capitalist commodity exchange. In this “uncharted” space, all of these ideas were open to renegotiation. As a result,
authors attempted to reaffirm the sanctity of racial, national, economic, and spiritual cohesion, or ruminated upon the implications of disruptions to that cohesion.

In fact, predating the Barbary captivity genre, frontier captivity narratives also used stories of peril to probe the limits of national, racial, and ideological hegemony. Hester Blum observes that “part of the appeal of the Indian and European versions of the captivity narrative was the format’s standard positioning of a white, Christian captive subject against the threat of a usually darker-skinned, presumed ‘savage’ or ‘heathenish’ people, whether Native American, Arabic, or African. The juxtaposition called attention to national differences and presented the white victims as dependent on Christian providence for their protection” (57). This is to say that frontier captivity narratives and, by extension, Barbary captivity narratives, functioned to reaffirm normative values in the face of challenge. In so doing, such narratives also reaffirmed the tight interconnectedness of nationalism, racialism, capitalism, and Christianity for North American Atlantic writers, readers, politicians, and citizens.

It is important to recognize the links between frontier captivity narratives, Barbary captivity narratives, and later maritime trade and travel narratives because, in some cases, their serial indebted connections are overt and explicit. In other cases, however, what persist are generic conventions, philosophical concerns, nationalistic stakes, and racial constructions that evolve from one literary period to another. Just as Barbary captivity narratives drew upon traditions established in the frontier captivity genre, later maritime free-labor trade and travel narratives, like Dana’s, drew upon traditions prevalent in Barbary captivity narratives, like Tyler’s, in order to articulate a white, nationalist identity, against a threatening loss of self, and to assert a Yankee American heritage by showing it under attack. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge the literariness of these generic inheritances. In Barbary captivity narratives and
maritime trade and travel narratives, authors use fiction, typology, autobiography, and philosophical observation to deal with some of the most pressing and vexing concerns of the post-revolutionary and Jacksonian periods, within and around the Atlantic, but with particular gravity for North America and the United States.

Attacks upon the American state from multiple fronts, in the form of Barbary piracy and British impressment, also indicated the entwined nature of American nationalism, racial construction, and religious affiliation. Hester Blum offers a succinct history of America’s political and military responses to these dual perils leading to the 1798 creation of the navy, the Tripolitan War of 1805 and the War of 1812 (48). As she does, she implicitly outlines an emergent narrative of an American state under potential assault on multiple fronts. Blum notes that “British impressment was equated with Barbary captivity in the writings of many sailors, and its dangers inspired sailors to suggest mechanisms for response to their fellow tars” (67). At the same time, America’s response to these dual affronts helped to characterize and mobilize American national identification in letters as much as in policy. Blum observes, “The success of the navy in restoring Autonomy to American ships in the Atlantic has often been cited as a crucial moment for the nation, when the United States could independently protect the integrity of its military and mercantile subjects. Yet mariners nevertheless remarked frequently (and with resignation) upon the tenuous nature of political and economic claims to sovereignty in the Atlantic world” (52). As they did, readers of maritime captivity narratives might note that the racial inversion and religious temptation that their protagonists encounter use personal narrative experiences to put pressure on the sanctity and security of an American racial and religious identity. As a result, the palpable desire of these authors to assert or to reestablish normative modes of national identification, founded around religious, racial, economic, and political
affiliation, read both as evidence of an emergent national identity and as evidence of that identity under assault.

Crucially, these issues were mirrored in the development of the Barbary piracy literary genre, which tracked these political changes and responded in terms both instructive and expressive. Blum argues that Barbary piracy narratives served a primarily utilitarian purpose, aimed at a seafaring audience as instructive texts. Blum writes, “The value of sailors as national subjects was a problem for a young nation with neither the hardware for a naval defense against piracy nor the financial reserves to ransom its captive nationals.” America simply could not protect its sailors, its citizens, or itself from the possibility of capture and captivity. Blum continues, “captive seamen consistently located the value of their writings not just in the affective appeals of the texts to nationalism or humanism but chiefly in their utility to fellow laboring mariners. Federal-era Barbary narratives…were explicitly addressed to a reading community of fellow seamen” (46-7). The stakes of this literary movement were, therefore, very real.

However, Barbary captivity narratives, like the frontier narratives before them, also served a sentimental purpose, inspiring sympathy, horror, anger, or even resolve amongst a reading public that took pleasure in the experience of a normative cultural self, contrasted victoriously against threats from the outside. At the same time, the frank reality of the situation was that, as Blum rightly observes, American claims to victory over these threats would have been unfounded, if not laughable. Thus, sailors used the networks of publication and dissemination that traversed the Atlantic in order to warn other sailors or to instruct them about how to behave in the very possible event that they might be captured and enslaved at the same time that Barbary captivity narratives found a robust audience on land. In either case, whether in
their sentimental or instructional capacities, Barbary piracy narratives evoke the national anxieties of their creation. America as both a geographic and an imaginary space was under assault at sea, and these texts worked hard to reassert the normative values of American national ideology, including the nation’s blend of Christian and capitalist value systems.

More often than not, the hopes of authors of Barbary captivity narratives and, later, maritime trade and travel narratives, to assert national, class, religious, or racial solidarity were thwarted by a market that revealed its divine and all-encompassing powers. The authors of such texts long for, fear, and confront the reality that their bodies and souls must be sacrificed at the altar of providential capitalism, just as countless others have done before them and just as all persons, slave or free, must, in the end, do as well. Barbary piracy, coupled with the specter of British impressment, presented an existential threat to the American state as a claimant to position and power in the Atlantic. The combined forces of non-white, non-Christian pirates, and economic and nationalist competitors threatened the primary pillars of American national identity, namely: its expansive capitalism, its providential Christianity, and its liberty rhetoric. America, as an Atlantic power, found its mobile Atlantic citizens prey to attack, British impressment, and Barbary slavery. If these experiences did not promise death, they did promise some degree of unfreedom. If the American sailor could be killed or made a slave, then so too could the American state.

Both Barbary piracy and free-laboring maritime trade and travel narratives, therefore, simultaneously articulated national hegemony and raised pressing questions about the sanctity and meaning of American identity, within a nationally and economically competitive Atlantic, that threatened to undermine the value of Americanness altogether. Much like an earlier generation of authors of Barbary captivity narratives, Dana, for example, will insist in 1840 that
his white, northern, American identity is an identity worth preserving against threats to its durability. However, he experiences reversals that challenge his status as racially superior or legally and philosophically free. Dana’s account ends on an ambivalent note, suggesting that his efforts to maintain the racial, nationalist, and class hierarchies of Atlantic society might fail in the face of the maritime trade’s aggressive, transgressive mobility. Such texts serve as reminders that even beyond the threat of Barbary piracy or Atlantic impressment, in the ostensibly secure maritime marketplace, freedom was less guaranteed than promised. Such texts also reaffirm the necessity of personal sacrifice for social cohesion and development, and enshrine the body as a site of Atlantic social reconciliation. These elements combine to make captive, fugitive, black or white sailors into Christ-like fetish objects, whose suffering, labor, loss of freedom, and even death permitted providential Christian principles to bind with capitalist directives for the sake of a seemingly disinterested market cosmology.

At the same time, the similarity between chattel slavery, Barbary slavery, and free-labor maritime wage slavery amplified the market-oriented elements of captivity, and underscored the extent to which ostensibly free individuals were subject to the same logic of captivity, control, and possession as their unfree counterparts. As Blum notes, “the ultimate use of the Barbary slave was for ransom, redemption, or other economic exchange. Barbary captives served as a marker or commodity in this exchange and had corresponding value within the system” (57). Just like chattel slaves, Barbary slaves were used very much as a form of currency. Their bodies maintained use value as laborers of one kind or another but, more to the point, they housed exchangeable value. They could be traded on the open market for other individuals or even for other commodity goods. With all of this in mind, Barbary captivity narratives expressed anxieties that the market might strip individuals of their unique status as white, Christian,
nationalist subjects, and transform them into pure commodities. The same could be said of the maritime merchant sailor, who could, at any time, find himself under the lash of a dictatorial captain, made to labor for little or even no pay, or traded or killed for the sake of primarily economic concerns.

Even if the captive white body could act as the site in which Christian virtue and capitalist know-how come together to create ideal virtuous, and frequently nationalist figures, this logic could also produce considerable anxiety. These narratives, spanning centuries, attest to the ease with which whiteness could go from a mark of privilege to a mark of exchangeable commodity value, or even the ease with which freedom could be exchanged for slavery. The white body, bolstered by white supremacist narratives that link white skin, claims to participation in the social economy, and designations of divine favor, becomes an unreliable indicator of status. In the face of captivity, capture, enslavement, and draconian labor practices, white skin takes on uncertain commodity status.

That uncertainty revealed fissures and destabilizations in the emergent hierarchies of power in the Atlantic. Mary Nyquist observes the intersecting hierarchies of imagined and real power structures between state, monarchy, and family when she observes that "patriarchal absolutism has a special affinity with analogical argumentation" (162). Essentially, throughout history, the monarchy acted as a stand-in for divinity, and that relationship was replicated within the family. However, with the emergence of capitalism, new relationships of hierarchal power and control took root, including that of freedom and slavery and employer and employee (163). Similarly, conceptions of power in the Atlantic take on a decidedly economic slant when, as Nyquist observes "paradoxical inversion of the master/servant relation...derives from the tenet that the people are the 'principal' and the ruler the 'agent' in the contractual relation established by
the institution of government" (172). Post-capitalist power arrangements created a more mutually dependent relationship between rulers and ruled, investors and invested, commodities and owners. Barbary piracy, maritime impressment, and dictatorial maritime labor practices could make these arrangements of power into fraught, competitive experiences that challenged the sanctity of national, spiritual, ideological, and racial hegemony.

At sea, free white bodies were mobilized and used as working commodities within the same labor market as enslaved black bodies. Although nominally protected from abuse, death, and dislocation by the safeguards of whiteness and nationality, white sailors and white captives also died and were disappeared in the same waters as the enslaved. If the scale of mistreatment and exploitation of white Atlantic denizens was dwarfed by that of their enslaved black counterparts, white sailors and captives could still see in the experience of unfreedom a grim reminder of the brittle promise of their own freedom. In the Atlantic maritime market, bodies of all races and classes became the communal sites of sacrifice around which Atlantic societies came together. The labor of the unseen, the passion of the working-classes, the spaces haunted by those who died to create and maintain society and economy—these became symbolic and sacred elements of social cohesion. Thus, at sea, the logic of conquest and submission crossed racial lines through acts of economic transaction, whereby the labor and even the lives of sailors both free and unfree were exchanged for the liberty, freedom, and class mobility that Atlantic societies promised to the elect.

**Barbary Piracy and the National and Racial Imaginary**

Barbary slavery narratives became increasingly popular throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to ambivalent effect, both projecting white supremacist hegemony into the Atlantic and problematizing the distinction between black and white captivity. In his introduction
Paul Baepler notes, “For nineteenth-century readers in the United States, the plight of the captive in Africa appeared to transpose the traditional roles of black and white bodies” (Baepler 27). However “while the Barbary captivity narrative might seem to mirror a slave narrative, the situations of white and black slaves differed…the captive used the situation to indirectly justify slavery in the United States or altogether denounce Africans as ‘barbarous’” (29). The production of these texts, therefore, served to advance the projects of imperialism and colonialism, even as they frequently exposed notions of racial, religious, and national superiority to critical scrutiny. The transposition that Baepler observes completely upends the normative codes that the nation worked hard to produce and to cultivate. On the other hand, the restoration of those codes in fiction promised their instantiation or affirmation in the world.

Such narratives have a long history in Atlantic literature, linking early frontier captivity narratives to antebellum white slavery texts through common generic and ideological preoccupations that persist over time. Increase Mather, for example, was instrumental in the publication and dissemination of Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative, and it set a template for other such texts, which used the experience of captivity to differentiate national and racial characteristics and hierarchies. In fact, Rowlandson’s account became increasingly popular and important as white reading audiences faced the ongoing and escalating specter of white captivity and white slavery in the Atlantic. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, for example, note that “by the end of the eighteenth century, almost thirty editions of Rowlandson’s account had appeared, most in the last thirty years of the century” (204). Blum’s reading of Barbary captivity narratives applies to Rowlandson’s account as well. Both narratives serve dual functions as informative, instructional texts for people living at the frontiers of the nation, and as
sensational, sentimentalist texts for people who wished to cringe at, delight in, or even live vicariously through the captive’s experience.

Moreover, like the Barbary captivity narratives that would evolve from the frontier captivity genre, narratives like Rowlandson’s served to define national and racial norms against their nationalist competitors. Eve Tavor Bannet, for instance, argues that the publication and dissemination of captivity texts served this pointed political purpose. She writes, “when Mather had Rowlandson’s captivity narrative published in London…he was indirectly communicating to his friends and supporters in England the answer that the King could expect from those steadfast Puritans in New England, who acknowledged the sovereignty of God but not that of a human king” (63). Here then is an early example of an endemic American democratic genre, asserting the coinstantiation of providence, liberty, and, in Rowlandson’s resistance to her own commodified transactional enslavement, free capitalist exchange, while rejecting old norms of Royalist authority. Similarly, Armstrong and Tennenhouse point out that “the exemplary captive existed for the early eighteenth-century reader as a kind of epistolary heroine, whose ability to read and write…distinguished her from her Indian captors…literacy also distinguished the English individual from men and women of European birth. The French—and during the revolutionary period, the English—posed a threat to the [Americanized] English character.” They continue: “The temptations of religious conversion, in the first case, and of treason, in the second, could sever the individual’s connection to home and community just as permanently as going native” (204). This suggests that the captivity narrative served to differentiate the “civilized” and white against the “savage” other and then, later, also served to differentiate a nationalized American identity from European competitors.
When Increase Mather’s son, Cotton Mather, turned his attention to Barbary captivity, he similarly used the genre to draw the borders of his community, as well as to promote notions of covenanted white, elect society, against both “barbarity” and temptations to apostasy. In 1703, he presented a sermon whose very title communicated his intention to use the experience of Barbary captivity for educational and typological purposes: *The Glory of Goodness. The Goodness of God, Celebrated; in Remarkable Instances and Improvements thereof: And more particularly in the REDEMPTION remarkably obtained for the English Captives, Which have been languishing under the Tragical, and the Terrible, and the most Barbarous Cruelties of BARBARY. The History of what the Goodness of God, has done for the Captives, lately delivered out of Barbary.* Mather notes with some relief that “none of these our Friends proved Apostates, from our Holy Religion, when they were under so many Temptations to Apostasy” (64). If readers may be permitted to draw generational comparisons, then they should see “apostasy” as the rejection of the same Americanist values espoused by the elder Mather. Liberty, Christianity, and resistance to enslaved commodification all become divine and ordinary virtues in this reading, further strengthening the ties between national independence, providence, and capitalist free-agency.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, *The Glory of Goodness* also uses the specter of white slavery to advance notions of divine retribution to those who would reject these normative values and salvation for those who would uphold them. Mather writes, “We…acknowledge that you have Deserved all your Sufferings, from the Hands of a Righteous God, before whom you must indeed say, Lord, Thou hast punished us far less than our Iniquities have deserved. It is a Surprizing Mercy of God, that has rescued you from the Horrible Pit” (68). Slavery is the pit, conversion too, but Christian piety and suffering are the way to prove and to accept election, and the means by which to reassert racial and community supremacy even as individuals find themselves held
captive by and traded within the mobile Atlantic market of bodies. For Mather, Barbary piracy is a formative experience, a trial to prove the elect, white, and socially covenanted character of Christian captives abroad.

Even nearly a century later, the struggle to maintain Christian faith and the victory over temptations to apostasy are common enough features of the Barbary captivity narrative that they make up a considerable portion of Royall Tyler’s 1797 narrative, *The Algerine Captive* as well. There, just as in Mather’s account, captivity and potential conversion allow the author to use trials and temptations to prove the moral superiority of white Christian slaves. In both Tyler’s and Mather’s texts, white slavery serves an instructive function: to use white slavery and conversion to Islam as an allegory for ordinary daily temptations to sin, and the victorious piety of white slaves as a model for how Christians ought to conduct themselves day-to-day.

These texts also make note of the transactional nature of captivity as an allegory for the spiritual circumstances of Atlantic life. Describing the drama of escape, Mather insists “Tis Prayer, ‘tis prayer, that has done it all” (67). Yet, at the same time, he admits that “a Touch from Heaven upon the Heart of a Devil Incarnate [intervened] compelling him to deal more truly than he use to do…The Difficulty of Gathering the Ransome was at lasts got over” (66). Mather is careful to insist that it is God who has made the ransom easier to procure, and careful also to insist upon the power of prayer, but it is clear that this is a scene of transaction, and one that unites distant cultures through what is, ultimately, trade. If, elsewhere, the connection between providential Christianity and capitalist exchange remained coded and implicit, here it becomes explicit. Providence is transactional, an economic operation, an expression of the divine in economic events. Moreover, as for Rowlandson, and, indeed, for black maritime Atlantic writers like Equiano, an unfree body acts as the currency of exchange for two distinct national and racial
cultures, and the logic of exchange capital uses the routes of unfree mobility to bind those cultures together through commerce.

However, ruminations upon the exchange value of captive bodies, whatever their race, were never simple and could serve as the material by which to make arguments both for and against slavery. Baepler, for example, demonstrates how white authors frequently invoked white slavery to comment on slavery as it was practiced in the West Indies and America, as well as to defend the practice in comparison to other forms of slavery. On the other hand, white writers sometimes used the existence of white slavery to point out the hypocrisy of slavery in general, as did early Abolitionists like Thomas Sewall in 1700’s The Selling of Joseph (Baepler 30). In any case “readers in the United States, the plight of the captive in Africa appeared to transpose the traditional roles of black and white bodies” (27). This could serve multiple purposes. In fact, it could potentially serve multiple purposes at once. By generating sentimental sympathy, white writers could argue against the sadism of American chattel slavery, argue for the relative merits of American slavery against supposedly worse forms of white slavery, or simply use the distinction between freedom and unfreedom to generate ideas about democratic liberty.

Although Barbary captivity narratives could serve these many purposes, they tended to privilege favorable comparisons between American norms against Atlantic competitors. Baepler writes, “while the Barbary captivity narrative might seem to mirror a slave narrative, the situations of white and black slaves differed, just as the ability of the narrators varied...Most often, the captive used the situation to indirectly justify slavery in the United States or altogether denounce Africans as ‘barbarous’” (29). In many ways then, the production of these texts served to forward the projects of imperialism and national supremacy inasmuch as narrative can be used as a form of “subjugation” or “domination” (32).
Even so, such texts also admit the ongoing centrality of the West Indian slave cultures that America and England sought to deny. Sean X. Goudie writes, “We must consider the West Indies as intertwined with, and a formative presence in, the New Republic’s national character, as well as the New Republic’s literary history” (Goudie 35). Equally crucial to the development of a normative national identity were political, racial, religious, economic, and literary codes. Thus, the presence and persistence of Barbary captivity narratives suggests the important role that literature, whether intended for instruction or for sentimentalist consumption, played in the construction of nation. On the other hand, because these narratives are so assertively Atlantic and mobile in nature, their surface nationalism cannot disguise the central importance of slavery and captive labor to the growth and continuity of Atlantic societies.

It is, therefore, impossible to separate the literary elements of these texts from the political circumstances surrounding their creation. John Foss’ exemplary model of the genre from 1798 coincides, as Baepler notes, with President Thomas Jefferson’s establishment of the federal navy and his attempt to deal directly with the problem of Barbary piracy (Baepler 71). The narrative also asserts its intention to use the experience of white, Christian captivity to draw the borders of whiteness, Christianity, and even national difference. The author notes that “the tears of sympathy will flow” when readers witness “the most extreme cruelties” heaped upon “Christian captives” by Muslim pirates who “are taught by the Religion of Mahomet (if that can be called a Religion which leads men to the commission of such horrid and bloody deeds) to persecute all its opposers” (73). Similarly, an extraordinarily popular account of Algerian slavery by Maria Martin, which was published twelve times between 1807 and 1818, emphasizes both graphic violence and potential sexual assignations as it asserts the power of the nation acting in the market to transform an experience of captivity into one of liberation and transcendence.
Baepler is careful to note that the narrative probably draws heavily upon a “fictionalized tale,” entitled *The Captivity and Sufferings of Mrs. Mary Velnet, Who was Seven Years a Slave in Tripoli, three of which she was confined in a dungeon, loaded with irons, and four times put to the most cruel tortures ever invented by man* (Baepler 147). Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the sensational nature of its source material, Martin’s account emphasizes the brutalizing tropes of both frontier and Barbary captivity narratives in order to satisfy the audience’s interest in adventure, violence, and sexuality. Even so, the text ultimately resolves with a gesture that reasserts the primacy of the nation, and of white “civilization,” against the excesses of Martin’s Barbary captors. The author observes, “my liberty had been purchased by my country…I often stopped in the streets, stared around me, doubted my own existence, and bit my finger, in order to convince myself that I was really awake and alive” (157). Slavery endured, the captive rescued, and community restored, this final flourish gives life both to the transactional “purchase” necessary to produce freedom, and to the “country” that stands triumphantly in contrast to Algerian captivity.

In fact, white captivity narratives could, somewhat counterintuitively, use the experience of the reversal of hierarchies of captivity and freedom as the means by which to construct and defend racial and community borders even amid the most destabilizing events of Atlantic history. They could insert white perspectives into an Atlantic history that privileged the experience of unfreedom. For example, Marcus Rainsford’s 1805 *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti*, relies upon tropes of white captivity and potential white slavery, in order to re-center the assertive black Caribbean revolutionary history around a white body and a white perspective. According to Paul Youngquist and Grégory Pierro, Rainsford’s text was long considered an authoritative account of the Haitian Revolution by an Anglo writer. However, its real value lies
in the way it forcibly, even awkwardly inserts the author, himself, into the narrative of black Atlantic history. It is true that Rainsford was captured and held as a spy only to be freed by Toussant L’Ouverture, but the text maintains a reflexive desire to turn history into a personal narrative of white captivity, in order to make sense of nonwhite political and historical events. Rainsford’s description of his own captivity and release by L’Ouverture privileges his white, Anglocentric perspective, maintaining the centrality of captivity to the Atlantic experience, but transforming it into an experience of white witnessing and white liberation. He writes “Even in this situation he could not resist the opportunity which his prison, or rather, cage, afforded him” (233). Indeed, for Rainsford, captivity is an opportunity to place himself at the center of a history of black rebellion, in which he plays only a very minor role. Moreover, it allows his white body to appropriate the experience of captivity much more familiar to the comparatively unfree black figures in his midst. This has as much to do with establishing unique links of sentimental sympathy as it does with asserting supremacy. For, although Rainsford’s experience does allow him to sympathize with the goals and even the methods of the revolutionaries, it also asserts his own supremacy, self-mastery, and even national superiority, amid the destabilizing experience of captivity. Stripped of his freedom, Rainsford remains calm, appreciative, enlightened, and virtuous. He is ultimately rewarded with freedom and even gratitude by the Haitian Revolutionaries.

By translating the Haitian struggle for independence into a personal struggle for liberty and transcendence, Rainsford also asserts his authorial privilege to order events and to characterize history. Toussaint L’Ouverture, for example, is largely presented as what Youngquist and Pierro describe as “white man in blackface” (xliv). By this they mean that Toussaint is presented as both exemplary and extraordinary, an embodiment of the Enlightenment values that
the English ostensibly held over the French, and an example of a black figure “civilized” by those same values. Similarly, while Rainsford describes the various methods of torture used by both sides, his sympathetic identification with the Haitian Revolutionaries allows him to assert British national superiority over the tyrannical French (93). He likewise sees a “benevolent Female of Colour” as a figure of personal and national Enlightenment liberation, drawing the individuals and groups involved in the Haitian struggle into a larger assertion of the superiority of Eurocentric Enlightenment values (147). He also presents Toussaint as generally heroic and offers causes for the revolution that rest upon “that spirit of revolt which only sleeps in the enslaved African” (77).

Furthermore, Rainsford’s insistence upon the importance of his own white Enlightenment gaze extends beyond the written word to include extra-textual features, like visual representation. Rainsford, for example, uses the interplay between illustration and text both to reassert his evaluative and determinative gaze and to render the realities of the Haitian Revolution as a drama of Enlightenment values struggling to win out over both African and, importantly, French barbarity. He is credited with the original drawings upon which the engravings in the text are based, and uses them in tandem with his written observations to witness and to characterize events (xlii). This Anglophonic white man, therefore, uses his power to order and to narrate events in order to repurpose the Haitian struggle for independence as an account of his own heroic victory in the larger Atlantic drama of mastery, captivity, and freedom.

However, although the project of narrating and disseminating narratives of white slavery was intimately tied to notions of whiteness and racial hierarchy, it could also destabilize the exclusive status of whiteness to nationalist identity. Robert Adams’ 1816 text, for example is an Algerian captivity narrative told from the perspective of an African American to a white
amanuensis. Adams works to develop a national self, in contrast to the cultures through which he passes, including Timbuktu and Algeria, and aligns himself most clearly with white Europeans, while also providing a witness account to the intersection of international and local politics with the lived experience of African slavery. The narrative subsumes its racial representations beneath a nationalist and Occidentalist perspective, but still observes the intersections of slavery, economic exchange, and suffering, as they play out upon the body. Throughout, the author observes the tenuousness of racial and nationalist identification, suggesting the porosity of racial and national borders in an Atlantic world.

Such texts were common in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and suggest the reading public’s appetite for narratives that explicitly dealt with the destabilizing experiences of Atlantic captivity, mobility and relative freedom. As Duncan Faherty and Ed White point out, the anonymously authored 1801 narrative, *Humanity in Algiers: or, the Story of Azem*, was produced locally and attests to the circulatory familial and communal subscription practices of a particular denominational Abolitionist group near the intersection of Vermont, New York, and Massachusetts. It is clear from subscription records that the text was passed along among friends and family members as both a novelistic account, and as a text to be read typologically, as an experience of unfreedom as Christian suffering. Moreover, it maintains a transactional logic that allows it to combine Christian virtues with exchange-oriented capitalist interactions. Faherty and White’s recognition of the transmission of such a text also draws attention to the continued popularity of Barbary captivity narratives, even for reading communities that were unlikely to face the maritime threat. This couples with Blum’s insight into the “instructional” nature of Barbary captivity narratives to demonstrate that such texts had appeal that went beyond the purely pragmatic. Moreover, it suggests that events that took place within the competitive space
of the Atlantic found their way, through the dissemination of narrative, to the communities that encircled the Atlantic. What happened at sea did not stay at sea and even landed New England communities were deeply interested and involved in the events of maritime Atlantic competition.

*Humanity in Algiers* is a remarkably sensitive text, interested in developing, as it says, the “humanity” of its characters, but also invested in developing and investigating a moral system that encompasses both interventionist divinity and exchange economics. The narrator offers the text as a “memorial of [his] gratitude.” but readers might also see it as an effort to erect a scaffold of supernaturally ordered capitalist humanism, even as it dismantles the image of the African other as totalizing stock character (28). Told in a frame narrative by a white slave survivor of the *Dauphin*, captured in 1785, the narrator recounts his experiences as a slave. When he rescues a gentleman friend of his masters from a startled horse he is, in return, offered freedom. As the man and the gentleman travel to seek the necessary legal proof of that freedom, the gentleman tells the story of Azem, a now wealthy merchant who was given, as a boy, to a family suffering through debt and privation. After his master’s death, Azem is contracted to work for each brother for a year before being freed. Their mother initially resists but has a prophetic dream which ultimately convinces her to accede. After he rescues the young bride of his new master from rape, he is offered his freedom and a stipend. Later, he meets a young slave woman bemoaning the lustfulness of her vile master and petitions for her release. When this is denied, he decides to leave to seek his fortune. Returning, he finds the woman has been freed because her master has had something of a near death-vision and repented. Azem even discovers that the woman is his long-lost sister. He then returns to the metropolis and sets up as a trader, becoming quite wealthy in the process. The narrative ends, however, when his wife, sister, mother, and child are killed by a plague and, brought low by the emotional blow, he prepares his finances.
After his death, a certain amount of his fortune is used to free a slave every year. Throughout all of these reversals, the narrative maintains a consistent transactional logic: freedom is offered in exchange for good actions, and as a reward for virtuous service. Prophetic dreams signal these transactions and suggest their divine ordination. All the while, the suffering slave wends his way through society as the figure around which families and societies constitute themselves. If this narrative conflates Azem’s experiences with those of the white narrator, it does so in such a way as to assert the universality of prophetic spirituality and market exchange as the means by which divinity communicates with and orders human affairs.

**Royall Tyler and the American Family**

Perhaps the most famous example of the Barbary piracy genre, Royall Tyler’s 1797 narrative, *The Algerine Captive*, also uses the enslaved white body as the site of reconciliation between Christian virtues and capitalist directives. The narrative follows a relatively disengaged young man as he searches for a place in American society, finds himself involved in the Atlantic slave trade, gets captured and brought into Algerian captivity, and eventually returns home with a newfound sense of nationalist purpose. The text makes its connections to a particular American historical memory clear in the narrator’s early encounters with and familial connections to John Winthrop, Anne Hutchinson, and Roger Williams (12-13). In so doing, the author foregrounds the function of the Barbary captivity narrative as a text with nationalist implications for white authors and audiences. Joel Wendland calls the novel “among the first original North American novels with major anti-Muslim and anti-Arab themes…because its author saw it as a self-conscious effort to promote and develop a U.S. national culture in literary form and because his work had enormous influence on subsequent U.S. Writers” (162). Indeed, just as Adams asserted national affiliation through the transactions of his body around the Atlantic, and just as Foss and
Martin asserted white, nationalist superiority in the face of Barbary cruelties, Tyler uses his protagonist’s experience with captivity to assert the centrality of Yankee North American identity to Atlantic history. As his body traverses the Atlantic, faces threats of violence and temptation, and, ultimately, overcomes all of the adversities represented by the slave experience, Tyler’s protagonist, Updike Underhill, becomes a symbol for the supremacy of white Yankee identity in a mobile and heterogeneous Atlantic. However, as Underhill travels throughout his orientalized Atlantic, he also sees his body rendered into a commodity in ways that both uphold claims of American national supremacy and undermine claims to national, racial, or religious inviolability.

The journey that the narrator undertakes at once attests to the complex interactions of different spiritual traditions in slavery and insists upon the salvific powers of providential Christianity. For instance, in Algiers, the protagonist meets a “Mullah” who offers him freedom in exchange for conversion. After a series of lengthy and generous discourses, the narrator rejects Islam, remarking “Abashed by his assurance, and almost confounded by his sophistry, I resumed my slave’s attire, and sought safety in my former servitude” (142). Tyler’s dramatization of the transactional and liberationist potential of conversion here is not entirely fictitious. For example, drawing upon sixteenth-century thinker, Jean Bodin, Mary Nyquist notes that "Turkish servitude...does not regard as slaves the Christian youths taken by the Turks for tribute because they are incorporated into the Turkish royal family" (Nyquist 183). Because Barbary piracy offers to incorporate white slaves into an Islamic community, it challenges the primacy and cohesion of the empire from which the slaves came or, in Tyler's case, of the American state from which he derives. It is not only slavery that threatens the sanctity of the national home, but also the possibility of incorporation. Elizabeth Fenton, for example, notes that the invitation to
conversion for freedom accepted first by an “apostate” Englishman who Underhill meets in captivity, and later extended to Underhill, himself, “is the path to all kinds of liberty.” This, she says “is an appealing notion, perhaps, but by placing it in the mouth of a convert to Islam, Tyler was inviting his eighteenth-century audience to receive it critically. Having made an informed decision, the Englishman also has abandoned that which, within the context of the novel, he should have held most dear” (71). Fenton’s critique is important especially because it notes the potent mixture of nationalism, racial difference, and religious affiliation that “the Englishman” has abandoned. Religious conversion, then, is an act of rejection of all of the racial, national, and religious tenets that Tyler intends to reaffirm and, in so doing, to bind together.

The liberty that tempts Underhill is a liberty premised not only upon conversion, but also upon an invitation into full participation in the Algerine economy. The Englishman is free to hold a job and to hold property but, to earn it, he must reject the religious, national and, implicitly, the economic claims of his homeland, and announce the supremacy of Algerine claims to the same. In contrast, although he makes himself useful to his captors, Underhill resists completely and freely embracing a role as a full participant in the Algerine economy. Because he holds to his American values, he remains a captive commodity. At the same time, liberty, Americanness, Christianity, and, implicitly, free capitalist exchange, are all one in this reading, and to abandon any one pillar is to abandon them all. And so, when Underhill resists conversion to Islam, he upholds the inviolability of Christianity, nationalism, and capitalist ethos all at once.

However, by asserting mastery in contrast to the specter of captivity and submission, the text implicitly admits the centrality of unfreedom in the Atlantic. For example, when the author becomes a surgeon aboard a slave ship, ironically named Freedom, he is shocked to be confronted by the material reality of the trade in which he has become directly, although, he
insists, accidentally, implicated. He remarks, “To hear these men converse upon the purchase of human beings, with the same indifference, and nearly in the same language, as if they were contracting for so many head of cattle or swine, shocked me exceedingly” (99). Once he is captured and made a slave in Algeria, the text’s tone shifts dramatically. The light picaresque that marked the early chapters falls away, and the author’s suffering becomes pronounced, as does his recognition that the commodification of bodies has profound mental and spiritual consequences.

As a slave, he undergoes his own humiliating examination and market experience, becoming the commodity that once filled him with so much pity and condescension (121). After seeing a slave killed for attempting to escape, he declares “I now found that I was indeed a slave” (149). He remarks that slaves find “it deeply engraven upon their memories, that when men are once reduced to slavery, they can never resolve, much more achieve, anything that is manly, virtuous, or great!” (150). However, it is this act of complete physical, spiritual, and mental debasement that will serve as the means of his eventual redemption. A “slave” then refers only to a state of moral and social death, from which a new man must be reborn. Mary Nyquist also notes that slavery is often figured as "social murder or death" as well as the loss of the self as property (Nyquist 186). The apostate Englishman is, therefore, something of an undead figure in the text, one who has succumbed to the “social murder” of slavery and given up his claim to himself as property, in order to be reborn as one who has rejected all of the normative values that gave him life. In order to maintain his sanctity as an American, Underhill must experience these challenges but overcome them, even at the cost of his own life. This text, as Nyquist suggests, presents slavery as a matter of consent to subjugation and commodification. In order to resist, the narrator must embrace his Christianity, navigate the market in Algiers, and endure the
humiliations reaped upon his body. To escape “social murder,” Underhill must accept Christian trial and the possibility of a pure and virtuous death, rather than an apostate and compromised life.

More pronounced even than its meditations upon the necessity of maintaining nationality in the face of temptation, the text is fascinated by the relative and shifting meaning of unfreedom. The narrator, for example, foreshadows his own real slavery by comparing his work on his father’s farm to chattel slavery (26). He likewise describes his brief period as a teacher as being a master “enslaved” to his students’ whims and bad behavior (33). Such moments prepare readers for the reversal that will cast all of his lengthy discussions of racial difference into a new light. After his slavery experience, he returns to America a very different man, embracing the nation and vowing to commit himself fully to citizenship and sociality. He announces “I now mean to unite myself to some amiable woman, to pursue my practice as a physician, which I hope will be attended with…success…to contribute cheerfully to the support of our excellent government…and thus secure to myself the enviable character of an useful physician, a good father, and worthy federal citizen” (240). In short, Underhill declares his intention to reconstitute the American national family in miniature within his own household. The paternal order of divine Christian authority will be reinstated, the borders of race will be reaffirmed, and the Atlantic social polity will return as a democratic, though undeniably patriarchal, family.

That mastery was essential for Tyler’s conception of not only a national political culture, but also a national literary culture, erected upon a foundation of racial, social, and philosophical superiority. Wendland, for example, notes that “Tyler’s caricatures are created as a racist gesture meant to degrade the cultural work of his contemporaries—poet Phillis Wheatley, scientist Benjamin Banneker, or AME Church founders Absalom Jones and Richard Allen—and to
silence the calls for freedom and equality by antislavery and equality activists such as Equiano, Lemuel Haynes, and Prince Hall” (184). All of these figures stand in implicit contrast to Underhill’s own polymath education before slavery, his evident utility during slavery, and his successful reintegration after slavery. Moreover, his narrative, whether playful, mournful, fearful, or nationalistic always serves as evidence of his own authorial mastery.

However, the reconstruction of the American literary and political family can only come after its destruction and, even as the text looks forward to its eventual happy ending, it reveals the fissures in the power structures of white, Christian, national authority. In particular, the text uses moments of relative domestic security to anticipate the racial, national, and religious upheavals that are to follow. For example, Underhill, during his brief time as a schoolmaster, compares his apparent drudgery to slavery. The comparison has an interesting historical background. In fact, Mary Nyquist observes that, for seventeenth-century philosopher, Richard Overton, the schoolmaster had a strict, binding obligation to his students (174). Underhill uses this experience of compulsion to prepare readers for the experiences that will follow, even if the tonal shift necessary for one experience to anticipate the other seems dramatic or even awkward. Nevertheless, whether believable or no, Tyler uses an implicit comparison between Underhill’s labor-servitude and later slavery, and implicit chattel slavery in order to reify the racial order at the heart of the novel. Wendland argues that, in this moment, Tyler “implies a racial difference between whites and Blacks that makes the lack of economic security seem as brutal for the white as violence and punishment is for the African” (182). Underhill’s immersion into classical literature anticipates an argument for the ostensible superiority of white slaves to black chattel slaves not unfamiliar to readers of, for example, Thomas Jefferson. In the same way, his successful resistance to the yoke suggests his moral and racial superiority over even the chattel
slaves for whom he expresses sympathy. This comparison between white wage slavery and black chattel slavery implies a fixed system of racial superiority, even within the context of unfreedom. However, if readers follow the logic of the moment as a literary foreshadowing gesture, the narrative follows the protagonist from imagined allegorical slavery, through real slavery, and to a new democratic freedom instantiated by his nationalist and real family. The father replaces the king who replaces God, but Tyler unites the masterful father with Christian philosophy and nationalist ideology in order to create a new form of mastery rooted in American democratic polity in the home. The narrator’s suffering has been a necessary trial, and, on the other side, lies a newly reconstituted national family.

Underhill’s personal experience with white slavery also illuminates the degree to which the devaluation of whiteness was linked to competitive nationalism. When the British navy withdrew their protection of American ships after the American Revolution, Britain explicitly exposed American vessels and, by proxy, the American state, to predation by Barbary pirates. At the same time, Britain implicitly rejected America from the league of European, white, and collaborative capitalist powers. America became a nation at collective risk of losing its claims to all the benefits of Eurocentric, Anglophonic, racial superiority, as individual Americans were placed at personal risk of having their bodies commodified in the unfree labor market.

In particular, impressment put the question of American whiteness and claims to liberty to the test. If, after the American Revolution, the British could lift their protection from American ships and impress American sailors, they could essentially transform America into a space as open to European plunder, captivity, and commodification as the colonial Caribbean or West Africa. Without a working claim to equality and supremacy in the Atlantic, the United States itself might become a peripheral nation, a frontier space, both part of Atlantic society, and
subordinated to greater Atlantic powers. All of independent North America might transform into a space like colonial Nova Scotia or Sierra Leone, included in the commerce and politics of the Atlantic, but relegated to the margins as a space reserved for the subjects of more powerful European actors.

With this in mind, the creation of the American navy takes on particular racial, hierarchical, and even philosophical importance. The Naval Act of 1794 reestablished the United States’ standing navy only after years of ongoing attacks on American commercial vessels by Barbary pirates, only after the Haitian Revolution, and only after years in which America was at risk of being cut off from Atlantic maritime trade. The reestablishment of the armed navy was an effort to protect the sanctity of the nation as a space with geographical access to the Atlantic, as a partner in Atlantic trade, and as an ideal of the inviolate national body, on equal standing with other Atlantic powers. In the same way, Tyler’s reestablishment of the American family after the crisis of Barbary piracy affirms the sanctity of American identity against threats both real and imagined.

Tyler's novel therefore functions as a particular kind of horror novel with the white American as victim. In it, all of the signifiers of racial, spiritual, class, or national sanctity prove violable. American citizenship and heritage is meaningless, religious affiliation is open to debate and conversion, liberty can be foreclosed and, perhaps most unsettling of all for the hierarchies of power in the Atlantic, whiteness offers no protection at all against the loss of the very privileges it was designed to guard. In fact, if anything, all of these ostensible signs of power only make Tyler's narrator more appealing as a target for predation. The very codes and signifiers in which Underhill has draped himself—his liberty, his national heritage, his free laborism, his whiteness—become sources of weakness instead of strength.
The novel systematically inverts and recontextualizes all of the hierarchical signs of national power at the very moment when the nation was anxiously and busily engaged with erecting and supporting those same signs. America as a state was attempting to exert power both in the Atlantic and southward and westward at the very same time that it was becoming increasingly obvious that the nation was vulnerable and, potentially, subordinate to other powers. The American state was premised upon the erection of expansive capitalist business practices, exclusive class and racial caste systems, and a presumed divine favoritism. Yet, in practice, America was a nation unable to protect its citizens in the Atlantic, much less project international power there. So Tyler's novel is not simply about one individual's struggle to resist enslavement, but rather about a national identity under assault, struggling to reassert itself.

Nevertheless, as Underhill becomes a valuable laborer and, eventually, a doctor during his enslavement, the text permits moments of critical comparison and, as a result, memorializes the heterogeneity of the Atlantic slave market. For example, although he traffics in some general antisemitism, Tyler also finds a Jewish benefactor, who tells him “I owe you my life. I owe you money, which you cannot oblige me to pay. You think a Jew will always deceive in money matters: you are mistaken” (234). That the text remains somewhat ambivalent on this point is of a piece with its general tone, at once open to the people and experiences the narrator encounters, and also deeply invested in the stereotypes with which this openness is at odds. In something of a reversal of the routes of the slave trade, the narrator discovers a diverse religious and ethnic Atlantic, encompassing the American South, Algiers, Medina, Giza, and Jerusalem. He holds to his Americanness, his Christianity, and his American-Atlantic capitalism, but he approaches the diversity he encounters without hostility.
This is both demonstrative of the diversity of the Atlantic market and, perhaps, a calculated display of American capacity for international compassion. If the frontier or captivity narrative is meant to elicit sentimental feeling in its readership, either for ostensibly superior whites or for similarly enslaved Africans, Tyler’s novel functions to elicit national sentimentalism. Sarah Sillin, for example, notes that the name of Updike Underhill’s second ship, The Sympathy “invites us to recognize that sentiment carries Underhill into a series of fraught cross-cultural encounters…these scenes suggest that the protagonist cannot resist expressing sympathy for foreign peoples” (101). However, Sillin argues that that sympathy is meant to work in both directions. By demonstrating his own capacity for sympathy, Underhill invites international readers to feel sympathy for a besieged American subject. Sillin writes, “By developing themes of rootlessness, slavery, and captivity, Tyler’s novel dramatizes pervasive concerns over the potential dissolution of domestic bonds and the destabilizing effects of foreign relations, which preoccupied Americans in the decades following the Revolutionary War. To address these anxieties over the United States and its role in the global sphere, writers and political leaders alike turned to eighteenth-century theories of sentiment” (102). Along with its elements of picaresque and its adherence to the generic conventions of the Barbary captivity narrative, the novel is, therefore, a sentimental fiction. However, it is not a sentimental novel fixated upon the plight of any one individual, or even of a frontier population under assault, but of an entire nation. The American state, engaged in uneasy relations with foreign powers, must demonstrate, to the literary world and to the world at large, its capacity for feeling, in order to elicit feeling, camaraderie, and solidarity around shared tenets of racial superiority, providential Christianity, and the right to national sanctity.
It is with this in mind that Tyler’s novel's conclusion takes on such nationalist gravity, as Underhill embraces Yankee American identity with a vigor that admits the heightened stakes of his choice. The family that he elects to form when he returns to the United States reconstitutes all of the hierarchical systems that were under assault for the protagonist and for the nation he represents: patriarchy, white citizenship, liberty-rhetoric, Yankee heritage, and Christian fellowship. Tyler used much of his novel to cast doubt about the power of these very signifiers to protect individuals in the Atlantic or to ensure the equality, supremacy, or validity of the nation. The creation of an American family at the conclusion of the novel diffuses these anxieties, but does not fully dispel them. Although Wendland insists that “the social conflict of Native American genocide on the frontier, the class rebellions, and the presence of hundreds of thousands of African slaves are erased or silenced in this fictional social harmony of readers,” the reader leaves the novel with the sense that the narrator and the author are clinging to codes of power and order precisely because they suspect that they are under siege (Wendland 170).

The extension of a national maritime presence was premised upon the very same hierarchical codes of economy, spirituality, race, and class that ordered the national family and polity on land. To undermine those codes, or to demonstrate their violability in the Atlantic, is to suggest the potential that they are innately unfounded, imperiled, or even inverted. The whiteness and Yankee heritage so necessary for nationalist identification in Tyler’s novel, the involvement in Atlantic mercantile economy, even the generic conventions of novelistic picaresque, all become points of assault. The foundation upon which the edifice of state is erected, the codes in which the state is most invested, all become the fodder for that assault, and the rhetorical, generic, philosophical, and economic ideologies that undergird expansive American identity reveal their weaknesses. If all of these measures of national identity could be undermined, then
their meaning might be reversed utterly, so that American claims to superiority were not only misleading and unfounded but also demonstrative of American cultural inferiority.

This anxiety is by no means confined to narratives of captivity or Barbary enslavement. In fact, it becomes considerably more pronounced in commercial maritime texts, which note the anxiety produced when the ostensibly free body becomes the site of convergence for the providential and syncretic Christian philosophies, and capitalist ideologies that flourish along Atlantic trade routes. As white free-laborers and authors saw the many ways in which white bodies could come to occupy the position of the unfree—through Barbary capture, through captivity, and, increasingly, through wage slavery—they came to see the ways in which they too could become the commodified captives used to instantiate capitalist and Christian convergence in the Atlantic market society. They increasingly recognized that their relatively unfree laboring identity was necessary for the instantiation of modern Atlantic society.

The Atlantic’s mobile seafaring populations constituted both its periphery and its core. Ships brought culture from place to place, mixing, and producing the features of a universal syncretic religious, economic, and philosophical society that united Philadelphia, Le Pac, Benin, and Liverpool. They were the essential base of the Atlantic mobile economy, the foundation upon which Atlantic communities constructed themselves. Though fluid and shifting, the cultures developed aboard Atlantic ships also served a universalizing and unifying function for Atlantic societies, connecting diverse centers through market routes. Those maritime cultures were composed of human beings in relative and shifting positions of freedom or unfreedom. So often made invisible to the Atlantic societies that they linked through labor and trade, they suffered, worked, and even died so that the market could thrive. Their bodies, therefore, became the focal points of the convergence of providential Christian and market-oriented capitalist
ideologies. Even Olaudah Equiano, as a “particular favourite” of heaven, presented a text in which his body incarnated providential capitalism by accruing value that was simultaneously economic and spiritual. Narratives of unfreedom only further underscored this reality. Captives like Updike Underhill and the protagonist of *Humanity in Algiers* were all essential but, in their captivity, largely invisible parts of a broad Atlantic economy that traded in souls and bodies at the same time. As the unfree elements of supposed free-laborism became clearer throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the nature of this captivity, invisibility, and erasure would, likewise, become more pronounced.

**Richard Henry Dana and the Yankee Gaze**

If Tyler presented an emergent American state in need of a robust maritime presence to protect its geographical and ideological borders, later texts, like Richard Henry Dana’s 1840 autobiographical account, *Two Years Before the Mast*, presented the extension of that presence into uncertain international markets and philosophical cultures. Edward Sugden notes that Dana “shows how, as the United States increasingly realized its early expansionist energies while also becoming dependent on a complex globalized economy, these same cultural forces placed considerable pressure on the notion that there could be a shared way of reckoning time across the nation and then further into the unsettled borderlands of the continent, through other foreign countries, and into the rest of the world” (88). Sugden identifies the central motivating structure of the narrative, as well as its tense and unsettled core: it is at once expansionist and aware of the vulnerability that that expansion entails. As a result, the novel demonstrates the fact that even supposedly free labor could, like the captive experience, reveal the anxieties of a culture attempting to assert racial, philosophical, and national hegemony as normative and dominant.
Two Years Before the Mast is a quintessential antebellum seafaring adventure and travel narrative that both exemplifies the genre’s most recognizable characteristics and suggests the anxieties that haunt Romantic accounts of the oceanic market. Daniel Walker Howe argues that “for all the political liberty that American institutions and ideology promised to adult white men, in practical terms most lives were disciplined and limited by the economic necessities of a harsh environment and the cultural constraints of a small community. Instead of ‘freedom’ from demands, it might be more accurate to think of the American husbandman as possessing ‘agency,’ that is, the ability to act purposefully in the service of goals” (40). As he travels along the trade routes of maritime exchange, Dana brings with him this American sense of agency without freedom. Dana’s protagonist certainly maintains his own “agency,” particularly as a writer, who gives narrative order to the events of his time at sea. However, whether he maintains “freedom” is open to question, even by the author, himself.

Following the exploits of an educated gentleman who goes to sea to cure or to escape a case of bad eyesight that prematurely ended an academic career, the text claims to be a straightforward account of Dana’s adventures at sea, filled with descriptions of seafaring life and observations of what he saw. This includes the usual sailor’s life events, along with an extended sojourn in Mexican California and the Sandwich Islands. As a result, the text adheres largely to its audience’s demands for light adventure and for descriptions of exotic locales and peoples. It also contains no small degree of colonialist salesmanship, encouraging Atlantic American readers to support and pursue exploration and repopulation of Spanish and unclaimed lands to the south and west. Nevertheless, despite its seemingly straightforward travel-narrative structure, the text offers moments of uncanny interrelation of commodity capital, syncretic spirituality, and providential Christian philosophy.
Dana’s overt gestures toward nationalism also underscore the problem inherent to binding ideals of nationhood to notions of race and freedom. Just as was the case for Tyler, Dana’s loss of personal freedom within a strict hierarchy aboard the merchant vessels on which he shipped implicates his country in a potential loss of white racial identification. Dana’s sailor uses his structuring gaze to present himself as the embodiment of American values and American hegemony, but, when crewmembers are “made” into slaves by a dictatorial captain, a troubling possibility appears: the prototypical American might be unfree, indeed, might be increasingly unfree. If Tyler’s loss of freedom implied the loss of the special value of his whiteness and, further, suggested the loss of his nation’s claims to international racial identification, Dana’s loss of freedom suggests that the extension of America’s borders might, in fact, make its people less free. In so doing, the terms of racial superiority upon which the nation was implicitly and explicitly founded might break down, causing the American state to become a racialized, subjugated, and subordinate one.

In order to hold these anxieties at bay, Dana’s protagonist constantly projects an imperialist gaze, even as his body experiences humiliating subjugation. For example, Dana presents the west coast as a “barren waste,” on its own terms but particularly in comparison to the New England of his birth. Edward Sugden argues that Dana’s experience in California gives the national past meaning through imagined “simultaneity” (Sugden 84). Home goes on, Dana imagines, while he, at the periphery, witnesses its opposite. So periphery helps to construct and give meaning to home. Nevertheless, like Ian Baucom, Sugden rejects the romantic “temporal turn in nineteenth century American literary studies,” presenting it less as a generic and philosophical awakening to a broader world and more as the development of a national imaginary within the context of capitalist colonialism. The news that Dana receives from home
suggests an ongoing connection between home and the periphery as well as the creeping extension of a national presence westward (Sugden 85-7). In short, when Dana considers the alternative national public in California, he imagines it always in relation to a New England, an American state that exists simultaneously and is always ready either to conquer or be conquered by its competitors.

The simultaneous perspective allows the observer to draw categorical comparisons between societies and, implicitly, to consider where the home state resides in the hierarchy of capitalist nations. As the United States became part of a globalized economy, its citizens, in Sugden’s words, both “revealed in” connections to the greater world and became “obsessed with the demarcation of boundaries, the setting of limits, and, increasingly, the securing of their borders” (90). In the globalized world that Richard Henry Dana chronicles a generation after Tyler, Sugden notes that British openness to Pacific trade threatened to devalue American Atlantic trade, again threatening to turn America into a subordinate or inferior power in the greater cosmology of capitalist exchange (Sugden 90). Writers like Dana and Tyler, therefore, both hope to procure an established status for the national imaginary and remain anxious about the position of the American state relative to the rest of the world.

To be clear, American primacy was not assured on the California coast that Dana explores. For example, Mexican inspection was required of any ship hoping to do business in California. Nor was American protestant Christianity to be assumed. In California, for instance, Protestants were required to convert to Catholicism in order to hold property. Sailors could not even count upon the extension of a common language in the west, so Dana’s ability to speak Spanish made him a valuable go-between when the Pilgrim made its way to the alien coast.
(Amestoy 27-8). All of this suggests that the tenets of Yankee nationalism that Dana brings with him to California are, if not under assault, then at least open to dubious inspection.

What Dana’s novel does, therefore, is to couple whiteness with nationality, while naming other societies, including Spanish colonial societies, aboriginal societies, and even the syncretic non-Eurocentric societies Dana encounters while aboard the *Pilgrim*, as all essentially alien, non-white, excluded. At the same time, he reveals the anxiety behind attempts to erect edifices of national affiliation around codes of race, class, capital, and Christianity, by demonstrating the brittleness of those same codes. Whiteness could be taken away, nationality could become a marker of subordination, class hierarchies could allow the individual to tumble, rather than to rise, and religious affiliation could become contaminated and blended.

The unspoken anxiety at work in the narrative is over whether the nation will conquer new lands and shores, or whether it will overextend and weaken. Indeed, would it, like the waning Spanish colonial powers, find itself diminished and even racially suspect? When Dana observes "Spanish" colonial lands, the diminished imperial status of Spain looms in his mind. So too does the implicit racial and religious alienation of Spanish citizens so important to later nineteenth century American-Spanish contests for dominance. Would America prove capable of conquering these Spanish lands to the west and south? Or would America fail and, in so doing, become increasingly marginalized, spiritually impure, and even racially suspect? When Dana’s captain threatens to make Dana and the other sailors into slaves, to conduct a grim racial transformation over their bodies, the narrative therefore personalizes and embodies larger fears about the meaning of American identity in the Atlantic. Exposed to attack, attempting to extend geographically and to exert Atlantic influence, the nation is like the hardworking Jack Tar
around whom the novel is centered: industrious, plucky, casting his gaze over new shores, but also under potential assault.

**Dana and the Making of a Slave**

Thus, the white author makes special note of the way that the same system that offered Equiano escape from racial determinism might rob white sailors of the special status conferred upon them by racist logic. During a scene in which a sailor is flogged for misbehavior, the draconian captain metes out discipline that degrades the sailor’s body both directly and symbolically, stripping it of both its flesh and its talismanic whiteness. Dana narrates the exchange: “‘I'm no negro slave,’ said Sam. ‘Then I'll make you one,’ said the captain.” The sadistic captain relishes the physical and racial mastery he performs in the two-fold punishment. Giddily, he announces “‘You see your condition! You see where I've got you all, and you know what to expect’—‘You've been mistaken in me—you didn't know what I was! Now you know what I am!’—‘I'll make you toe the mark, every soul of you, or I'll flog you all, fore and aft, from the boy, up!’—‘You've got a driver over you! Yes, a slave-driver—a negro-driver! I'll see who'll tell me he isn't a negro slave!’” (47). Such declarations inform the crew and Dana’s readers of the proximity and similarity of the sailor’s life to that of a slave. They also indicate the constructed and conferrable nature of slavery as a position of powerlessness and punishment. The disempowered sailor or laborer is always in danger of being converted to a lower racialized caste. The victim even cries out for the help of Jesus Christ, but the captain answers that he has taken the place of the savior, a brutal inversion of the hierarchies of Christology within the Atlantic market.

The mental subjugation that Dana depicts advances the notion, also present in *The Algerine Captive*, of slavery as a question of will and consent. Saidiya Hartman notes that the
“repressive problematic of consent frames everyday practices in terms of mutual obligation and reciprocity between owners and the enslaved. Thus it stages the agency of the enslaved as a form of willed self-immolation in that what is ‘consented’ to is a state of subjugation of the most extreme order” (Hartman 53). In some sense, Dana’s narrative self desires this “willed” enslavement, because he desires the instantiation of national, patriarchal, and cultural authority. However, this matter of consent does not function as an apologia for slavery. It does not suggest that the enslaved are innately inferior. Rather, by staging dramas of subjection in white bodies, authors like Dana suggest that all individuals in the Atlantic marketplace, black or white, slave or free, might desire or consent to subjugation. Dana willingly invites the humiliations of life aboard the Pilgrim, just as Tyler’s narrator discovers that true slavery is the slavery of the mind. Both suggest that the market is divinely ordered around the logic of submission and mastery and that all individuals are subject to this commodifying “self-immolation.” Hartman wonders whether “the only difference between freedom and slavery [was] to be ascertained in the choice to labor dutifully,” and these texts suggest a similar view of freedom (Hartman 141). Freedom, then, is a state of willed personal and spiritual submission to commodification as well as to violence and labor. In short, there is no freedom, only submission and mastery cloaked in different manifestations.

With this in mind, free labor takes on more complex philosophical significance. In an Atlantic world in which, returning to Hartman, “emancipation instituted indebtedness,” work itself was a demonstration of both belonging and ascension, a performance of the concept of freedom through the experience of indebted labor (Hartman 131). Labor communicated the fact that the laborer belonged to the divine and social lenders of liberty, and that the laborer was willing to repay that social and divine debt through work. Work was a form of penitent
acknowledgement that freedom too entailed responsibilities to society and to the god that ordered the universe around the logic of exchange (Hartman 135-6). Furthermore, the equality and sociality Dana presents revolve around communal suffering and subjugation. The studious but remote Dana gives himself to the community of fellow sailors, in order to embark upon an economic adventure that, he hopes, will also inculcate his own personal growth. But, in order to do so, he must also give up his freedom, autonomy, and body to accept the subjugation enforced by corporal punishment, as the cost of inclusion in a market-driven community. He becomes a member of the elect society of fellow seamen when he accepts his status as a relative slave.

This is representative of an Atlantic world in which there are more slaves than masters, more unfree bodies in circulation than free ones. As Susan Buck-Morss argues, the Hegelian dialectic of mastery and slavery, so central to conceptions of culture and self in the slaveholding Atlantic societies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, developed in response to actual slavery. Liberty evolved as a concept in response to its opposite. With this in mind, Dana’s “willed” submission to mastery is also evidence of his desire to uphold the normative foundations of mastery and power upon which his society was formed. Dana plays out the literal drama of slavery in order to uphold, as Buck-Morss suggests, the ideal of liberty.

However, if Equiano and other emancipated Atlantic writers used their proximity to the unfree to present God as the ultimate and benign owner, texts like Dana’s emphasize what possession truly means: powerlessness, subjugation, and uncertainty. Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh note that “paradoxically, the worst sites of oppression and terror offered opportunity for collaboration.” For example, the prison “was something of a leveler, where the radical protestant, the sturdy rogue, the redundant craftsman, the Catholic recusant, the wild Irishman, the communist, and the cutpurse met on roughly equal terms” (60). If we accept this view, then
we might also accept that what Dana describes is where the myth of the American dream, liberty, and democracy, begins: not as a mighty ideal, but in the harsh levelling realities of the ship; not with a divine light, but with a punitive lash.

**Class Desire and Invisible Sailors**

Perhaps it is natural, then, that the text, in some respects fetishizes the common man. The narrative, like Tyler’s, revolves around an educated young man of relative means choosing or being forced to choose to give up his class privilege to become a laborer among a mass of other laborers. Jason Berger argues that the relationship between reader, author, and sailor-figure became a common triptych in antebellum literature because authors increasingly wanted to explore the kind of labor-oriented authenticity that the sailor represented. He writes, “The literary marketplace’s anxiety about the issue of authenticity is, in part, a symptom of foundational fantasies about class and labor experience…the position of the common sailor becomes a fantasmatic locus of enjoyment” (26). However, Dana’s efforts to transcend to new heights of spiritual or personal understanding by sinking downward in the hierarchy of labor and command are largely circumscribed. He learns only that he is less powerful than the market, that there will always be another person with more potential claim upon his body and soul than he has. All he seems to gain is the knowledge that his privileged racial or class status is a mere mask, obscuring the reality of his servitude and subjugation to the market, to the buyers in the market, and to the inchoate god who operates through the market. If he gains and communicates any “authentic” knowledge of maritime life, it is of the undeniable authenticity of violent subjugation in the Atlantic.

Dana himself was a man who engaged with a promiscuous but ambivalent sort of class mobility. A member of Boston's Brahmain sect, he spurned Harvard for a life laboring at sea, and
returned home to practice law. He had, therefore, the privilege of experiencing class as a malleable thing. By leaving home, Dana gains a new perspective on the place and society he has just left, and can see it anew. He goes to the periphery to better judge the nature of “home.” In fact, Bryce Conrad calls this “objectification of self” the “obsessive concern” of the narrative (292). Moreover, Conrad notes that this alienated perspective allows Dana to consider himself better too (295). In California, for example, the self is, mutable and uncertain. As Conrad observes “Dana’s speakers picture the visible self as an object changed into unfamiliar forms by experience” (304). In Conrad’s telling, this objectification is all a part of reasserting racial, personal, national, and ideological norms. Conrad notes that Nathaniel Philbrick describes Dana’s text as a captivity narrative in which “the virtue of heroism of the captive depends upon his unshakable allegiance to his original identity (Conrad 302).” If Dana’s narrative is a captivity narrative, Conrad argues, it is only because Dana is essentially a captive of his own home, forced to remain there in order to maintain a sense of self (Conrad 310). However, that Dana questions his own identity is of a piece with the logic of the text as captivity narrative: the text raises the specter of a transformed identity so that the protagonist can more forcefully assert the normative self. The protagonist is presented with a drama in which he hopes, essentially, to convert back into the person he has always been.

However, Dana traversed an odd trajectory from Boston Brahmin society to laboring seaman and back, and his time at sea, along with the vocal antislavery and anti-despotic advocacy that he developed as a result of his time at sea, made his return relatively constrained. He returned home and used the successful publication of Two Years Before the Mast to help establish himself as a New England lawyer, but never fully made his way back into the upper echelons of New England society. Dana's vigorous antislavery advocacy and legal career attest to
his understanding that what was legally permitted in the hierarchies of power, both in the American state and aboard American ships, was not necessarily just (Amestoy 5). And so, ashore, Dana developed a strong reputation as an advocate on behalf of abused sailors and escaped slaves, if not always a successful one. In fact, Jeffrey L. Amestoy notes that Dana drew upon his reputation as a sailor and a lawyer to write publicly against despotic captains who found their way before juries (96). Dana also wrote freely against the often violent hierarchies aboard American ships in publications like the *American Jurist* (Amestoy 57). Dana’s open opposition to slavery was at odds with the generally hierarchical feelings espoused by others in Boston society, who frequently looked down on both black Americans seeking freedom and the Abolitionists who agitated on their behalf (Amestoy 148).

In fact, Dana returned home from his time at sea in many respects more the embodiment of the Atlantic class outsider than he, perhaps, expected. In his narrative, he rebels against the strictures of Harvard and, aboard the *Pilgrim*, is demeaned as a landsman going to sea as a kind of tourist. These are not unfounded critiques. However, they also ironically allow Dana to experience and represent the experience of marginalization that life amid Atlantic commerce could inculcate. The sailor was at once a part of society and marginalized away from society. Jack Tar embodied the tension that Sugden identified in American culture at large: simultaneously expansive and vulnerable. Perhaps appropriately, when he returned home, Dana remained at once a member of New England society and an outsider to his Brahmain heritage. He, for example, brought many aspects of the sailor’s life home with him, even writing freely about his visits to America’s urban brothels and other ostensible dens of vice frequented by sailors, and permitting his wife, Sarah, to read about his exploits (Amestoy 85). This suggests that Dana brought home the ambivalence evinced by sailors who perceived themselves as bound
within a complex moral web of providence and superstition. In fact, Dana’s perspective on the nature of providence even made its way into his legal practice. Amestoy, for example, notes that, like many Abolitionists, Dana believed that God would provide “a faithful juror” to help decide cases in favor of freedom (Amestoy 165). Dana’s time among the laboring classes awakened his Atlantic maritime syncretic beliefs and his class consciousness, even as it marked him as an outsider on land.

In the moment in which his captain threatens to "make" a slave, Dana, perhaps, anticipates the anxiety that his desired class mobility could produce. Though Dana enjoys the freedom to traverse class boundaries, his return may not be absolute. Others may not even be that lucky. The unfortunate sailors on the receiving end of the Captain's outburst convert to a lower class, lower even than the oft-abused Jack Tar, and even to a lower racial order. Despite Dana's personal class journey, his text demonstrates that the polity of the ship, and, by extension, the polity of the American state, was one in which freedom could be taken away and might not ever be returned.

Dana experiences an uneasy transition to home, perhaps, because the sailor class for which he felt such an affinity was one that Boston society would just as well have ignored, even as it benefitted directly from maritime trade. Howe explains that “New England Yankees made themselves one of the world’s great seafaring peoples…seaport Americans earned livings not only as merchant sailors but also as fishermen, whalers, and shipwrights” (Howe 47). Nevertheless, the Atlantic, as well as the Pacific coast, that Dana describes is populated by people who largely remain invisible to the societies that depend upon their labor. He explains, “Death is at all times solemn, but never so much so as at sea. A man dies on shore; his body remains with his friends, and ‘the mourners go about the streets;’ but when a man falls overboard
at sea and is lost, there is a suddenness in the event, and a difficulty in realizing it, which give to it an air of awful mystery” (19). These sailors’ lives are defined by the lines traced between places, by brief encounters ashore, and by long periods of isolation, during which all that seems to remain of them is their laboring value and commodified identity. And so they seem to exist only as ghosts, entities that persist on the margins of Atlantic society, even as they vitally empower its centers of trade, commerce, and culture.

Moreover, Dana’s direct embeddedness in this market forces him to confront the degree to which sailors were asked to make personal sacrifices in the name of sustaining the market. While reflecting upon the death of George Somerby in “Twenty-Four Years After,” the conclusion that appeared in every edition of Two Years Before the Mast published after 1869, he writes, “There he lay, not over nineteen years of age, ruined by every vice a sailor's life absorbs” (179). The sailor’s body “absorbs” the vice and sin of a society that depends upon his labor to survive, and disperses it in death. Somerby is sacrificed, then, not only in the service of the market, but also in the service of the spiritual community of the Atlantic. He dies so that the market can thrive, and also so that the market’s many souls may be cleansed.

This sense of being forgotten, rendered invisible, or even damned invites readers to reinterpret the Atlantic as what Avery Gordon might term a haunted space, suffused with and empowered by crews and ships, unfree bodies that are never seen, powerful absences that announce themselves only by their effects in the tangible world. Gordon writes, “The ghostly haunt is a form of social figuration that treats as a major problem the reduction of individuals ‘to a mere sequence of instantaneous experience which leave no trace or rather whose trace is hated as irrational and ‘overtaken’” (20). Readers should keep this “ghostly” haunting in mind both as they consider the ocean over which Dana sails, saturated with the unseen dead, and as Dana’s
fellow crewmen encounter the privations and cruel social structures of life aboard ship. The sailor’s passion, his trial under the lash, serves as a reminder of the many sacrifices sailors had to make in order for the maritime trade to function. They willingly or unwillingly took on the punishments and powerlessness necessary for other individuals—the captain, the company’s owners, even the consumers in distant ports—to experience freedom in the market and in the culture of the Atlantic. For example, in a chapter entitled, “Loss of a Man—Superstition,” the ship’s cook laments, in response to the death of crewmember, George Ballmer, “‘To work hard, live hard, die hard, and go to hell after all, would be hard indeed!’” (20). These sailors have a sense that their unfreedom may be necessary for others to claim freedom, their labor necessary for others to enjoy leisure, and their damnation necessary for others to secure election.

This is a fact borne out by the economic realities of the landed slave system the sailor’s replicate at sea. Edward E. Baptist, for example, points out that “Enslavers used measurement to calibrate torture in order to force cotton pickers to figure out how to increase their own productivity and thus push through the picking bottleneck.” Troublingly, these enslavers were successful. Baptist writes, “After the Civil War, when many cotton planters would pay pickers by the pound at the end of a day’s work, free labor motivated by a wage did not produce the same amount of cotton per hour of picking as slave labor had…this system confounds our expectations, because, like abolitionists, we want to believe that the free labor system is not only more moral than systems of coercion, but more efficient” (130). Dana seems cognizant of this grim reality and to transpose the coercive “torture” that Baptist describes into the lives and onto the bodies of his sailors. This form of coercion was not incidental to the economies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but essential to them.
Pinned between freedom and bondage, between vice and virtue, the sailors in Dana’s account also demonstrate the peculiar legal and moral ambivalence of the sea. Lauren Benton writes that “by its very nature, the ocean has seemed to demand the mutual recognition of legal norms derived from natural law or other law standing outside the control of polities. At the same time, the historical weakness of such legal regimes has given the oceans an enduring association with lawlessness” (Benton 105). Benton describes the sea as a place that both demands and evades legal conquest. Dana’s text demonstrates the moral and spiritual elements of this evasion. Rightly so, for, if the cultures of the Atlantic are brought together by the logic of a universal moral system of righteous capital, codified in law, and expressed through legal contracts, all of which are backed by divine intent, then the economic and legal uncertainties of maritime trade reflect deeper moral and spiritual uncertainties as well.

If Equiano believed that a life of constant conversion offered an ironic stability, a sense that, because he was always changing he was always ascending, Dana’s narrative shows readers the particular superstition and fear of doom that arises in a life of uncertainty and rootlessness. He writes, “A sailor's life is at best, but a mixture of a little good with much evil, and a little pleasure with much pain. The beautiful is linked with the revolting, the sublime with the commonplace, and the solemn with the ludicrous” (122). This is not to say that no moral code could take hold in the Atlantic. In fact, as Benton notes, “the high seas….came to be understood as a peculiar legal region in which multiple powers exerted influence but not control” (Benton 110). With this in mind, the directives of the Atlantic market served a unifying purpose. The logic of profit and loss, equivalent exchange, and circular mobility maintained stability in an Atlantic governed by multiple legal systems. When sailors or writers ascribed supernatural or
providential significance to that economic order, they asserted a universal divinity that crafted
order out of the chaotic networks of trade, law, and cultural exchange in the Atlantic.

Dana uses the hardships of seafaring life and, particularly, the death of fellow
crewmembers to examine the superstitious and darkly religious nature of sailors’ belief systems
within a mobile life in the Atlantic. The sailors with whom he travels share a semi-contradictory
conviction that they are hell-bound for their lives of sin and vice, even as they suffer through
difficulty in expectation of heavenly reward. For example, Dana describes one fellow sailor who,
“after leaving home… had spent nearly twenty years, sailing upon all sorts of voyages, generally
out of the ports of New York and Boston. Twenty years of vice!” (90). In moments like this,
Dana’s seemingly dry description of exploration and adventure reveals his internalization of a
widespread sense that the sea is a space of depravity and perilous moral instability. To be in
contact with the oceanic trade markets is to put one’s very soul in jeopardy, for the market seems
to infect all who touch it.

This openness to the perils and possibilities of new markets and new lands remains
fraught in the text, and rightly so, for the moral and providential nature of newly opened national
spaces posed a serious question for nineteenth-century writers, politicians, and philosophical
thinkers, alike. Joseph Fichtelberg, for example, notes that “speculation, in all senses of the
word—stockjobbing, risk taking, unproductive labor—seemed to be the antithesis of…rational
order. Not only was speculation driven by the passions; it was also the preserve of the wealthy
and unscrupulous and thus, of the old, despised, aristocratic order.” On the other hand, he writes,
“Providentially, the Louisiana Purchase made the past unnecessary by opening up vast new tracts
to common enterprise. Combined with the land bounties distributed to Revolutionary veterans,
such opportunities amounted to a wholesale endorsement of democratic individualism and the
modest prosperity now open to all (188). What this suggests is a widespread belief in the providential properties of expansion into newly acquired lands, matched with a healthy suspicion of “speculation.” Though Dana makes his journey to the west by sea, rather than by land, he remains uncertain about whether his venture is providential or merely acquisitive.

Moreover, this uncertainty was more pronounced, as Fichtelberg notes, because, after the acquisition of French Louisiana, American farmers and explorers found themselves in competition with the waning Spanish (191). Hoping for stability, such individuals attempted to stake a claim to the west in whatever way they could. Elsewhere, Fichtelberg notes, “fortune seekers, in the race for security, denounced speculators in one breath and amassed land in another. Poor farmers sought compensatory power in magic, and anxious property holders found comfort in speculation and rumor” (198). This mix of magical thinking, geographic expansion, and ambivalent attitudes toward the acquisitive nature of land possession demonstrated anxieties that were heightened by the expansive nationalist context that dominated the early nineteenth century, and became increasingly politically contentious as the century wore on. These concerns also blend many of Dana’s own generic preoccupations: nationalist expansion or debasement, acquisition or failure, conventional Christian or syncretic spiritualism all become elements of an ongoing and contentious public debate about the nature of westward national expeditions. And so, throughout his narrative, Dana wonders whether the journey is either nationally and spiritually healthy, or overly profit-driven, and, therefore, contemptible.

These concerns were tied to the questions of power and submission that energize so much of Dana’s narrative. Fichtelberg writes, “On the nation’s borderlands, questions of sovereignty were inescapable, and the need for paternal sanctions intensified” (198). Individual farmers, explorers, and citizens at the frontier of the American state sought legal claims to land, desired
the aegis of official national sovereignty, and craved the order that “paternal sanctions” might provide. The desire for national order at the frontier evolves, in Fichtelberg’s telling, into a desire for paternal mastery over the land, its people, and its culture. These same desires play out in their most brutal form aboard the Pilgrim, in which the desire for paternal control becomes a tense interplay between both sides of what Foucault calls the “pleasure of power” or what Hartman describes as “willed” enslavement. To some extent, Dana and the other crewmembers take pleasure and comfort in submitting to the domineering will of a leader as they travel to lands with uncertain claims. In so doing, however, they unleash the dictatorial powers of a captain who wields his power at the end of a lash. As a result, Dana’s wish for command becomes, like his implicit wish for nationalist expansion, an ambivalent desire. Though he may wish for national expansion and national mastery, he remains unsure of whether that expansion and mastery is benign or malign. Moreover, he remains cognizant of the fact that, as he sails the corridors of Atlantic trade and brings the ideologies of the east to the west, he embodies all of these contradictions and, good or ill, brings them with him.

In response, Dana communicates his sense of his own embodiment of ambivalent desires and values, and his own role in spreading the ideology of paternal control and expansion, as a kind of frontier contamination. Dana uses the language of contagion to consider the embodied moral effects of the Atlantic market and its itinerant sailors. He writes, “It has been said, that the greatest curse to each of the South Sea Islands, was the first man who discovered it” (122). Dana recognizes the catastrophic nature of European incursion into the Caribbean, the Americas and even the Pacific in commercial, moral, and biological terms. He continues, “Every one who knows anything of the history of our commerce in those parts, knows…that the white men, with their vices, have brought in diseases before unknown to the islanders, and which are now
sweeping off the native population of the Sandwich Islands, at the rate of one fortieth of the entire population annually” (122). His language belies his belief in the material effects of vice and capitalist expansion. Here the market itself becomes a body, of which the sailors are essential but contaminating parts. This body is inextricably intertwined with and subject to the moral superstructure of providential capitalism.

**The Body Auction**

Dana’s narrative also demonstrates the way sailors used their own bodies, and the bodies of the dead, as ritualistic and fetishistic repositories for the synthesis of the universal providential capitalist culture that kept nationalist Atlantic projects afloat, if still ambivalent and syncretic. This conflation becomes especially stark in the funeral rites of the crew. In a scene that becomes a common feature of other maritime texts, the funeral of George Ballmer includes an auction of his now reliquary possessions. Dana explains: “It is either a law or a universal custom, established for convenience, that the captain should immediately hold an auction of [the dead man’s] things, in which they are bid off by the sailors, and the sums which they give are deducted from their wages at the end of the voyage.” This serves a practical as well as a symbolic purpose. Dana writes, “In this way the trouble and risk of keeping his things through the voyage are avoided, and the clothes are usually sold for more than they would be worth on shore” (21). It is difficult not to interpret this scene as emblematic of the commodification of the sailors aboard the ship, and the spiritual significance of commodification. In life, Ballmer’s body contained both his value as a laborer and his potential value in the future. He was an individual, but also a potentially tradeable commodity in the marketplace. In death, his direct value collapses, leaving only his abstracted, potential market value to be dispersed in the form of his personal effects. Clothes and trinkets contain the Ballmer that could have been, the money he
could have made, and the value he could have brought to another ship or to another journey. In short, they are haunted by his absent market value. The other sailors seem to recognize the sacredness of this conversion, from man to thing and from thing to the container for a soul now lost, for they pay extravagant sums for small items, in part as a form of reimbursement to Ballmer’s family ashore, and, in part, out of solemn and religious respect.

Moreover, this funeral scene suggests the sailors’ awareness of their potential to be erased by the commodifying logic of their trade, as well as their desire to resist that erasure. Hester Blum writes that “for most sailors, death at sea represented a putative erasure from terrestrial and human memory” (162). In fact, Blum explains that sailors took solace in the small reliquary markers placed throughout the islands of the Pacific to memorialize the dead who otherwise had no memorial (166). If sailors and their labor were rendered invisible by society, their death and “erasure” foreclosed the possibility of their return to and disruption of the society that thrived off of their work, sacrifice, and even death.

Nevertheless, Dana’s description of the dead auction demonstrates the degree to which sailors used market logic to make up for the absence of the normative burial amenities, including church and family plot, that would have been offered to the dead at home. The sea itself is the burial plot for countless sailors, lost to but remembered by the maritime economy they served. Similarly, relative to Melville's *White-Jacket*, Jason Berger notes that the ship's log's notation, "D.D" for "Discharged, Dead," suggests "an odd turn of phrase hatched by some seasick accountant." He writes, "It seems to speak to the fact that the *Neversink* [the ship at the center of *White-Jacket*] produces reproducible, replaceable laboring bodies and functional actions out of the masses of living men. On the other hand, this bizarre need to discharge the dead may bespeak an attempt (unconscious or otherwise) to occlude the excesses that the system garners from
sailors’ bodies and actions” (Berger 223). The body auction, and the sailor-author's recording of the event, therefore also function as both material and expressive forms of resistance against textual erasure.

These economically-derived religious practices served the essential function of providing the same qualities of order to sailors that burial practices on land provided to communities of the faithful. Blum continues, “seamen’s desire for...’closure’...is derived from the material conditions of maritime labor, in which stowage, confinement and restraint—of men and of things—are fundamental practices. When death at sea can only exist as a metaphor (represented by the figures of a locker, a cave, or a grotto), rather than as a material practice that they can perform, sailors discover a breach in their understanding of the poetics and practices of maritime life” (177). Into this “breach,” sailors poured a unique philosophy of economic supernaturalism. Blum writes, “Sailors’ faithful attention to objects therefore becomes a conceptual tool for translating into materialist terms the absence caused by death: that is, the objects, labor practices, and shipboard exchanges that comprise the true targets of death’s effect” (179). More than this, however, the sailors’ relics allowed them to fold the simultaneously productive and oblitative forces that dominated their lives—the market and the sea itself—into a comprehensible and comprehensive belief system. They used the commodities left behind after a sailor’s death as material substitutions in the dematerialized world of Atlantic maritime economy and as physical monuments for the burial at sea, which, otherwise, offered no memorial.

Even so, Dana’s prose permits a twinge of discomfort with the swiftness and superstitious nature of such practices, suggesting that the frequency with which sailors’ bodies were reduced to or exchanged for other commodities remained a troubling feature of Atlantic maritime life. He writes, “We had no sooner got the ship before the wind, than his chest was brought up upon the
forecastle, and the sale began. The jackets and trowsers in which we had seen him dressed but a few days before, were exposed and bid off while the life was hardly out of his body, and his chest was taken aft and used as a store-chest, so that there was nothing left which could be called his” (20). Continuing, he notes the taboo that follows haunted objects: “Sailors have an unwillingness to wear a dead man's clothes during the same voyage, and they seldom do so unless they are in absolute want” (20). Gordon reminds readers that “ghosts are never innocent: the unhallowed dead of the modern project drag in the pathos of their loss and the violence of the force that made them” (Gordon 22). Appropriately then, the sailors recognize that something both commonplace and, in some way, unnatural has occurred in the transfer of man to tangible commodity good. Though the process is appropriately ritualized as part of the ecclesiastical practices of providential capitalism, it still reminds the other sailors of the ease with which they might also be converted into post-human commodities, and the degree to which their lives could be exchanged, even in death, for an equivalent value of commodity goods.

Especially in these funeral scenes, Dana demonstrates the way Christian tradition intersects with animist, heterodox, and superstitious belief systems, which have all come into contact in the Atlantic Market. The form of religion practiced aboard the ship appropriately bears all the signs of the mobile heterogeneity that produced Atlantic cultures. Dana, for example, writes of a conversation he has with the cook, in which he finds that he “was full of the superstitions once more common among seamen, and which the recent death had waked up in his mind” (21). As Christine Leigh Heyrman recognizes, supernaturalism spread throughout the Atlantic and North America to such an extent that preachers “actively dismissed beliefs in witchcraft and magic as ‘superstition’” later in the nineteenth century, in a way they hadn’t in the eighteenth (Heyrman 73). So the cook’s beliefs have a rich history, even if they are not exactly
orthodox. Moreover, they will, as Heyrman notes, continue to have effects at sea and on land as
the ideologies and heterodox philosophies of the Atlantic marketplace increasingly influence
societies around the Atlantic.

In this moment, Dana illustrates the prevalence, even across racial boundaries, of belief
systems that were deeply engrained in both the free and unfree cultures of Atlantic maritime
exchange. Echoing Equiano, the cook believes in providential design that frames supernatural
events as productions of divine intelligence. He goes on to tell Dana “stories of dreams, and the
unusual behavior of men before death” (21). He even suggests the way that providential events in
nature might intersect with the nationally competitive elements of Atlantic trade. Dana writes
that the cook “had heard of ships, too, beating up the gulf of Finland against a head wind, and
having a ship heave in sight astern, overhaul and pass them, with as fair a wind as could blow,
and all studding-sails out” (21). Taken together with the auction of the dead crewman’s goods, a
practice that invests personal effects with monetary and sentimental value, while also using them
as fetish tributes to the dead, readers see the maritime belief system come into focus. Colin
Dayan similarly recognizes the way that fetish objects in the syncretic Atlantic take on profound
social significance and demonstrate the ability to empower the unquiet dead, along with the
social processes that attended their life. The constantly shifting Christian, animist, superstitious,
and racial formulations that Dana observes are all held together by the economic system that
maintains these sailors in its grasp, and by the proximity sailors share to the commodities they
invest with the same providential value that suffuses their own bodies.

Nevertheless, Dana turns away from superstitious readings of these events, insisting upon
a rational interpretation and Enlightenment objectivity to keep philosophical problems to the
margins of the narrative. In his concluding chapter, he actively resists romantic notions of sea-
life, writing, “There is a witchery in the sea, its songs and stories…I have known a young man
with such a passion for the sea, that the very creaking of a block stirred up his imagination so
that he could hardly keep his feet on dry ground.” Nevertheless, he continues, “This fine drapery
falls off, and he learns that it is but work and hardship, after all. This is the true light in which a
sailor's life is to be viewed; and if in our books, and anniversary speeches, we would leave out
much that is said about ‘blue water,’ ‘blue jackets,’ ‘open hearts,’ ‘seeing God's hand on the
deep,’ and so forth,” (Concluding Chapter). Still, though Dana might maintain that his text and
his experiences adhere to Enlightenment norms and orthodoxies, his text reveals the anxious and
unsettled nature of a mobile life lived at sea. Embedded within the commodity exchange market,
he is forced to confront the meaning of his own body as a commodity with importance as a
symbolic repository for market exchange value and spiritual significance. At the same time, he
must consider his position, as well, as an invisible and suffering laborer, whose harsh life is
necessary for the sustenance of the Atlantic market community.

**The Pilgrim and Capitalist Colonialism**

Notably, Dana’s first ship is named the *Pilgrim*, strengthening his adventure’s narrative,
historiographical, and ideological connections to an earlier touchstone of North American
providential capitalism. If his ship’s journey may be called a pilgrimage, or if it represents an
extension of the puritan pilgrimage, it is a pilgrimage that explicitly conflates religious and
commercial pursuits. Sacvan Bercovitch is careful to remind readers that “Puritan society was
not middle class” even though it “established the central tenets of what was to become…our
‘dominant culture’” (xiii). The relative universality of that cultural dominance is open to debate,
but it is clear that the trade, exploration, and colonialism that Dana describes, helped to spread
American hegemony and to present as normative its tenets of providential Christianity bound to
expansive market capitalism. This marriage served to instantiate, justify, and codify claims to new lands, and new markets. Daniel Walker Howe notes that Americans “needed frequently to glance back over their shoulders, toward the ocean that continued to bring them goods, additional people and new ideas. Atlantic crossing times and costs would both fall steadily over the next thirty-five years and for the rest of the century, integrating commodity markets, even on the North American frontier, in an early example of what our own era calls ‘globalization’” (Howe 48). Dana’s voyage is, therefore, tied to the “civilizing” forces of capitalism and Christianity that connected a mobile economic venture to an imaginary and expansive Atlantic, uniting the people it bound together as members of the church of capital.

As evidenced by Dana’s conflation of Spanish lands with “Christian lands,” Christian hegemony was intimately tied to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’ evolving nationalist projects. Entering Mexican waters, he remarks, “We felt as though we had got into a Christian (which in the sailor's vocabulary means civilized) country” (35). Although he earlier admitted that the spread of colonialism would decimate the pre-capitalist, non-Christian cultures throughout the Americas, Dana here uses Christianity as a stand-in for colonial modernity. Dana offers a vision of Atlantic capitalist Christianity suppressing non-capitalist, non-Christian cultures throughout the Americas and “uplifting” the population. This is not far off from Equiano’s plans for a virtuous providential Capitalism spreading the fruits of modernity to Africa. Taken together, the authors present a consistent picture of providential capitalism as the ideology that empowers both capital and Christianity to spread as colonizing ventures. Both authors use this colonialisit perspective to imagine a universal Atlantic ideology and system of trade and value exchange that sustains itself and uplifts the diverse populations of the world.
Nevertheless, by remaining ambivalent about the nature of that hegemony, texts like Dana’s present the possibility of an implicit rebuke to even their own nationalist frontierism.

This push and pull between Atlantic universalism and nationalist particularity was especially important in the revolutionary to antebellum periods. Sean X. Goudie, for example, writes that “Hamilton proposes the strategic expansion of commerce…for Hamilton, the model U.S. empire flows south and east: his notion of empire is not bent on continental expansion and conquest, but on the command of the hemisphere’s tradeways” (Goudie 88). Similarly, Goudie notes that John Adams’ letter to U.S. Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Robert Livingston, “makes transparent what Franklin’s paracolonial posture mutes: that the ‘commerce’ of the West India Islands’ is the most vital component part of the entire ‘American system of commerce’” (62). Moreover, Goudie observes that “If Franklin frequently engages in acts of paracolonial negation in his writings, anxious to repress the potentially deleterious social and cultural effects of commercial excess on the emergent national character, Hamilton not only sustains U.S. paracolonialism in the West Indies as an affirmation of the United States’ special mission to spread liberal and republican values in the hemisphere; he also strives to build a U.S. commercial empire there” (63). Goudie, therefore, reasserts the tense rhetorical and philosophical back-and-forth that American Revolutionary patriots held over the question of national expansion, based upon slavery. Even as Dana extends an American identity abroad, he carries with him this unsettled national inheritance. It is never fully clear whether the extension of American nationalism is good or bad, virtuous or wicked, ennobling or infectious.

In practical terms, religion served a key role in the advancement of Atlantic nationalism and hegemony, a historical fact to which Dana’s ship’s name and journey also implicitly harken. Vincent L. Wimbush notes that “even as ‘religion’ became more restricted and less pervasive in
traditional or superficial terms, it became more powerful in terms of providing, for example, the ideological and discursive framework for the modern nations” (Wimbush 50). As was the case for frontier and Barbary captive narratives, religion served a key role in differentiating national identities as well as in distinguishing between “civilized” and “savage,” as Eurocentric and North American powers attempted to extend their influence around the Atlantic. When Dana insists, “I never knew but one sailor who doubted its being the inspired word of God,” he generally subsumes the fact that that “word of God” appears decoupled from specific religious denominations, suggesting the syncretic religious practices that were so prevalent at sea, even as he offers a Christian American nationalist framing (Concluding Chapter 25). Dana, therefore, treads a fine line. On one hand, he dramatizes his own mobility among different religious traditions within a unifying Atlantic marketplace, and, in the process, elaborates the porous barriers between civilization and barbarity or between one national identity and another. On the other, he ties Christian development to the larger project of nationalist demarcation and capitalist and political expansion.

As a result, Dana also implicates the mordant hope that his fellow sailors hold out for divine intervention into their extraordinarily difficult lives in the processes of personal, social, and moral definition that preoccupied the nation. This too is a result of historical circumstance. Bercovitch, for example, notes that “The Yankee Jeremiahs…shift[ed] the focus of figural authority. In effect, they incorporated Bible history into the American experience—they substituted a regional for a biblical past, consecrated the American present as a movement from promise to fulfillment, and translated fulfillment from its meaning within the closed system of sacred history into a metaphor for limitless secular improvement” (Bercovitch 94-5). In response, the Yankee Dana suggests a system of personal reform that, as for so many other writers,
combines moral development with literacy, labor, and Christian virtue. He writes, “A sailor never becomes interested in religion, without immediately learning to read, if he did not know how before; and regular habits, forehandedness (if I may use the word) in worldly affairs, and hours reclaimed from indolence and vice, which follow in the wake of the converted man, make it sure that he will instruct himself in the knowledge necessary and suitable to his calling.” Dana here yokes personal moral development to vocational improvement and expects reading to initiate a necessary conversion. He reiterates, arguing that, “The religious change is the great object. If this is secured, there is no fear but that knowledge of things of the world will come in fast enough” (Concluding Chapter 24). Sailors, he suggests, will learn to understand text. In so doing, they will convert into more virtuous members of a Christian laboring polity. Their virtue will then make them into better laborers and their labor will make them better Christians, so that the capitalist enterprise of shipping, exploration, and trade will become a self-sustaining vehicle for spreading Atlantic capitalist and Christian hegemony abroad.

**Conclusion**

If Dana’s vision of colonial expansion uses the market and Christianity as twin mechanisms for the spread of rational modernization and Yankee-rooted capitalism, it could not have functioned without the help of the literary marketplace. Howe notes that “New England Yankees made themselves one of the world’s great seafaring peoples; they had already traveled around Cape Horn and across the Pacific to open the China trade. They had a remarkable amount in common with the Dutch—another seagoing, predominantly Calvinist people who combined agriculture with commerce, practiced religious toleration, and had no compunction about subjugating native populations” (Howe 47). However, it was the dissemination of texts that reproduced the American Yankee archetype for transatlantic audiences. For example, Eve Tavor
Bannet notes that “American printers recognized and re-imported…narrative elements from captivity narratives which their forbears had earlier exported to Britain, as well as arguments from antislavery discourses which their forbears had shared with Britons, both of which had become topical again in America during the 1790s” (Bannet 60) In fact, In addition to his early positive reception, Dana’s literary output established important personal connections to other writers, including Herman Melville, who described his experience of reading Two Years Before the Mast as feeling “wedded” to Dana (Amestoy 161). Thus, Dana doesn’t merely bring an American colonial perspective to the maritime travel genre, but also uses the genre to extend the Yankee heritage and to assert its primacy as the root of American hegemonic power.

It is clear that, as Jason Berger argues, Barbary piracy narratives were just as often instructional as they were sentimental, while antebellum seafaring literature was both concerned with presenting the fantasy of an authentic vision of the sailing life and preoccupied by the problems inherent to nationalist expansion. Berger writes, “Earlier narratives by sailors held captive by Barbary States such as Algiers and Tripoli were often written to provide specialized and serviceable information for other seamen. Sea narratives produced in the antebellum era, however, not only circulated within a maritime laboring and reading community, but also were progressively addressed to a larger domestic readership” (Berger 27). However, Berger’s own recognition of the commodity identification in maritime novels, his examination of the literary market’s desire for “authenticity,” and his analysis of the processes by which the Atlantic market allegorized laborers and even worked to “occlude the excess” persons at the heart of Atlantic commerce, all suggest a broader view. Barbary captivity narratives and maritime free-labor travel narratives appear to have served both sentimentalist and instructive purposes for the reading public. Authenticity, therefore, is a deceptive lynchpin around which to posit a change in
literary goals. The authenticity of experience in Barbary captivity narratives was intended to elicit the sympathies of white readers even as it was intended to warn sailors about the possible dangers of the Atlantic maritime trade. Meanwhile the supposed authenticity of later maritime narratives was meant to lend believability to fantasies of labor that bound sex, class, race, and nationalism into one ostensibly prototypical figure.

Dana as narrator, for example, maintains distance and difference from the rest of the crew, undercutting his autobiographical claims by transforming the other crewmembers into objects for analysis and, frequently, into figures for allegorical ruminations on philosophy, capitalist ideology, and nationalist identity. According to Berger, Lacan reads Hegel’s master-slave dialectic to present the master as the dominant capitalist and the slave as the figure dispossessed by capitalism (Berger 40). However, both figures are essentially united in Hegel’s ongoing struggle for primacy, so both are constitutive elements of capitalist interplay in the market. Dana reads his experiences through a similar lens, observing both mastery and submission at sea as the dual elemental experiences of Atlantic life.

The Atlantic was a space of potentially productive mobility, but also a space of potentially destructive conversion. Nevertheless, the special status of nation or of race could be undermined just as easily and as neatly as it could be reaffirmed in text, as well as in the embodied experiences of travelers and laborers in the Atlantic market. These narratives demonstrate that life in the mobile Atlantic marketplace could be dehumanizing, as well as transcendent. They suggest that the possibilities presented by mobile Atlantic life could swiftly transform into anxieties about the self, and about cultural identities that had profound philosophical implications. More than anything, these texts admit the centrality of the captive, yet mobile body, whether enslaved or nominally free, to the function and practical reality of
maritime Atlantic life, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As writers absorbed these captive experiences, they began to see greater reasons for philosophical and personal anxiety. Just as one person could find transcendence and mastery through the movement of their literal body in the Atlantic, and the movement of their representative and valued body through the market, any other person could find domination, violence, and submission as they traveled the same routes over the same churning waters.

Disrupting the racial and national identities that writers attempted to articulate and assert in the letters and politics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, life at sea demonstrated the tenuous logic of ideological, national, or racial superiority. At any moment, any person involved in the economy of the Atlantic could transform or convert, could gain or lose status. Just as the enslaved black laborer could trade upon his commodity value to achieve higher status, the free white laboring man could, at any moment, find himself transported into Barbary captivity, or meet a captain who wished to “make” him a slave. Given the tremendous importance of race for the production and demarcation of Atlantic culture, this instability presented intense philosophical challenges. What did it mean for the soul of a white person, if the white body could be captured and enslaved, subjected to abuse, or used as a laboring commodity? In the face of these many forms of subjugation, white writers attempted to assert racial, cultural, and national difference. They insisted that even their captivity and abuse communicated their elevated status. Yet, lurking behind these assertions of power is a tacit acknowledgement of the insecurity of racial superiority. In particular, texts like Tyler’s and Dana’s demonstrate that, even as white writers privileged their own evaluative gaze and their own national identification, they struggled to contend with the fact that their personhood was constantly threatened by the ineluctable moral logic of the Atlantic. In such a space, neither race nor nationality could protect
the individual from the inescapable reality of commodification. Even as they insisted that the privileged status of their bodies suggested the privileged status of their souls, the providential capitalist marketplace demonstrated that they were laborers in an economy much larger than they could comprehend, and things to be traded in a market they could hardly claim to master.
Chapter 4

Combustible Man: Consumption, Cannibals, and Commodity Horror at Sea
Questions of commodification, exchange, and even spiritual value were very real issues affecting the lives of the people most intimately associated with Atlantic trade. These issues arose amid the realities of impressment, Barbary captivity, and wage slavery. Moreover, the providential capitalist nature of mainstream accounts of maritime trade and travel allowed readers to explore the philosophical implications of these issues as they related to national expansion and antislavery politics alike. The persistent concern with commodification, displacement, community, and exchange in maritime texts offers evidence for the swelling anxiety over the value and status of the individual caught in a market-driven moral, cultural, and financial economy. What maritime slavery narratives, like Olaudah Equiano’s or Ukawsaw Gronniosaw’s, or Barbary captivity narratives, like Royall Tyler’s, and later maritime sailor’s trade and travel narratives, like Richard Henry Dana’s, also reveal is the centrality of the body to Atlantic providential capitalist discourse. The body—sacrificed, enslaved, consumed, converted, absent—is the site where capitalist exchange logic and providential Christian logic cohere, for good or ill. Anxieties over commodification, racial evaluation, and even the tense push and pull between mastery and submission were registered as embodied, corporeal experiences of loss, sacrifice, and passion. Abstract concepts of commodification and consumer logic became fraught and potent questions about the value and meaning of the body in the Atlantic marketplace.

In many respects, this anxiety is tied explicitly to the question of race. Given the overwhelming symbolic and ideological importance of white and black bodies in the construction of Atlantic societies, this should come as no surprise. In the white supremacist Atlantic, the white body was all that ensured liberty, salvation, and even election. But that whiteness could be undermined by unequal labor relations, unfair contracts, and the confounding reverses that attended mobility along the routes of Atlantic commerce. Whiteness served, in the
white supremacist Atlantic, as a catchall symbol, an assertive sign of superiority into which intangible values could be poured, in order to justify hierarchies of power. Vincent L. Wimbush, for instance, observes that white writers, politicians, and thinkers posited “something mysterious…variously referred to as beauty, sentiment, or sensibility, imagination or reason” to justify white superiority (Wimbush 59). However, maritime texts like Richard Henry Dana’s, or those of Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville, refocus critical attention upon the material in which these values are housed. Although these texts dwell upon the significance of whiteness and white flesh, they do so in such a way that reveals its violability and, as a result, suggest the potential diminution of whiteness as a stable epistemological sign of power. This is, perhaps, why Toni Morrison argues that Poe was the most important writer of his age regarding “the concept of African Americanism” (Morrison 33). She describes his “figurations of impenetrable whiteness that surface...whenever an Africanist presence is engaged” and calls Pym an experience of “haunting” of whiteness by a sense of otherness and by unstated blackness (33). All of this is to say that Poe’s investigations into the epistemological value of whiteness are really investigations into the hierarchies of power, natural, supernatural, invented, and innate, that structure his moral universe and are supposedly housed in white skin.

But the question of the body in the Atlantic market went beyond a question of racial significance. Indeed, the sacrifice of bodies became a progressively central trope in Atlantic fiction as the revolutionary age gave way to a more ideologically hegemonic and nationalist period, and to the increasingly industrial Jacksonian age, which was, itself, marked and empowered by the wholesale disappearance and violent destruction of people and communities. The ideology of individual free-laborism collided with the reality of demeaning labor conditions, so that the value of labor, and the value of the bodies that could perform that labor, remained in
question. This uncertainty led writers to consider the possible spiritual ramifications of bodily commodification. Was the body the receptacle of a valuable immortal soul? Was that soul the product of labor relations and remote contracts? Was the sacrifice of the individual necessary for the instantiation of community? These were practical questions for the sailors, free and unfree, who found their bodies mobilized and exchanged within the Atlantic market.

They were also perplexing philosophical questions in an age of expansive maritime markets and ongoing exploratory capitalist exchange. For example, Mary Nyquist observes the persistence of the biblical story of Jephtha, who, for the sake of military victory, vows to sacrifice his own daughter, in European discourse over the social function of personal sacrifice. Responding to George Buchanan’s 1554 *Iepthes sive votum*, she remarks that “when voluntary, sacrifice of life for the common good may unite the best in scriptural and Greco-Roman traditions” (93). She also notes that “[Bartolome] Las Casas argues that, when performed for the welfare of the entire state, the reverent sacrifice of fellow humans should not be judged as unnatural or unreasonable” (122). Nevertheless, the actual drama of human sacrifice came to signify the barbarism of colonized New World peoples in the European imagination. Nyquist writes, “Often regarded as a by-product of human sacrifice, *anthropophagy*—the Greek term for what Euro-colonialism, following Columbus’s lead, calls ‘cannibalism’—did not occur only outside European Christendom, however. For Protestantism, debates about the Eucharist provided an opportunity to stage a righteous revulsion against anthropophagy as a barbarous feature of Roman Catholic worship” (94). This dual attitude toward sacrifice, of both longing and revulsion, was vital to Atlantic providential capitalist literature. Poe and Herman Melville, for example, both toy with these dual interpretations, presenting sacrifice as, at once, sacred and profane, barbaric and necessary for the continuation of civilization. Increasingly, such authors
pursued the possibility that the market that was premised upon divine order could demand bodily sacrifice even as it produced profits that individuals might never see.

**Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Gordon Pym’s Pointless Adventure**

Edgar Allan Poe’s 1838 novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, contorts the traditional maritime adventure romance into a covert meditation upon the dehumanizing effects of commerce, racial relativism, and commodification anxiety. It uses the motif of a sacrificial body to portray the effects of commodification and consumption as anxious reenactments of Christian sacrifice. In so doing, it raises vital questions about the moral shape of a universe that appears to be divine in conception, but chilly, economical, and even bloodthirsty in its dictates. Moreover, the novel raises pressing questions about the early nineteenth-century American drive toward expansion and colonialism, and the American nation’s attempts to assert its status as a world power through exploration. Johan Wijmark points out that “When Poe wrote *Pym*, the Antarctic really had become a source of mystery again, and many Americans hoped that it would be revealed as a new territory for economic expansion. Some went further and took reports of ice-free Antarctic waters as indications that exploration would uncover a region of temperate climate—or, as in the infamous theories of John Cleves Symmes, even reveal an opening into the interior earth” (85). This fantasy of colonial expansion “is written…reflecting a desire among Americans to reject their colonial history and have the Republic assume its rightful place in the international community of nations” (85). Thus, the disaster that befalls Pym and the crews of the ships with whom he sails suggests a dim view of what has become a national project of hegemony through exploration and community through exploratory labor. Moreover, the god of this novel demands blood sacrifice in submission to the ultimate logic of consumption,
conversion, exchange, and equivalence, that extends from the Atlantic outward, toward a global south and toward a global market of commodities, souls, and souls as commodities.

Recent scholarship has attempted to situate Poe within the context of the racial and national politics of his age. Kevin J. Hayes, for example, helps to place Poe within a political, literary, and social climate that doubtless influenced his writing. Similarly, Jerome McGann and J. Gerald Kennedy have worked to recover Poe’s position as an emblematic antebellum American writer, despite his seeming “anti-nationalism” and mythical outsider status. On the other hand, Robert T. Tally Jr. suggests that Poe is best read as a satirist of antebellum literature and politics. If readers look back even further, David S. Reynolds both situates Poe within a literary and political climate, and productively reads the “subversive” elements of Poe’s literature. All of these readings are well-founded and important interventions into a long history of Poe scholarship that has largely read him in something of a vacuum, cordoned off from the racial and national politics of his age. It is important, however, to apply this contextualizing scholarship to issues related to a broader Atlantic culture, to see Poe’s interest in maritime fiction as evidence of an interest in the philosophical issues related to Atlantic capital commerce, and maritime philosophy and spirituality.

*Pym* is a novel that challenges both readers and critics to find meaning in its seemingly dissolving mess of potential readings, but, within the context of providential capitalism, it opens itself up as a text concerned with documenting an economic universe that is, ultimately, ordered around the logic of commodification, transaction, and, in the end, consumption. In some ways, *Pym* and Herman Melville’s *Redburn* mirror one another as novels concerned with literal and authentic representations of maritime labor. Wayne Grady, for example, argues that “Poe’s novel anticipates *Moby-Dick*, and even *The Grapes of Wrath*, in the way in which it introduces long
passages of non-fiction as a way of not only creating and prolonging suspense, but also of injecting an atmosphere of verisimilitude into the fictional account” (342). Nevertheless, this verisimilitude is only ever in the service of destabilizing the reader’s reliance upon textual authority and narrative reality.

As a result, other critical discussions surrounding Poe’s novel have centered upon its epistemological challenges, its racial formulations, and its structural and symbolic inconsistencies. For example, Darryl Jones discusses the “polar imaginary” that Poe employs to such intriguing, but indeterminate, effect. David Ray Vance mines the providential elements of the novel in order to assess the unsettled nature of the castaway text. Other scholars have focused upon elements of racial hybridity in the novel. This focus on Pym’s structural and symbolic challenges is no recent innovation in Poe studies. For instance, in 1978, Barton Levi St. Armand discussed the symbolic significance of Poe’s treatment of cannibalism in the novel, concluding that each ghastly sacrificial event in the novel represents a transcendent “ritual” of personal ascension for Pym. Tying these two modes of reading together, readers might see Pym as the representational product of both mid-nineteenth century scientific discussions, and the generic elasticity of the author’s most allegorically daunting works.

Paramount among the novel’s preoccupations is its curiosity and worry over the meaning of racial codes and their possible disruption. Indeed, Katherine Montwieler and Mark E. Boren point out, for example, that in their partnered escape from the murderous natives of the island, Pym explicitly figures the racially ambiguous Dirk Peters as white (Poe 188). Race, argue Montwieler and Boren, is “connected to violence, sexuality, and hybridity” in the text and, as such, implicitly comments upon the conditions of chattel slavery with which Poe’s readers would have been familiar. As such, “Poe shows us that violence is universally human, if often
racialized, and Pym anxiously suggests that disaster looms on the horizon” (Montwieler; Boren 14-15). Poe’s racial configurations, therefore, are even more ambiguous than they seem. They are at once of a piece with the racist hierarchism of antebellum America and disruptive of those same hierarchies, convinced of looming American racial hybridity and fearful of the violence that will erupt from the impossibility of interracial integration. This instability seems to pull the text apart and, indeed, the text closes on a note of such baffling ambiguity as to suggest that the author has simply given up on resolving its many inconsistences. However, the racial formulations of the text are comprehensible within a system of supernatural market economy: race is, like any other commodifiable value, something to be traded, exchanged, balanced, and desired. It too adheres to the logic of violent rising, falling, and give-and-take that orders the text’s other concerns.

The conferrability and reversibility of race extend to the novel’s curiosity about the sanctity of human personhood altogether. For example, Dominic Mastroianni recognizes that many readings of *Pym* have focused on its elements of racial hybridity and transformation, but extends his critique to “study how conceptions of social life can change when the boundaries between human and animal are taken not to be stable or inviolable, but rather volatile and readily crossable” (185). Although Mastroianni is careful to note that his definition of “hospitality” as a system of exchange does not overturn Poe’s racist caricatures or hierarchical thinking, the volatility it presents also suggests Pym’s post-human transformation into commodity and, in particular, into a consumable commodity—into food for the market and for other individuals. For Mastroianni, what maintains Pym’s humanity, even in the face of his potential loss of human-ness is his adherence to “hospitality,” the codes of conduct that dictate and negotiate social interactions among people. Of course, hospitality is, in part, one more facet of the western
colonial ethos of “civilizing” other cultures through demonstrations of virtuous behavior. This may be so, but it is important to recognize that that hospitality arises from a system of behavior ordered around the logic of economic consumption. Mastroianni, for example, recognizes that the moment in which a gull drops a hunk of human flesh aboard Pym’s raft as he and his fellow survivors starve is “a form of hospitality [that] is consistent with the chapter’s larger redefinition of hospitality as an unmasterable form of response” (192). That responsive “unmasterable” force might well be defined as the surrounding, perhaps transcendentally universal, reality of consumption and sacrifice. “Hospitality” in *Pym* is just one element of social life within the all-consuming market.

Moving away from the human experiences in the text and toward its unsettling but significant depictions of natural environments, Peter Taylor reads the novel’s closing gesture toward a supernatural but unreadable language written in stone, along with the repeated but never deciphered native refrain, “Tekeli-li” as moments of pure typology. He likens both the writing and the speech of the natives to the Book of Daniel “the only apocalyptic text in the Hebrew Bible [which] is read not as actual history but rather for its symbols and signs that enable the interpretation of ‘current’ history.” Taylor notes that, like the evidently supernatural writing that Pym discovers in the stones of the island, “in Daniel the mysterious inscription, written by disembodied hand, confounds every diviner” (18). On the other hand, Shaindy Rudoff insists that these codes are implicit attempts to uncover the root of racial hierarchism in Poe’s time. She writes, “In *Pym*, the codes themselves become Poe’s focus, his point of entry into a discussion of racial politics, religious texts, and the ideology of slavery. The text’s philological play re-enacts, and is in conversation with, the debate about whether slavery was a natural, divinely ordained institution or a purely human social construct” (Rudoff 63). In either case,
Readers should consider the possibility of typological meaning in two respects. Firstly, it suggests that, within the world of the novel, events are dictated by a divine but obscure hand. Secondly, it suggests that the novel, itself, is a typological text, one to be read symbolically and interpreted relative to current events—including, for Poe’s readers, slavery, the possibility of war, and scientific revolutions. The indecipherable stones are not meant to be deciphered, but to be seen as representative of a world beyond understanding, yet deeply involved in the daily experiences of individuals. If the novel presents market-exchange logic as active and formative in the world, it also presents it as divine, supernatural, and typological.

At the same time, the novel stages encounters that challenge readers to consider the meaning of the transition from pre-capitalist social interaction to capitalist exchange. Central to this transition is a shift from pre capitalist gift-giving to capitalist exchange is the text. As Hildegard Hoeller notes "the memory of a gift is not the same as the transcription of one. Once written down, the amount is fixed...the transcription of the gift inevitably records a specific debt—not a bond between people but a precise debt" (167-8). Similarly, Hoeller argues that in Typee, "Melville stages the conflict between gift economies and market economic thinking that is at the center of many colonial encounters. How can one comprehend one through the lens of the other?" (144) Readers might ask the same question of the encounter that occurs in Pym. Does the violence that erupts at the conclusion of the novel allegorically relate the violent overthrow of pre-capitalist gift culture by capitalist exchange and debt? Regarding Typee, Hoeller observes that "what escapes Tommo is that, in response to the gifts bestowed upon him, he is expected to become a Typee since gift economies function by drawing clear distinctions between brother and other" (150). If readers apply this logic to Pym, it is possible to read the moment of failed gift-giving between an American merchant ship and a native culture that Poe describes as a mutual
rejection of relational modes. Too-Wit's people offer a gift, which the sailors reject in favor of an economic exchange. The villagers, in turn, reject the imposition of capitalist economy and ideology. In that mutual rejection, the seeds of violence are planted. The cannibalistic horror that breaks out between the villagers and the sailors appears as the natural endpoint of a conflict over the logic of gift-giving. Holler explains that "gift economies bind tribal members through the bond of obligation." Again, regarding *Typee*, she goes on to note that "since he cannot see what other value he brings to the table, cannibalism over and over appears to him as the final gesture of self-interest and exploitation...that may make sense of the mysterious generosity he encounters" (151-2). *Pym* literalizes this experience. In this novel, the sailors really do have nothing to offer but themselves, and so they become the consumable gifts given in exchange with the villagers. Readers might consider this the embodied experience of a shift from gift culture to debt culture.

However, even as recording of debt—the recording of significant absence—signals the violence that attends capitalist acculturation, Poe, like Melville, uses sea-burial and the recording of sea-burial as an important substitution for proper memorialization, a form of writing that uses the logic of debt and value loss to ironically resist personal erasure. Hester Blum writes “while the coffin must be symbolically and materially unattainable in factual sea narratives, in these rare (yet canonical) fictional examples in sea literature, it can serve as the container for physical and spiritual salvation…Pym’s buried locker and Queequeg’s coffin become placeholders for the absent narratives of dead sailors” (183). By parodizing the maritime narrative, Poe emphasizes the way the genre frequently uses its own texts to memorialize the absent dead. “Ultimately,” writes Blum, “the sailor’s desire for bodily enclosure can only be realized in this textual form” (184). At the same time, Blum argues that, in the novel’s frustrated and clipped ending, “this loss
of narrative, neither author nor text materially remaining, is the theoretical component of the lack of a record of burial…so often lamented in sea narratives” (190). Ian Baucom has made similar claims about the allegorizing function of the ledger book and its ability to record loss. Again, readers should not ignore the way that this privileging of text elevates the allegorical logic of the market, the substitution of words and figures for bodies and graves, to spiritual heights. The text itself, as well as the genre it both represents and upends, serves the memorializing function that is otherwise unavailable to the dead at sea.

With all of this said, the novel’s interest in indecipherable codes, inscribed values, and potentially divine organization also arise from Poe’s immersion in the scientific questions of his day. The novel’s implications of a polar region reigned over by a divine or supernatural entity, for example, evidently represent an ancient desire to combine rationalism and supernaturalism by literally reaching beyond the limits of human navigation and understanding. Daryl Jones argues that, even for ancient Greek thinkers, a land beyond the polar limits of the world “acts as a limit-point of human speech and understanding beyond which is only silence and whiteness and consequently as a space with the potential to open up vistas of numinous terror” (51). He continues to note “the specifically American resonances of hollow earth theory,” by observing “their origins in the work of Cotton Mather, who, in The Christian Philosopher (1721), repeats [Edmund] Halley’s [1692] theories almost verbatim” (56). In fact, explorer, Cleves Symmes applied to the Senate to fund an expedition to prove the existence of what Jones calls “Symmes holes” in 1818, an endeavor that, though failed, would, Jones argues, have been present in the minds of Poe’s readers (60). This quest has always, therefore, been both scientific and mythic, representing a desire to rationally explore the realms of the phantasmagoric and philosophical. Jones even calls “the quest for the Pole…a desire to return to a prelapsarian state, the discovery
of a lost Eden before (or outside of) time” (63). However, in Poe’s hands that Edenic world contains and, perhaps, even emanates from the logic of capitalist consumption. All of the consumer sacrifices of the novel lead the main characters toward the divine space beyond the novel’s and the world’s termination.

All of these critical readings pursue the alluring enticements of the novel’s dense and resistant symbolisms and structural peculiarities. Readers should draw upon all of these sources for a better understanding of this difficult novel, but they ought to go a step further: the novel is not interesting merely for its epistemological innovations, its structural problems, or its symbolic density. It is interesting because of the way that all of these elements allow Poe to repackage a capitalist enterprise as a supernatural problem. Wayne Grady insists that “cannibalism existed for [Poe] beyond the limits of horror” (344). However, Poe’s selective decisions about what to depict and what not to depict appear to be part of a rather more manipulative game he plays with his audience. By denying representations of cannibalism, he entices his readers into desiring cannibalism. He extends his authorial hand beyond the pages of his own novel to draw us into the system of consumption that orders the text.

The tale is deeply ironic but in no ways more so than in its overall inversion of the adventure narrative. The novel’s seafaring events are initiated not by the titular Pym’s demonstrations of maritime prowess, for example, but by his failure, along with that of his friend Augustus Barnard, to avoid a literal collision with the maritime economy, in the form of a whaling vessel. Pym’s later stowaway passage aboard that whaler, the Grampus, turns into an extended chronicle of potential live-burial, rather than an opportunity for the young man to acquaint himself with the crew, their adventurous goals, or to their transcendental relation to the sea. Poe even refuses to narrate a mutiny that occurs during Pym’s interment. Then, after a
shipwreck, Pym, mutineer Dirk Peters, and Augustus all find themselves adrift and forced to resort to cannibalism. Pym and Peters are rescued a short time later by the *Jane Guy*, rendering the death and cannibalistic consumption of a crewman at best superfluous. Finally, the crew of the new ship lands upon what, at first, seems a verdant island refuge that reveals itself to be populated by cunning and bloodthirsty villagers who, rather than succumb to the superior technological strengths of the white crew, manage to outwit and murder them. These plot events reveal the extent to which Poe appears to be in constant conversation with the narrative forms he subverts. However, adventures are accidental in Poe’s narrative, exciting events take place off the page, and main characters are dispatched frequently and in such a manner as to render their deaths unnecessary. All of the tropes of white superiority and exploratory conquest dissolve into utter disaster.

This makes for an interesting, if sometimes frustrating, text, but it also serves to reverse the moral assumptions of prior maritime adventure narratives. Accounts such as Richard Henry Dana’s, or even Olaudah Equiano’s, assume that maritime expansion, driven by the needs and desires of capitalism, is also an essentially civilizing and blessed venture. When these authors narrate or imagine personal victories, or the potential future triumphs of expansive nationalist or capitalist projects, they assume God’s favor and divine election, grace demonstrated in economic terms. In contrast, Poe’s narrative posits a reverse course: such ventures demonstrate, if anything, divine disfavor, although, again, the economic nature of these events suggests that God communicates that disfavor through market forces. As David S. Reynolds notes, Poe’s narrative also functions as both an exercise in and inversion of mid-nineteenth century reform literature, which offered to “lift the veil,” on society’s sins. Poe uses testimony to critique the ostensibly righteous and rational nature of modern life, but goes a step beyond reform literature by insisting
that, beneath the veil of propriety, rationality, and divine orderliness, is an entirely inverted moral, racial, scientific, and psychological system. Behind the veil of Poe’s supposedly virtuous capitalist and enlightened society is not a clear moral system of divine favor and wrath, but a mirror universe, still ordered around capitalist principles, but with the elect and the damned, the successful and the failed, reversed. Ignore national entreaties to expand through trade and exploration, Poe seems to say, ignore too any moral system that blankets capitalism in simple and clarifying pieties, for these are misleading distractions from the course upon which all sail toward hell. At the center of this moral system lies a corpse, a commodified and consumed body, destroyed for nothing but the advance of a market that never particularly cared for it in life.

Even as the novel engages with an evidently national desire to discover and subdue a global south, a space both strange and ripe for exploitation, Poe suggests the folly of such a project. As Pym’s journey takes him to the absolute southern extremity, he projects an American capitalist colonialist perspective, moving directly from Nantucket, through the Caribbean, and to a South Pole that, beyond the ice, reveals an apparent tropical paradise. The south is a space of exotic encounters, unformed civilization, and cultural and personal flux. These are familiar extensions of the colonialist ethos to the global Atlantic south. Jennifer Rae Greeson, for example, argues that the Northern American psyche was constructed, in part, against visions of a colonial American south, and against a broader Caribbean and global southern other (44). However, this adventure is not a glorious one. The presumed “savages” of the story have cunning intellects and comprehend an occult belief system that, the endnote material suggests, truly does structure the world. In contrast, the ostensibly “civilized” white North Americans descend into savagery and cannibalism in short order. The Christian god that ought to protect the protagonists instead seems to present them with only endless and even tragic ironies. Moreover,
Poe’s characters discover the ineluctability of their own commodification, even as they attempt to master the Atlantic marketplace. In short, Poe’s novel suggests that the extension of providential capitalism southward is neither a victory nor a foregone conclusion.

Nevertheless, Poe recognizes the importance of the Atlantic itself as a space of imaginative conquest and expansion. He was not alone. As David Dowling observes, by 1838, “the zeitgeist was seething with romantic dreams of sea adventure” (35). Dowling notes that Poe “took only two transatlantic voyages in his lifetime, both as a boy” and, as a result “sorely lacked the degree of firsthand maritime experience that established the credibility of Richard Henry Dana and Herman Melville…Poe relied instead on popular and intellectual culture as the primary source material for his sea narratives” (32). Nevertheless, Dowling argues that Poe “construed [the sea] as one of the many antebellum creative renderings of the virgin territory inherent in the concept of Manifest Destiny” (33). True, the sea is an important, Romantic expanse for Poe, but he never loses sight of the fact that it functions very much as a space of trade. Maritime stories were profitable to the writer of fiction, but maritime trade was even more profitable to the nation at large. As Melville would a decade later, Poe blends the Romantic with the financial, presenting the sea as the space where economy achieves spiritual significance. However, because Pym remains strange, uneasy, and almost perversely unresolved, Poe darkens the hues of his Romantic-economic adventure. Here too he draws upon the trends of the literary market. In 1821, for example, Owen Chase published his Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex, an account of a disaster at sea that would also go on to inspire Melville’s Moby-Dick. In that narrative, Chase openly admits to cannibalism borne of necessity and, in so doing, raises doubts about the conditions necessary for survival that both Poe and Melville exploit for philosophical ends. The sea raises important questions about the
value and nature of the soul, as well as the goals and righteousness of the nation, but the answers it provides may not offer comfort.

The sacrifice endemic to Pym’s capitalist misadventures is essential to Poe’s critique of the ideological underpinnings of providential capitalism in his age. In *Capital*, Marx recognizes that the social conditions of capitalism were commonly narrated as if they were divinely ordered. In reality, however, the division of buyers and those with “nothing to sell but their own skins” was determined by conquest and violence (Marx 874-5). This material and theatrical conquest relies on analogical reasoning that the thing isn’t the self but its embodied relational networks—the body becomes an analogue of value and exchange both real and, in the commodity exchange market of the Atlantic, symbolic (136). For example, as Eric Sundquist points out, the 1839 ruling in favor of the *Amistad* slaves did not assert a general right to claim revolutionary self-possession, but, instead, reaffirmed the commodity status of persons, specifically based upon the fact that the slaves had been illegally purchased and sold in the first place (Sundquist 177). Sundquist suggests that “this also reveals the linguistic and conceptual tautology at the heart of slavery—what is a thing and what is a person? What is and what is not? Only violence could truly break through this circular dialectic” (182). Poe asks the same questions but, in the context of ostensibly free white labor, lets their unsettling conclusions extend beyond the barriers of race and freedom. The transactional logic that determined the humanity and liberty of slaves did the same for the supposedly free white sailors in Poe’s novel. Moreover, his narrative suggests the possibility that the extension of national identity actually required the sacrifice and unfreedom of both black and white persons.

Nearing the end of the novel, Pym evinces some satisfaction in having had a hand in furthering the aim of exploration, but admits that the cost of doing so is the bloody destruction of
an entire crew. Urging his captain to push farther south, toward what, ultimately, will prove the ship and its crew’s demise, Pym retrospectively insists “I must still be allowed to feel some degree of gratification at having been instrumental…in opening to the eye of science one of the most intensely exciting secrets which has ever engrossed its attention.” Nevertheless, he admits that he “cannot but lament the most unfortunate and bloody events which immediately arose from my advice” (111). In this case, the “eye of science” also sees with the eye of capitalism, for the crew’s actions are entirely mercenary as they explore the societies they discover in their approach to the South Pole. Just as the lives lost in the expedition are traded in for scientific advancement, so too are they implicitly exchanged in order to open new markets, to access new commodities, and even, in Pym’s case, to achieve spiritual and philosophical epiphany. If Pym here suggests that human lives have a value that should be spent if the ends are worthy enough, the novel supports his assertion time and again even as it undermines his paeans to nationalist, divine, or even rational order. Readers might here be reminded of Ian Baucom’s presentation of insurance logic and writing as generic and ideological forms that permit the market to profit even through loss. The loss of friends, the massacre of the crew, the deaths of the native villagers Pym encounters are all the necessary sacrifices made for the aim of a nationalist and colonialist adventure that portends to divine and economic ordination, but which reveals itself as pointless, tragic, and empty.

**The Capitalist Urge and Self-Destruction**

Naturally, therefore, Pym’s search for understanding in a morally obscure universe manifests in an obsession with documenting material commodity amounts and figures. For example, he engages in lengthy discussions and explanations of the *bouche de mer* or *biche de mer*, the sea-cucumber, to be found in the Antarctic island community his ship discovers. Pym
writes “a description of the nature of this important article of commerce, and the method of preparing it, may prove of some interest to my readers” (123). In fact, it is difficult to imagine readers, expecting Poe’s characteristic psychological horrors, to find anything of interest in the description that follows. However, Poe here is engaging in the tropes of the exploration narrative, a genre defined by its descriptions, which, it must be noted, serve to entice potential investors, explorers, or business partners, for future expeditions. Additionally, the biche de mer is a living commodity, a live thing with market value and even value as currency between the white sailors and the native villagers. Yet, in Poe’s story, the pursuit of the biche de mer allows the native villagers to tempt the crew of the *Jane Guy* into the archipelago and onto the island where, eventually, they’ll be slaughtered (121). The capitalist motive for exploration is, therefore, exposed as self-destructive. In its obsessive pursuit of profitable commodities, the capitalist urge blinds individuals to the perils to which they expose themselves.

Poe underlines the destructiveness of this attitude even further by putting it into conflict with the aims and ethos of an evidently pre-capitalist society. After the wreck of the *Grampus*, Pym and Peters travel south and discover a series of islands, later revealed to be named Tsalal and ruled by the duplicitous Too-wit. During their first encounters with the natives of Tsalal, Pym describes the way the *Jane Guy*’s crew “endeavoured to ascertain if they had among them any articles which might be turned to account in the way of traffic, but found great difficulty in being comprehended” (115). Michael Taussig points out that Native peoples didn’t view white Europeans as ‘God’ but as potential gods who could be both good and evil (Taussig 190). In premarket societies, exchanges were presented as reciprocal gift exchange, not simply economic transactions. The real evil of capitalist conquering spirits is, Taussig suggests, in rupturing the reciprocity of social and natural relations (197). As Hoeller might have anticipated,
a pre-capitalist culture of reciprocity clashes with a culture of acquisition, instantiating an inevitable violent cultural collision.

At the same time, villagers see an animate spirit in the inanimate ship and can implicitly imagine an animate man made into an inanimate thing. In the same way, the sailors see trinkets and sea cucumbers and imagine commodity exchanges. The white explorers are utterly distracted by their valuative mode of assessment, whereas the villagers attempt to discover the spirit or intelligence that animates the visitors’ arrival. If Poe here describes a discovery event, the moment in which a pre-capitalist society first encounters capitalist rituals and ideology, he also describes the birth of commodity fetishism. The text parallels the villagers’ evident miscomprehension of the ship, with the sailors’ over-valuation of the biche-de-mer. Colin Dayan notes that commodity fetishism insists upon the over-determination of a thing with social, and even supernatural significance (*Haiti, History and the Gods*). The body, the relic, the coin all function with the logic of the thing possessing and containing spirits of social interaction and even divine intervention. In this case, both sides of the transaction see the other in possession of a potentially valuable fetish object: the ship and the biche de mer, respectively. Pym and the explorers see live things and imagine commodities; Too-wit and the villagers see a commodity and imagines a live thing. Moreover, Too-wit does so because he imagines the living ship’s suffering. Even in reverse, the logic of commodification uses the suffering and sacrifice of a body as the pivotal moment in which its status as living being or commodity thing oscillates.

However, this may also be a case of the pre-capitalist society playing to and subverting the capitalist crew’s condescending colonialist expectations. When the ship’s cook leaves a gash in the deck of the ship Too-wit, appears “pushing the cook on one side…commenced a half whine, half howl, strongly indicative of sympathy in what he considered the sufferings of the
schooner, patting and smoothing the gash with his hand, and washing it from a bucket of seawater which stood by” (114). Taussig points out that the introduction of capital to the indigenous world introduced both the iconography of mastery in nature and messianic struggles for resistance (Taussig 183). Too-wit here essentially performs the logic of commodification in reverse in order to satisfy the American sailors’ expectations of messianic reception. The sailors expect the pre-capitalist natives to view them with appropriate awe and miscomprehension, so Too-wit evinces awe and performs submission, in order to gain his own advantage.

Though Too-wit’s performance adheres to the logic of providential capitalist commodification practices, it also alienates these practices, in part because it plays them in reverse, and, in part, because the performance is false. Pym notes that, “This was a degree of ignorance for which we were not prepared, and for my part, I could not help thinking some of it affected” (114). In this, at least, Pym is correct. Too-wit’s followers will commence to burn the ship, after murdering the majority of the crew, belying their understanding of the ship’s functional, but inanimate status (134). Too-wit appears to understand that the capitalist crew of the Jane Guy believes in a reality to which he is not subject. The crew is bound by the logic of commodification, by an essentially animistic belief in the allegorical equivalence between living and non-living things. Because Too-wit evidently understands this belief, but does not truly share it, he can perform it as a deadly form of play. This recalls Sianne Ngai’s discussion of “animatedness” as a form of performance that demonstrates social structures by performing them and animating them. Too-wit gives life through his exaggerated performance of commodity misidentification, to Atlantic capital’s ideology of all-encompassing commodification. He does so in light of the fact that, all along, the crew has treated ships and the commodities they carry as repositories of value, spirit, memory, and have treated the men who crew these ships as
potentially consumable commodities. In fact, by this point in the novel, Poe has been building a case for commodity misidentification, both through Pym and the other crew-members’ metonymic relation to things, and through Pym’s ongoing anxiety about cannibalism, the ultimate act of commodification.

**Commodity Misidentification in the Storeroom**

Early on, Pym begins the process of dehumanizing commodification, by transforming his own body into literal and figurative commodity cargo. Pym’s friend, Augustus Barnard, helps him to stow aboard the whaler, *Grampus*, by packing him among the other commodities to be shipped. Pym describes “the ends of the box [that] could be removed at pleasure” and announces that he “proceeded immediately to take possession of [his] little apartment, and this with feelings of higher satisfaction, I am sure, than any monarch ever experienced upon entering a new palace” (15). It does not take long for the dehumanizing aspects of Pym’s predicament to reveal themselves. After passing out, he wakes “strangely confused in mind” and notes that his “limbs were greatly cramped, and [he] was forced to relieve them by standing between the crates.” Then he announces that “feeling an almost ravenous appetite, I bethought myself of the cold mutton…what was my astonishment in discovering it to be in a state of absolute putrefaction” (16). Poe’s language here is careful and considered: Pym says he “bethought myself of the cold mutton,” ostensibly thinking of a necessary repast, but also potentially conflating himself with the mutton. In the context of the page, this makes sense: bit by bit, Pym loses his humanity and sees his body, mind, and soul transformed into commodities among other commodities. His legs have ceased to function, his mind is giving way, and his language begins to dissolve the distinction between himself and a hunk of stowed meat. The container for foodstuffs thus comes to resemble a tomb, and Pym’s live burial comes to resemble the process by which meat is cured,
stowed, and shipped for consumption. If he is to be reborn from this tomb, it will be as a body subject to the logic of consumption and commodification.

Poe’s treatment of Pym’s conversion into a commodity emphasizes the fact that commodification is an embodied experience of transactional logic, one in which a person loses selfhood, humanity, or life itself, so that others might survive. Pym’s fear of consumption initially and powerfully manifests in his interactions with Tiger, his faithful Newfoundland dog, who, starving, transforms from a friend into a potential murderer. At first, Pym is delighted that Augustus has stowed the dog in the ship to keep him company. However, as days pass with no escape from the hold, Pym discovers that “the sausages were entirely consumed; of the ham nothing remained but a small piece of the skin; and all the biscuit, except a few fragments of one, had been eaten by Tiger.” When Tiger begins to look for other sources of nourishment, Pym discovers that he is the only meat available. He recalls, “As I rubbed, he ran his nose against my hand with a slight snarl; but I was too greatly excited at the time to pay much attention to the circumstance… Presently I became aware of a singular hissing sound close at my ears, and discovered it to proceed from Tiger, who was panting and wheezing in a state of the greatest apparent excitement, his eyeballs flashing fiercely through the gloom…his behavior inspired me with so great a degree of fear, that I became fully aroused. He was now lying close by the door of the box, snarling fearfully, although in a kind of undertone, and grinding his teeth as if strongly convulsed” (26). Pym, trapped in a box, is nothing more than a self-conscious piece of meat at this point, having traded places with the hams and sausages already consumed. His fear is natural. Given his proximity to commodities, he has come to view himself as a commodity. When others come to view him in the same way, he is subject to the same fate that awaits all commodities: consumption.
This fear remains potent throughout the text, as characters are forced to consider, or even to carry out cannibalism upon one another. Moreover, the persistence of this fear suggests the essential logic of the market-oriented universe. In the moral cosmology Pym inhabits, a body contains value that can be transposed into an equivalent body of another kind. A person can, potentially, be traded in for an equivalently priced amount of grain or alcohol or meat. Furthermore, one must consume in order to avoid being consumed. One must lose for another to gain. One life must be spent to purchase another's survival. The market has transformed friendship and companionship into simply benign distractions from the reality of deadly competitive advantage that exists in the market-oriented Atlantic world.

**The Cannibal Urge**

On the other side of Pym's fear of being consumed lies his latent desire for consumption. For example, while Pym and his fellow survivors are adrift and starving aboard the storm-ravaged *Grampus*, a bird flies overhead, carrying the disembodied head of a sailor from another passing ship, this one decimated by plague. Pym writes, “The horrid morsel dropped at length with a sullen splash immediately at the feet of Parker. May God forgive me, but now, for the first time, there flashed through my mind a thought, a thought which I will not mention, and I felt myself making a step toward the ensanguined spot. I looked upward, and the eyes of Augustus met my own with a degree of intense and eager meaning which immediately brought me to my senses. I sprang forward quickly, and, with a deep shudder, threw the frightful thing into the sea” (70). Both Pym's fears and his desires are mingled in this scene. He aches to consume but shudders at what succumbing to the urge would reveal: that the universe is ordered only around the logic of consumption and exchange, and that everyone is designated as either the consumer or the consumed. Pym implicitly fears being made into a product like the meat with which he
shares metonymic proximity in both space and text, and desires, as a survivor of the capitalist
market system, to consume others.

In *Pym* readers see a character obsessed with the puzzle of consumption, the relentless
need to consume or to be consumed, as well as an author and an amanuensis who present an
ostensible history for public consumption, reiterating the experience of bodily sacrifice as an
instance of communion among a public readership. This is a persistent feature of Poe’s writing.
Writing in 1992, for example, Alexander Hammond pointed out the recurrence of tropes of
consumption in Poe’s texts. In “The Gold-Bug” and “Bon-Bon,” characters “convert foodstuff
into meals sold to and eaten by customers… [or the character] offers to convert his soul into a
‘stew’ to be sold to the devil. At the middle of each of these relationships, the exchangeable
commodity…can be metaphorically substituted one for another, as can the more mysterious
conversion and consumption processes at the extremes” (162). Hammond specifically links this
to the act of writing, saying that “because the exchange of that commodity is economic, writing
for the marketplace thus becomes both a kind of Faustian bargain with those who would buy and
control the author’s work and a commerce with the cannibals who ‘dine’ on it” (163).

Consumption is the central terror of the text, but also its most productive element. People
consume one another, so that they might survive, readers consume the novel so that they might
learn its secrets, and Pym learns to consume, in order to transcend the boundaries of perceived
moral logic, and to comprehend the divine but amoral economic logic that undergirds reality.

For a time, other, less troubling commodities keep Pym from succumbing to his desire,
but even these commodities reinforce the divinely-ordered religious overtones of Pym’s
suffering and need to consume. When the surviving men discover a barrel while diving beneath
the waterlogged decks, they literally survive off of wine and blood, taking satisfaction and
communion at the same time and conflating the consumer urge with Christian sacrament (73). All the necessary elements of a communion are present but the sacrificial body, and, as long as Pym resists the requirement for such a sacrifice, his salvation will be provisional at best. Though the wine may seem to save Pym’s life, it provides no nutrition, and even invites the kind of madness Pym experienced after days locked in the coffin-like hold of the *Grampus*. He maintains, “I had for some time past, dwelt upon the prospect of our being reduced to this last horrible extremity, and had secretly made up my mind to suffer death in any shape or under any circumstances rather than resort to such a course. Nor was this resolution in any degree weakened by the present intensity of hunger under which I laboured” (78). Readers know that this is but a temporary and deceptive repast, a commodity that merely distracts Pym from his essential need to act according to the logic of the market, to eat or to be eaten.

When Pym does finally succumb to the necessity for consumption, he at once loses his sense of what it is to be human and gains a greater sense of what it is to be a survivor in the capitalist marketplace. He converts into his first terrifying vision of the embodiment of consumer hunger let loose and transformed into a kind of madness, and becomes the consumer monster first embodied by his beloved dog, Tiger. He recalls, “At this moment all the fierceness of the tiger possessed my bosom, and I felt toward my poor fellow-creature, Parker, the most intense, the most diabolical hatred” (81). People are, the scene argues, little more than hungry animals, friendly when fed but ready to pounce upon one another for nourishment, protection, or survival. We will kill to eat, to survive, and to consume.

If Pym wishes to survive, he must face the sacrifices that underpin survival in a capitalist moral universe. He recalls, “I recovered from my swoon in time to behold the consummation of the tragedy in the death of him who had been chiefly instrumental in bringing it about. He made
no resistance whatever, and was stabbed in the back by Peters, when he fell instantly dead.”
Almost perversely, Poe has his narrator faint, but recover in time to witness the violence that will be his salvation. Pym sadly admits to his readers that he did what, for so much of the novel, he has longed to do. He writes, “I must not dwell upon the fearful repast which immediately ensued. Such things may be imagined, but words have no power to impress the mind with the exquisite horror of their reality” (81). Perhaps not, although Pym will violate this promise not to describe the event in just a moment. However, if the moral order of the Atlantic revolves around the logic of consumption, then this act is its most sacred rite. Pym’s “fearful repast,” is a necessary and even holy sacrifice in the providential capitalist Atlantic.

*Pym* performs this tense drama of desire and revulsion, by focusing on its central character’s struggles with how and whether to narrate scenes of consumption. Pym insists that he will not betray his own secrets, even as he satisfies our desires, our hunger, for the grim details. He writes, “Let it suffice to say that, having in some measure appeased the raging thirst which consumed us by the blood of the victim, and having by common consent taken off the hands, feet, and head, throwing them together with the entrails, into the sea, we devoured the rest of the body, piecemeal, during the four ever memorable days of the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth of the month” (81). Poe knows that, from the first stirrings of potential cannibalism, the reader has expected and longed for this moment. Finally, we see Pym succumb to the logic of consumption and in such a way so that we too can share in that consumption.

Poe goes a step beyond simply acknowledging the co-instantiation of commodity relations and consumption, to tease and implicate his readers in the brutal logic of commodity consumption. He shows us what happens to the blood, the entrails, the hands and feet of the victim, so that, as readers, we can devour them along with Pym, but also so that we might share
in a kind of communion with the survivors of the wrecked *Grampus*. The communal Christian sacrifice entwines with the calculating logic of market equivalence and exchange: one dead body for three live ones. Writing in 1992, Carol Peirce and Alexander G. Rose III also recognize the religious overtones of this blasphemous meal. They write, “The passing of the ship leads straight to the bloody cannibal feast, almost a parody of the Eucharist, the sacred ritual of the Grail mysteries. Pym shrinks in horror but presides over the lots and ultimately participates” (67). A grim echo of the sacrament of Holy Communion draws together the small and stranded society around the parcels of flesh that have both ceased to be human, transforming into meat no different from the ham and mutton of the storeroom, and taken on overwhelming spiritual significance, converting into the fetish objects that give the men no less than life.

However, just as Poe asserts the sacred status of the cannibalistic urge toward consumption, he undermines its claims to logic or necessity. Ironically, the stranded party is saved almost a moment later by another “large ham and a bottle of Madeira wine” that they discover below deck (82). The act of cannibalism was unnecessary except as a means to perpetuate consumer logic; the sacrifice was made to a god who cares little for the men or, if it does care, toys with them in the most perverse way possible. Consumption then is an act carried out for its own sake. Moreover, the rediscovery of wine and ham as lifesaving commodities allows the text to double back on itself, to reveal the way cannibalism, consumption, commodification, and communion have functioned as the primary values of providential capitalism all along.

Pym faces a greater spiritual crisis when his friend, Augustus, dies, presenting the challenge of whether to continue to obey the law of consumption, to treat his friend as the commodity he always was, and survive, or to resist the inescapable grasp of consumer demands.
He writes, “We now saw clearly that Augustus could not be saved; that he was evidently dying. We could do nothing to relieve his sufferings, which appeared to be great. About twelve o'clock he expired in strong convulsions, and without having spoken for several hours. His death filled us with the most gloomy forebodings, and had so great an effect upon our spirits that we sat motionless by the corpse during the whole day, and never addressed each other except in a whisper” (88). When Augustus begins to decay, just like the ham in the *Grampus* hold, it is as if nature itself is taunting the men for their decision not to obey its cannibalistic logic. The text presents the men with an enticing opportunity to eat a friend who resembles more and more a piece of meat and less and less a person. The longer they resist, the longer they strain against the essential values of the moral and natural universe they inhabit.

Nevertheless, although they do resist—or claim to—the market still succeeds in the end. Throwing Augustus’ body overboard only invites other operatives in the market to profit from their refusal. Poe completes the drama of Augustus’ non-burial, writing, “It was not until some time after dark that we took courage to get up and throw the body overboard. It was then loathsome beyond expression, and so far, decayed that, as Peters attempted to lift it, an entire leg came off in his grasp. As the mass of putrefaction slipped over the vessel's side into the water, the glare of phosphoric light with which it was surrounded plainly discovered to us seven or eight large sharks, the clashing of whose horrible teeth, as their prey was torn to pieces among them, might have been heard at the distance of a mile. We shrunk within ourselves in the extremity of horror at the sound” (88). This entire scene has been orchestrated to make its conclusions inescapable. The market will ensure that someone, somewhere, will profit, even from death. Moreover, nature seems to obey the consumer logic of the market. The world itself shares the logic of the cannibal or the monster.
The moral tension of such a text carries enormous weight in an Atlantic world that depends so greatly upon the suffering and sacrifice of laborers to function. As a result, the reader’s position is of central importance: can we identify with the consumer or the consumed? Saidiya Hartman, for example, notes that scenes of black suffering ask us to participate as “witnesses...or...voyeurs” presented with the chance to sympathize or self-reflect (3). Poe, in contrast, doesn’t ask readers to consider the suffering of sacrificed characters, but to consider the choices made by those who sacrifice them. The novel puts the reader in the position of the consumer and criticizes characters for resisting the overwhelming logic of consumption. People die and must be consumed, the novel argues. The important thing is the moral choice to consume or to resist, to obey the consumer logic of the moral universe we inhabit or to turn away from its imperatives.

As the cannibal horror continues in the novel, it does so in such a way as to critique Pym’s polite pretenses for masking the essential nature of the moral and economic universe in which he lives. The leader of Tsalal, Too-wit, invites the sailors of the Jane Guy to a feast, where they are offered mysterious, but disgusting, meat. Pym speculates that it belongs to “the slim-legged hogs” that he’d earlier seen, but the text makes it clear that it may well be the body of some unfortunate man. Pym describes the way their dinner “was handed into the tent over the heads of the attendants, and consisted of the palpitating entrails of a species of unknown animal, probably one of the slim-legged hogs which we had observed in our approach to the village.” Although Pym tells readers that they are “probably” only consuming a pig, Poe invites readers to see the potential horror that lurks just beneath the surface of polite ritual. He continues: “Seeing us at a loss how to proceed, he began, by way of setting us an example, to devour yard after yard of the enticing food, until we could positively stand it no longer, and evinced such manifest
symptoms of rebellion of stomach as inspired his majesty with a degree of astonishment only inferior to that brought about by the looking-glasses” (121). Poe creates a scenario that, though coded and filtered through the protagonist’s orientalizing gaze, still forces readers to consider the fact that the bloody exchange and consumer market presents the same actions under the pretense of civility.

Moreover, as Mastroianni explains, the hospitality on display is the very thing that marks the participants as human. If, however, that hospitality is rooted in a cannibalistic exchange, then it follows that cannibalism, the consumption of one individual by another, is the most natural “human” behavior in the market-driven universe. When Pym returns to the topic to chastise the evidently duplicitous natives, he writes “we should have been the most suspicious of human beings had we entertained a single thought of perfidy on the part of a people who treated us so well. A very short while sufficed to prove that this apparent kindness of disposition was only the result of a deeply laid plan for our destruction, and that the islanders for whom we entertained such inordinate feelings of esteem, were among the most barbarous, subtle, and bloodthirsty wretches that ever contaminated the face of the globe” (123). However, Poe is more critical than Pym and offers readers the chance to see his implicit critique. If the natives’ civility masked their bloodthirsty nature, then what did the cannibalistic sailors’ civility mask?

**Commodification and Racial Reversal**

This act of masking also implies the deceptive nature of race in the novel and in an Atlantic in which white bodies could be impressed into labor or, in this case, reduced to the savagery they pretend to have transcended. Indeed, Pym’s body, forced into the cramped confines of the ship, surrounded by other goods, each with an equivalent market price, undergoes a racially and geographically inverted middle passage. By evoking white slavery and Barbary
piracy, and by recontextualizing the slave experience within the white body of Pym, Poe offers his white readers an opportunity to investigate Rudoff’s questions about the natural ordination of racial hierarchy or to consider the frightening possibility against which Poe’s readers hold the shield of white supremacy. In a market in which human beings can be shipped and traded, only the false logic of an invented racial caste system protects white bodies from the same fate. Pym’s commodity conversions are so complete that he loses or exchanges his racial identity, suggesting that, if whiteness does possess a high market value, it could be converted or lost through trade. With this in mind, readers might examine all of the subsequent horrors that Pym experiences as the results of his conversion from free white man into a body that can be stripped of its protective whiteness, enslaved, commodified, and consumed.

Pym’s racially inverted middle passage is of a piece with the novel’s anxiety over racial transformation or over the unreliability of racial codes. Recall that Pym rightly suspects Too-wit of performing ignorance in order to mollify his race-blinded white victims. Moreover, the constant refrain of the villagers, “Tekili-Li,” is a terrified response to whiteness that goes hand-in-hand with the text’s overall treatment of whiteness as something frightful, rather than transcendent. This ambivalent treatment of whiteness conforms to the concluding chapters’ over-determination of racial signifiers. The natives of Tsalal, for example are described as being so black as even to have black teeth (150). Pym’s fellow survivor of the sinking of the *Grampus*, Dirk Peters, is also described through the racializing gaze of Arthur Gordon Pym, amateur phrenologist: “Peters himself was one of the most ferocious-looking men I ever beheld. He was short in stature, not more than four feet eight inches high, but his limbs were of Herculean mould. His hands, especially, were so enormously thick and broad as hardly to retain a human shape. His arms, as well as legs, were bowed in the most singular manner, and appeared to
possess no flexibility whatever. His head was equally deformed, being of immense size, with an indentation on the crown (like that on the head of most negroes), and entirely bald” (30). Yet, as Montwieler and Boren, in their discussion of hybridity, are aware, the racial cues are all misleading: the “natural ferocity of [Peters’] countenance” conceals Pym’s friend and ally; the ignorant savage played so expertly by Too-wit is really a cunning strategist; the white creatures and the white haze Peters, Pym, and Nunu, the villager they capture, all enter at the end of the novel, inspires terror, instead of connoting the apex of racial symbols.

All of this suggests anxiety about racial miscommunication, and further suggests a fear of racial relativism. Whiteness might be bad or evil instead of good, just as blackness might be a sign of intelligence instead of ignorance. Within the novel, whiteness and blackness are equally untrustworthy and unreliable empty signifiers. None of these racial categories are fixed or permanent, because the logic of exchange and equivalence reigns over all. Race isn’t symbolically fixed if, in the mobile market of the Atlantic, individuals can climb up or fall down its treacherous ladder. John C. Havard sees Pym as “a hoaxical satire of racist epistemologies” that reveals that Poe “undoubtedly believed in the inferiority of those of African descent” even as it both plays into and challenges the beliefs of the readers of The Southern Literary Messenger (Havard 107). Havard contends that “Poe satirizes his readers’ tendency to misunderstand race due to their reliance on similarly racist epistemological apparatuses” (108). Moreover, the savagery to which the white characters descend further undermines epistememes of race and racial hierarchy. Finally, Harvard argues that the final image of the text, of the looming white figure, represents Pym’s own racialist fantasy of triumphal whiteness, even as it functions to confuse readers on the issue of race because “whiteness here leads to the utter absence of meaning” (116). However, if we limit our interpretation of the novel to its racial formulations and even
dislocations, we miss the important philosophical challenge it poses for its audience. The
question of race in Poe’s age is, as Rudoff notes, a question of the essential value of individual
personhood. To upend racial epistemology, therefore, is to upend the primary mechanism by
which antebellum society not only constructs hierarchies of class and status, but also those of
spiritual election. By placing his characters in an environment ordered around the logic of the
market value of human flesh, Poe forces his readers to confront their fantasies of white mastery,
and to grapple with the question of whether their souls have value only in relation to the color of
their skin. If Poe challenges the readers of The Southern Literary Messenger to question the
meaning and value of race, he asks them to scrutinize their very souls by the logic of the
marketplace, even as he snatches away the codex of white supremacy upon which they depend
for meaning.

If race becomes permeable in this novel, or at least open to symbolic reversal, so too does
the logic of mastery and submission that undergirds nineteenth-century notions of a racial caste
system. Poe dramatizes this uneasy potential, by presenting Pym as a character who at once fears
and longs for both mastery and submission. In discussing Poe’s presentation of women, Colin
Dayan points out “that the enslaved want to be mastered, for they love—and this is the crucial
word for Poe—to serve, to be subservient” (242). This applies in this text as well, for Pym
willfully, even gleefully submits to his burial, commodification, and submission in the bowels of
the Grampus, then spends the rest of the novel caught in a tense back-and-forth between his
desire to consume and to be consumed. Dayan also argues that in Poe’s “tales about
women…possession, multiple hauntings, and identity dissolutions suspend gender difference as a
component of identity” (244). The same might be said about Poe’s treatment of race in Pym.
Regarding Poe’s willingness to turn nineteenth century tropes of white female beauty into
visions of white “pallor” and dread, Dayan notes that Poe “makes whiteness as negative and opaque what Jefferson had described in Notes on the State of Virginia as an ‘immoveable veil of black.’…Poe plays with the possibility of one thing passing into another and vice versa—the convertibility so much a part of his project” (250). The central character of Pym remains in circulation in the Atlantic market, and so his racial status remains suspended, with the potential to settle into the role of mastery or submission, and frequently oscillating between both. Moreover, his whiteness might instantiate the hierarchies of white supremacy, or might upend them altogether.

This “convertibility” becomes pronounced in the novel, as seemingly docile pets and natives become threatening figures of submissive entities asserting their claims to mastery. Dayan, for example, notes that the loving submission of the pet turns into the monster seeking mastery, reflecting Poe’s ambivalent views of mastery and slavery. Dayan writes that “the rare and special love between slave and master, man and wife, based on the law of property, becomes the medium by which perfect submission becomes equivalent to a pure but perverse love. A slave, a piece of property, a black pet…effects an excess of devotion.” Yet this devotion, in its excess, in its sacrificial love, can quickly reverse and transform into the urge to consume. Regarding “The Black Cat,” Dayan writes that Poe “demonstrates…how destructive is the illusion of mastery…as the pet of perfect docility turns into “a brute beast” (252). So too might the slave or the servant turn into the master or the monster driven by the consumptive urge.

Pym’s anxiety represents not only his fear of dehumanization and consumption, but also his concern over the dangerous game of trading and production upon which the entire Atlantic market depends. Pym’s enclosure within the bowels of the Grampus is doubly frightful as a result of the dangerous products with which he, knowingly or unknowingly, shares space.
Tobacco, flammable alcohol, dried grains—these are some of the most important products of Atlantic trade, and each has the potential to explode and destroy the very ship that carries them. Pym notes how carefully commodities must be packed by reminding readers of the case of the Firefly. He tells us that in 1825, “the force of the movement [of commodities] bursting open the main hatchway…the vessel went down like a shot. This happened within hail of a small sloop from Madeira, which picked up one of the crew (the only person saved)” (44). Pym himself is a form of unstable cargo at this point, potentially unsettling the shipped commodities as he moves about in the hold. The Firefly anecdote suggests that the market itself is unstable and may, at any moment, erupt into a calamity that would engulf the Atlantic world by engulfing the trade upon which it depends. Pym’s body becomes the repository not only for the Atlantic market’s commodifying logic, but also for its fears of disruption and collapse.

Given his trip’s evocative references to the middle passage and to racial inversion, Pym’s body also becomes the repository for fears of revolutionary racial upheaval. If valuable commodities like tobacco, alcohol, and grain could combust, could not the most valuable commodity of all? Fear of a slave rebellion also motivates the novel’s conclusion, in which the black villagers of Tsalal outsmart and murder the white explorers en masse. If the logic of commodification is all-encompassing, it is also unstable and threatens free white people with the possibility that they might change places with unfree black people within the market cosmology. In this novel, the exchange must be violent, because all of the transactions in the novel are. The dead bodies of the white sailors become the sacrifices upon which the black natives can assert their superiority, liberty, and agency in a market-oriented universe.
Providence Written in Stones

In what way, though, do the moral, cultural, and personal crises narrated in Pym’s account constitute concern over providential capitalism in particular? For one thing, these are moral issues, anxious investigations into the impact that transactional human encounters might have upon one's soul. For another, they reveal the unsettling reality that God offers no answers to moral questions and cannot be counted upon for deliverance. The text offers only ambiguous explanations for revelation and denies a comprehensible basis for commerce and commercial adventurism—both might be rational, supernatural or simply the products of disease or drunkenness. In any event, messages from outside of the confusing web of commodification and consumption utterly resist interpretation. For example, Pym, interred in the heart of the Grampus receives a dispatch from Augustus that says only “blood,” to which he responds, “how trebly full of import did [the word] now appear—how chilly and heavily…did its vague syllables fall, amid the deep gloom of my prison, into the innermost recesses of my soul!” (25). The message carries the weight of spiritual significance and may, in fact, offer the key to Pym’s survival. Yet it is incomprehensible. Receiving messages of this kind, the soul merely shrinks from horror in this novel; it never exults in grace.

This shrinking is appropriate, given nature’s chilly reception of entreaties to the divine. For example, as the Grampus crashes and sinks, Augustus exclaims “It is all over with us, and may God have mercy upon our souls!” (61). God shows no evident mercy, and will not, throughout the text. Instead, what divine intelligence there is will present the tantalizing possibility of deliverance, but never its manifest reality. A moment after the former exclamation, Pym and Augustus fall to their knees. They look to God and ask “his aid in the many dangers which beset us” (67). Then, as if in answer, they see an approaching vessel and think themselves
rescued. Pym exults, “we poured out our whole souls in shouts and thanksgiving to God for the complete, unexpected, and glorious deliverance that was so palpably at hand” (68). But the ship is—comically, tragically, horrifically—captained by a literal skeleton crew. All hands are dead from a mysterious plague. God’s message is like that of Augustus to Pym: blood, with no rational or supernatural context. The novel contains only death, with no promise of deliverance.

Nevertheless, the final scene of the novel brings Pym to an evident place of judgment that frames the text as retrospectively providential, and suggests that a divine hand has been orchestrating events all along. Careening ever southward, Pym’s final journal entry reads “there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow” (151). If this is a divine figure, it is one that elicits fear from the Tsalal villagers, including the captured Nunu, who dies of fright at their approach (150). It is never clear whether this is, indeed, God, but it is clearly a superhuman entity and appears to have orchestrated the events that drew Pym to its feet. As such, the reader should prepare for a judgment to be rendered over the decisions and transactions that have brought Pym to this fatal moment. All of Pym’s documented sins have been sins of a transactional nature, trading other lives for his own, or blasphemously replaying the communion to survive. The ending of the novel, therefore, leaves readers with an important question: has it all been worth it? Has Pym purchased revelation at the cost of his friends, his home, his identity, and his preconceived moral boundaries? If so, does he inhabit a universe in which such a trade is proper and justified? Were his sins actually just the natural and, therefore, virtuous performances of his vocation as a consumer in the market? This final judgment will determine whether the sacrificed bodies that Pym has left in his wake have helped him to convert into a soul ready to be received by a divine entity that has orchestrated his
economic and literal journeys. Or it will reveal him as unsuited to existence within a moral cosmology that uses economic transactions to offer individuals their only opportunities to make moral choices. That he survives to tell the tale, perhaps, offers the answer.

Moreover, these events have been telegraphed from the start of the novel, reinforcing the novel’s late gestures toward providential predestination. Pym admits in only the second chapter that his “visions were of shipwreck and famine of death or captivity among barbarian hordes; of a lifetime dragged out in sorrow and tears, upon some gray and desolate rock, in an ocean unapproachable and unknown” (11). If these visions are not explicitly coded as providential, they still contain the entire novel in miniature. At least in this respect, the novel implies predestination and supernatural revelation.

More compelling is the possibility that events in the novel spring from a divine intellect that has communicated through written language but, again, in such a way as to remain incomprehensible to the central characters. Pym, for example, notes the shape and location of the system of caves in which he and Dirk Peters seek shelter from the attacking villagers (138). Later, the editor and publisher of his narrative reads them as an alphabet, potentially spelling “To be Shady…to be white…the region of the south” in a number of different world dialects (154). This then is the language of the secret but universal religious culture that unites faiths and far-flung societies. The editor’s interpretation tantalizingly suggests that all of the events of the tale may have been composed by an active and divine authorial hand and that that hand links all of Ethiopian, Arabic, and Egyptian cultures to Pym’s experiences. If Peter Taylor is correct and the novel should be read typologically in light of the Book of Daniel, then, even if the messages remain unreadable, they suggest the union of spiritual cultures in the Atlantic, as well as the divine order of the novel’s narrative events. The will and message of God presage the text,
having already been etched into the stones of the island for Pym, acting as a prophet, to discover and disseminate. Moreover, Pym only found his way to this prophetic position as a result of the economic underpinning of the adventure at the start of the novel. So, once more, the divine communicates with the ordinary world of men like Pym primarily through the market. The market, the one that launched the Grampus, the Jane Guy, and Arthur Gordon Pym into the Atlantic, has proven a vehicle for the discovery of a divine universal language and an evidently interventionist deity.

Even so, if God is the intelligence designing Pym’s universe and journey, then the novel suggests that people like Pym are but God’s commodity playthings to move about, exchange, and evaluate. This then inverts the logic employed by writers like Equiano. Belonging to God offers no reassurance, peace, or security, save the security of knowing that an individual is little more than a commodified object in a universe that resembles the market. Barton L. St. Armand similarly observed this element of the novel and called the nature of transformation in Pym “sacred and profane” (60). He notes that the series of interlocking rituals of consumption and transformation in the novel, “are all allegories of the larger, higher, and more inclusive ritual of transcendence, rungs on a ladder by which the ultimate state of all-in-one and one-in-all is reached” (61). Poe maintains the revelatory and providential generic conventions of this moment by reframing predestination as a secular but supernatural form of prophecy, and by re-forging the covenant tablets as the cliff-side dwellings of a civilization of bloodthirsty killers. Text maintains its covenant-oriented taboo status, with the ability to assert truth as well as to make events occur, but with no security that the outcomes will offer the individual transcendence, rather than obliteration. These concerns would continue to influence writers into the antebellum period. In particular, the philosophical implications of maritime free labor as a form of social sacrifice
would become particularly acute, especially in novels by writers like Herman Melville, who use the Atlantic market as a space in which to stage dramas of sacrifice, conversion, communion, and exchange.

**Herman Melville Tries to Sell a Book**

Maritime novels, like Dana’s and Equiano’s, offer a jeremiadic sense of victorious exploration and expansion, a narrative of personal conversion from naiveté to special knowledge and expertise, as well as an assertion of the virtuous character of seafaring labor as vocation. Herman Melville knew these conventions and constructed his 1849 novel, *Redburn: His First Voyage*, as a narrative that adhered closely to expectations of the maritime exploration genre. The novel’s parallels to Dana’s are unmistakable, down to specific plot elements, attesting to the degree to which Melville was writing within an established medium. Indeed, readers might be tempted to take the novel’s conventionality for granted as they search for Melville’s novelistic innovations or subversions. However, the relative predictability of a text like *Redburn* is the very thing that distinguishes it as evidence of a larger cultural victory for providential capitalism and a broader, more prevalent concern with issues of commodification that appears in maritime narratives.

*Redburn*, along with its follow-up, *White Jacket*, is something of an accidentally pivotal novel for Melville. It largely abandons the sometimes wild and wandering exoticism of Melville’s early Pacific-set novels and evades the extravagantly symbolic and imaginative leaps of his later novels. *Redburn* is also a deliberate response to the failure of Melville’s previous novel, *Mardi*, a highly symbolic and much less mainstream early attempt at extended allegory. Nevertheless, as an attempt at writing an orthodox maritime adventure narrative, *Redburn* is a failure. Its plot is both circular and digressive, its characters either thinly drawn or caught in
endless games of manipulation and control, and its themes both covertly and overtly pessimistic. Where *Redburn* succeeds is as a complex meditation upon the personal effects of a market-dictated life, which focuses attention upon the uncanny aspects of human-commodity relations in the Atlantic. Indeed, Brian Yothers points out that Melville “dismissed *White-Jacket* and *Redburn* as books written to order” that nevertheless maintain “his profound ethical interest,” in questions of poverty, charity, and the innate violence of social interaction (Yothers 73). In its awkward attempts to satisfy as a mainstream maritime adventure account, the novel uncovers fears of commodity misidentification that lay at the heart of maritime fiction.

*Redburn* is not unique because it discusses the relation of men to their labor—the same is true of most of Melville’s fiction. Rather, it is unique because it is so focused upon the maritime commodity market, so fixated upon the way that an individual’s relation to that market could initiate processes of personal commodification, and so interested in the sacrifices necessary for the production of the Atlantic economy. Benjamin S. West argues that *Redburn* presents Melville’s most potent criticism of capitalism as a system of labor and as a structure for Atlantic society. He writes, “*Redburn* makes it clear that Melville views capitalism as an alienating force, a hindrance to the American Dream, and a cause of social injustice throughout the Western world” (West 165). West also argues that the book reveals Melville’s opinion that capitalism “forces some individuals to live so that others might profit” (179). Though *Bartleby the Scrivener* is probably his most thorough indictment of American capitalism, and *The Paradise of Bachelors* and *The Tartarus of Maids* probably his most direct attack on the system’s abusive practices, *Redburn* most clearly articulates the centrality of abuse, consumption and commodification in the Atlantic maritime marketplace in particular. In an earlier critique, Neal Tolchin agrees, writing that *Redburn* is Melville’s “most damning case against commercial
values” (Tolchin 168). Indeed, the novel’s cynical bildungsroman sees Wellingborough Redburn grow only through degradation and exploitation aboard his ship, *The Highlander*, poverty in Liverpool, and humiliation upon his return to the United States.

Many scholars have taken up Melville as a writer interested in the problems of capital and labor, or even as a figure of resistance to capital’s demands. For example, Melville’s narratives suggest Theodor Adorno’s formative examinations of human and social embodiments of ideals of capitalist labor. Similarly, in an early but representative 1945 reading of Melville, R.E. Watters read Melville’s *Typee* as a novel primarily concerned with examining “sociality” as an experience of social indebtedness. More recently, Cesare Casarino reads *Moby-Dick* as a series of class performances and depictions. Scholars like Hester Blum have, likewise, investigated Melville’s evident protest against capital relations, particularly in texts like *Bartleby the Scrivener*. Related to this focus upon Melville’s examination of class relations is the question of the relative authenticity of his depictions of classed subjects. Authenticity and believability were primary concerns among maritime authors. Moreover, as Jason Berger points out, because they were presented as autobiography, both slave and sailor’s narratives required authenticity. This suggests not only their generic resemblance, but also their experiential similarity (Berger 31). Both slave authors and sailor authors wanted to produce experiences for their readers that would instruct, elicit sympathy, instantiate community, and allow past experiences to take on productive life in the market. They could only do so if readers believed texts to be authentic.

However, a marked shift appears to have occurred among scholars of Melville and his literature. Where earlier critics, and some recent critics, have focused primarily upon Melville’s ties to labor-relations and even upon the way his representation of labor might reflect his interest in antebellum antislavery politics, more and more recent scholarship has taken up Melville’s
work for its aesthetic experimentation and for its psychological insights. John Paul Wenke examines Melville’s metaphysical interests through his aesthetic recreations of philosophical issues. Paul McCarthy, on the other hand, has attempted a thorough examination of the role of “madness” across Melville’s work. Clare Spark studies the political culture surrounding Melville’s texts through the lens of censorship and Enlightenment debates. This is not to say that the Melville’s religious interests have been left aside. Brian Yothers, for example, attempts to reconcile Melville’s many contradictory religious allusions by examining the diverse religious cultures of Melville’s America. If these many interpretations can be unified and linked to critiques that focus primarily upon Melville’s interest in labor relations, it is through the lens of providential capitalism. Melville assesses a society that sees capital as providentially divine and providence as a form of capital relation. As a result, his psychological, aesthetic, and political experiments fall into place alongside his more overt labor concerns.

Poe and, increasingly over his career, Melville, both appear to challenge the need for authenticity in literature, producing texts that claim autobiography, even as they practice fiction. Nevertheless, critics like Walter Bezanson assert that Melville mined his real experience for his sailor narratives. This is true, but Melville uses his authority as a former sailor to threaten the barrier between fiction and autobiography. Writing in 1991, Jonathan L. Hall noted that Redburn “is the closest Melville had ever come—or ever would come—to obeying the formal conventions of the mid-nineteenth-century novel” (259). Although Hall recognizes that this adherence is, at best, circumscribed by Melville’s characteristic allegory, he still reads the novel through the lens of nineteenth-century bildungsroman. Nevertheless, he too sees the violence upon which this development of self rests. He writes, “Redburn attacks the shipboard system of identity, with its insistent erasure of personal history, its attempt to base personal identity on the mere
contingency of the present moment of the present cruise. He attempts to reverse this denial of the past, to re-assert more traditional norms which emphasize the continuity of the self and the validity of familial definition.” However, hall continues, “the more he tries to contact the past and to establish a connection between the accounts of those who came before and what he finds in his present experience, the more he encounters not reassuring continuity but disorienting gaps” (261). This is correct and, to see the material reality of this “erasure,” readers need only look to Redburn’s father’s useless travel guide, the protagonist’s link to his familial past, to the past of his laboring community, and to the geographic past of Liverpool. Hall locates Redburn’s resistance to this obliteration of self in his construction of a narrative identity, one that can adhere to novelistic expectation and can observe and control the meaning of events. However, within the context of providential capitalism, this erasure is even more comprehensible if no less destabilizing. Time and experience are, themselves, subject to the same exchange logic as all of the other individuals, events, and belief systems in the novel. The past does not proceed into the present, but is exchanged for the present. The past then loses value and becomes excess, like the rags that the rag-pickers pick, like the books that no longer communicate, like the individuals lost at home or to the sea. The past is spent, erased as the present accumulates value. Redburn’s true personal development, then, comes when he transitions from resisting this erasure to accepting it as part of the exchange process of the divine marketplace. He comes to accept that the only things that persist are those that maintain exchangeable or usable value.

Nevertheless, it is impossible to divorce Melville’s critiques of capital from his critiques of Jacksonian America. In 1985, Michael Rogin argued convincingly for the questioning approach to capitalism that runs throughout many of Melville’s novels as well as for the links between Melville’s autobiography and his “subversive” representation of labor. Indeed, these
elements of Melville’s evident discomfort with capital link early Melville scholars like Watters to more recent scholarship that has attempted to situate Melville’s capital critiques within a personal, political, and historical context. Numerous critics have remarked, for example, upon the economic circumstances of Melville's own life, circumstances which first drove him to sea, then drove him to work at the New York Customs Office when he could not support his family on a writer's income. Hildegard Hoeller notes the way these facts made their way into Melville's fictions when she observes how, in his first novel, *Typee*, "Melville defines Typee as the antithesis of the depression-plagued capitalist America he knew. The very fact that there is no money in Typee—the root of all evil, as Melville calls it—gets rid of all the phenomena of a depressed money economy that Melville lists and knew first hand." The novel is, therefore, "an ironic panic fiction" (148). Readers might read that “panic” as rooted in economic uncertainty, personal economic failure, or broader national or philosophical ambivalence.

Similarly, Melville’s fears of the Jacksonian period’s violently expanding nationalism, economic destabilization, and avaricious personal individualism, broaden his economic concerns to include fears of Jacksonian personal and social moral values. For example, amid her thorough 1993 explanation of the elements of *Redburn* that mark it as a novel about the protagonist’s inner and social growth, Joyce A. Rowe noted that Redburn’s personal development is at odds with the Jacksonian period’s emphasis on individualism as a mode of normative manhood. Rowe writes, “If growth signifies moral development…Melville suggests that the demands of economic and social survival produce a deepening self-division and deficit in that emotional center from which genuine moral action derives. In his capacity for sympathy with others, especially with his tormentor Jackson, Redburn develops as a moral being. Yet the deeper levels of inner growth are blocked by the exigencies of the individualism he must live by” (56-7). She continues, “In
Captain Riga…Redburn is introduced to the realities of a commercial world that humiliates his patrician expectations” (60). Essentially, Melville writes a nineteenth-century bildungsroman that remains circumscribed and even deformed by the social and economic mandates of Jacksonian America. More overtly, the villainous Jackson “connects the demagogic and brutal characteristics of the late president with the nightmare fears of the era to which his name serves as rubric—the anarchy, violence and corruption that an individualistic, socially fluid age fears it will unleash” (64). The villain’s name and Melville’s critique are hardly subtle: he fears that Jacksonian individualism, yoked to competitive market economy, will produce a society of sharkish exploitation and violent struggles for power.

Yet, Melville’s investigations into the subject of labor, capital, philosophy, and politics, are always personalized, playing out upon the bodies of the men involved in these democratic and capitalist projects. With this in mind, the same-sex relations among the crew and characters of *Redburn* also suggest a kind of hospitable reciprocity that readers might consider a tacit rebuke to the Jacksonian threat. For David Greven, this aspect of the novel makes it into something of “a Russian-doll series of embedded allegories.” This is to say that “its depiction of the hellishness of shipboard life allegorizes the hellishness of gender conformity; in turn, the disruptive potentiality of gender nonconformity illuminates the perils and possibilities of sexual nonconformity.” By the same token, “the novel’s critique of antebellum era racism allegorizes Melville’s critique of compulsory gender roles and evocation of an alternately threatening and playful same-sex desire” (2). The novel’s moments of same-sex desire are most closely paired with its explicit ekphrastic critiques of slavery when Redburn travels to Liverpool sees a statue that calls to mind the European slave markets, and meets his friend and evident object of desire, Harry Bolton. Greven’s argument rests upon this apposition, suggesting that the possible
disruption of compulsory heterosexuality instantiated by life among the mobile denizens of the maritime Atlantic also portends the possible disruption of racial codes and hierarchies by the same mobile population. This reading extends the interpretation of *Redburn* as a novel of personal development, to present it also as one of potential national reckoning with race through gender. What readers should not miss in this critique is the element of reciprocal exchange. Homosocial and homosexual relations arise in the novel through reciprocity so, if such relationships are to portend racial reconfiguration or even the disruption of racial hierarchies, readers must see those possibilities as equally arising from the experience of reciprocity. Gendered, sexual, national, and racial freedom erupts in the novel because exchange, organized around the logic of market equivalence, makes it possible. The binding reciprocity of these relationships returns to Hoeller's contention of the gift economy that Melville observes in *Typee*. The gift-giving that Tommo experiences in that novel creates a social expectation that he will become a member of Typee society. It creates a building desire to possess Tommo (Hoeller 154). The same could be said of Redburn who, increasingly, feels the pull of a society that wants to possess him to the point of potentially consuming him.

It is difficult to negotiate these interlocking allegories because they remain so ambiguous in Melville’s writing. Douglas Ivison, for example, argues that even Melville’s critiques extend from the same colonizing gaze and carry the same colonialist assumptions that they attempt to dismantle. Regarding *Typee*, He writes, “*Typee* works to negotiate this potential contradiction through a subversive misprision of one of the central literary genres of colonialist discourse, the travel story. However, although Melville’s book does provide a powerful critique of European behavior in the South Seas in particular, and of European civilization in general, it must be recognized that *Typee* ultimately seems to work toward the reification of the consciousness of the
imperial subject through its internalization of colonialist discourse” (115). *Redburn* potentially suffers from the same problem, critiquing slavery by overturning normative codes of sexuality, interracial labor relations, and even religious affiliation, but doing so through the authorial gaze of a normative colonial subject. Again, however, these knots of meaning and contradiction are at least partially resolved when the text is viewed through the lens of providential capitalism. Melville’s narrator does not merely observe and engage with both the norms and disruptions of Atlantic hierarchies of gender, nationalism, religion, and race. Rather, he views these hierarchies as negotiable and exchangeable elements in a grander transcendental cosmology of divine economy.

Even Redburn’s own empowered colonialist perspective is implicitly a valuable commodity that might be exchanged or lost or devalued, much like Redburn’s once-precious travel book that loses all value over time. Regarding *The Confidence Man*, Hildegard Hoeller notes that the novel “stages the impossibility of narrative in a world where human bonds are replaced by deals and contracts, where trust has disappeared, and where the gift is almost (im)possible” (147). She continues "in a capitalist world of strangers, rather than in the tribal non-monetary world of the Typees, gifts become (im)possible and—Melville concludes—so do narratives" (158). *Redburn* sees a character learn this lesson in the harshest way possible, entering the maritime trade expecting mutual exchange to be the basis of friendship, but discovering the disappointing realities of capitalist acquisition and commodification instead. The novel’s highly organized structure allows this transformation to occur for Redburn, for the reader and, ultimately, for Melville, who would move on to less narratively cohesive, and more piercing critiques of capital, as his career continued.
Moreover, the novel presents moments of resistance in order to trace the borders of the society they challenge. Jason Berger, for example, describes sailors’ resistance to incursions into their spaces of pleasure in *White-Jacket* as moments of insurgence against the tight hierarchal control of the ship. This may be so and, indeed, in *White-Jacket*, sailors resist their captain’s attempts to curb their pleasure to the point of rebellion. However, in *Redburn*, pleasure is not an experience that exists outside of maritime hierarchies of power, but resides squarely within its logic and control. Redburn and Harry Bolton enjoy themselves in Liverpool, but do so at their own expense and for the sake of a greater economy. Moreover, their time in Liverpool is explicitly shaded by the city’s position within the economy of slavery, a point that Ian Baucom emphasizes when he calls Liverpool the “capitol” of the slaveholding Atlantic, and that Melville underscores with references to the presence of slaves and reminders of the slave economy all around his protagonist (Baucom 3). Redburn, furthermore, imagines the pleasure of sexual assignation, but imagines it in such a way that it conforms to consumer logic. Perhaps because the novel is less concerned with critiquing the specifics of oft-draconian Naval command, it broadens its view to demonstrate the way that pleasure—even self-negating pleasure—can be contained within a system that still operates via the logic of consumption, leading, ultimately, to the total consumption of the individual within the marketplace. As with Poe, readers would be wise not only to see all of these critical approaches as parts of a dialogue concerning Melville’s interests and investigations, but also to see them as the material with which the author forces a capital critique to transcend its economic frame and to become a personal and philosophical issue. Homosociality, democracy, labor, commodification, and philosophy are all important elements of Melville’s investigation into the spiritual event of his age. Namely: capitalist labor.
More often than not, Melville presents that experience as one of personal and social sacrifice. Nyquist notes that early Christian colonialists, including Las Casas, looked to classical texts and the Biblical Jephthah's model of self-sacrifice against the specter of forced slave sacrifice. She writes "in appealing to Euripides's emphasis on his heroine's voluntary self-sacrifice, [historian George Buchanan] reinforces his culture's condemnation of the ritual sacrifice of children, prisoners of war, or slaves, none of whom have a say in the matter" she notes that scholars underscored the "voluntary character" of sacrifice while criticizing "the barbarism of customary, involuntary human sacrifice" (121-2). Essentially, for a sacrifice to be considered within the bounds of Christology, even capitalist Christology, it had to be voluntary. The laboring and suffering sailors aboard Poe's and Melville's ships are liminally situated between voluntary and involuntary sacrifice. They serve to put themselves in perilous situations and sometimes choose to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their crew, but, just as often, their initial choice is taken as acquiescence to the social need for sacrifice, and their death, voluntary or not, can be deemed sacred and necessary, within the logic of providential capitalism.

Moreover, the primary sacrificial events of the novel occur as willed acts of commodification. Berger argues that *White-Jacket*'s white jacket “might act as a fetish-object for the narrator, allowing him to partition himself off from the logic of the ship’s space” (Berger Floating 209). No such “partition” exists for Redburn, who bears witness to individuals who, though they share space with commodities, do not use them as fetish repositories for social interaction or signification. Instead, they sacrifice themselves to become the fetish commodities through which interact the distant forces of Atlantic market capitalism.

Nevertheless, the novel never forgets the personally obliterative nature of the commodification sacrifice, even if that sacrifice helps to establish or maintain community or the
market. *Redburn* consistently offers the possibility of escape in the Atlantic market, only to foreclose that possibility when the market reveals its true consumptive nature. This marks it as an important step in Melville’s evolving interest in the possibilities for freedom and free agency within or outside of capitalism. Even Melville’s earliest and seemingly least political novels, *Typee* and *Omoo*, suggest an open yearning to use the routes of maritime trade to escape the strictures of a capitalist, western, white or “civilized” culture, and to embrace a more heterogeneous, culturally syncretic freedom. *Mardi* similarly experiments with a series of competing ideologies and tries in vain to strike upon the best way by which to live one’s life. *Redburn*, by contrast, is a clear-eyed and ornately detailed catalogue of the suffering wrought by Atlantic market capitalism. It was certainly not the last time Melville would critique maritime hierarchies of power. For example, in *White-Jacket*, he openly questions the rigid structures of authority that turn Atlantic Naval life into an experience of submission to mastery. The sailors of that novel are given orders they do not understand, experience harsh conditions and disrespectful treatment, and are flogged viciously for insubordination. *Moby-Dick*, of course, presents Melville’s grandest drama of out-of-control mastery and disastrous submission. In *The Confidence-Man*, Melville considers the possibility of socialist philanthropy as a cure for capitalism’s broader problems, but concludes, “With mankind it would never do” (57). *Redburn* appears to be a novel-length examination of the reasons why it “would never do.” The market is organized around the logic of pure consumption. Philanthropy, the giving of self to another, is just one more example of this consumptive logic, less charity than wolfish commodity ingestion. *Redburn* is unique in that it places these questions of mastery in the Atlantic maritime shipping corridor, suggesting that even the business relations of Atlantic capitalism resemble the
hierarchies of power so familiar to the punitive Navy of *White-Jacket* or the Shakespearean fiefdom of *Moby-Dick*.

Many of the same points about commodity misidentification, the uncanny personification of taboo objects and, especially, God’s relative interest in individual humans and level of intervention in the physical world could be made about Melville’s other novels—including, of course, *Moby-Dick*. *Billy-Budd* is even more explicitly concerned with the social compulsion toward human sacrifice than is *Redburn*. However, *Redburn* exports these anxieties onto commodities, asserting not only the communal and spiritual necessity of commodification and labor as sacrifice, but also the economic underpinning of the sacrificial urge as it exists in the maritime exchange market. As a result, *Redburn* is the work in which Melville most acutely advances the notion that providential capitalist ideals have infiltrated and subsumed daily life within a market-oriented Atlantic world. Even as he details the specifics of maritime trade, he employs tropes of prophecy, conversion, and social election to emphasize the dehumanization of a capital-driven universe. In *Redburn*, prophecy only promises destruction, election is meaningless or damned, equivalence guarantees dehumanization, and text can reveal nothing trustworthy. Moreover, the sailor’s body and soul are always perched in a precarious position between nearly free and nearly enslaved. That body endures hardships, and even seemingly supernatural destruction, so that the market can run smoothly. If *Billy-Budd* uses the sailor as a Christ figure, dying to maintain the social hierarchies of his ship, *Redburn* uses the sailor for the sake of maintaining the social order of a broader Atlantic world. In this novel, the sailor’s body is destroyed, consumed, or lost, so that the market-oriented society’s urge toward consumption and exchange can be preserved.
Melville’s view of maritime communities bowing to the logic of consumption also suggests the power of debt to structure the Atlantic world, and to create a system of mutual possession and mastery. This focus upon debt as a mode of social relation has long interested Melville scholars. In 1943, for example, R.E. Watters argued that Melville’s view of debt coincides with this representation of Atlantic society as a system of personal and social consumption. Regarding *Typee*, he writes that Melville believes “that man is born, lives and dies in constant debt to the social community of his fellows…[Melville] repeatedly portrayed the distortion of the individual and the destruction of the group which follow upon voluntary repudiation or involuntary neglect of that debt” (33-34). Although Watters insists that “Typee society displayed communal life nearly at its best,” he stops short of dealing with the fact that Tommo, a thinly veiled facsimile of Melville, himself, flees the peaceful valley of the Typee because he fears their cannibalistic consumptive urge as well (Watters 34). Watters wrote from the perspective of a generation of scholars who largely read Melville as an author who sought to champion the authentic experience of the working sailor. However, what this reading leaves out is instructive: the logic of consumption and market cannibalism follows the author wherever he goes. Though Tommo runs, he cannot run forever. This inescapability is *Redburn*’s central drama.

Certainly the degree to which the Atlantic market abuses and exploits Redburn demonstrates Melville’s perception of capitalism’s disorienting, and unsettling powers. For example, Benjamin S. West writes that, “Redburn and his family may have once been considered genteel, but with capitalistic ideology increasingly taking over Western social practices, his lack of wealth keeps him from gaining any kind of class prestige…his gentlemanly upbringing, is of no value” (174). However, Melville recognizes the ambivalent nature of capitalism as well, and
even his critiques acknowledge the system’s potential to liberate as well as to obliterate. In the “Knights and Squires” chapter of *Moby-Dick*, for example, Ishmael proclaims, “this august dignity I treat of, is not the dignity of kings and robes, but that abounding dignity which has no robed investiture. Thou shalt see it shining in the arm that wields a pick or drives a spike; that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God; Himself!” (103). If Atlantic capitalism victimizes Redburn, it also helps America to define itself as a space where capitalist principles allow individuals to rise and fall, rather than an English or European aristocratic social hierarchy. Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh point to Francis Bacon as originating a theory of capitalism as divine and genocide as a moral good for the benefit of the Christian capitalist state (2). What Melville’s treatment reveals, therefore, is not that capitalism is innately good or bad, but that even its ostensibly socially progressive elements contain threats to the individual, and vice versa. Social good and social evil remain inextricably bound, two sides of the moral ledger book of the Atlantic.

**Utopianism, Wage Slavery, and Life in the Atlantic**

Melville’s leery view of contract arises from the rocky evolution of the relationship between slavery, contracted labor, and utopian free labor, from the revolutionary period, through the Jacksonian era, and toward the Civil War. In the revolutionary period, both free labor and slavery were used to articulate philosophical notions of liberty and emergent American nationalism. In the Jacksonian period, free labor became an ideal of personal individualism empowered by repressive slavery, violence, and debt speculation. That tension would result at mid-century in the violent collision between the ideals of liberty and the reality of bondage in the American Civil War. Melville explores the breadth of this tense push and pull between freedom and unfreedom by looking back to American founding, surveying his contemporary American
milieu and looking forward to the American violence to come. Ian McGuire suggests that the language of Captain Ahab, for example, is clearly meant to evoke the President Andrew Jackson’s elevation of individualist labor, as well as John Calhoun’s warnings against wage slavery. At the same time, Melville responds to the development of unions promising to protect laborers against the worst competitive excesses of the market. Similarly, he writes in the context of a period of social activism that resulted in, for example, Fourierism and other forms of utopian socialism. Such groups believed, as the preeminent historian of American labor movements, Philip S. Foner, writes, “in a new social order which would abolish all types of slavery and oppression by restoring to the people control over the productive forces” (170). By and large, these projects, including, famously, Emerson, Hawthorne, and Margaret Fuller’s experimental Brook Farm, collapsed into utter failure.

Foner’s description of Brook Farm as a potentially “new social order” is interesting, given the existence of the laboring communities that Melville describes. Moreover, arriving in the wake of the Second World War, Foner’s history suggests the longstanding scholarly interest in pockets of utopian thinking, which linked eighteenth to nineteenth to twentieth century labor projects, but which, until recently, has neglected to recognize the importance of mobile maritime laboring societies to the evolution of labor ideology. As Melville could attest, as either a sailor or an author, the economy and culture of Atlantic maritime trade functioned all along as a system emblematic of both the promises and problems of such movements. Both marginalized from and essential to the survival of Atlantic societies, maritime laboring cultures contained pockets of utopian idealism alongside the brutal imposition of capitalist enterprise and control. The maritime trade about which Melville wrote was, as Rediker and Linebaugh note, an enormous system. They estimate that “20 to 25 percent of the adult male inhabitants of Boston, New York,
and Philadelphia worked in the maritime sector—trade or fishing—throughout the eighteenth century” (62). Mobility was essential to this system, and to individual survival within this system. Rediker and Linebaugh argue that “Desertion was not so much a trade as a trademark of a footloose maritime proletariat” hoping to avoid impressment, capture, the law or, in some cases, land (105). Indeed, some sailors, recognizing their exploitation, removed themselves from the logic of wage-earning and striving, choosing to live primarily at sea. (146) Rediker and Linebaugh also note that sailors demonstrated many means of resistance and cooperation. As a result of labor specialization, work-stoppages were common. Indeed, “strike” is a term that comes from the maritime work stoppage involving the “striking” of sails (97). Although courts were unlikely to “liberate’ sailors from their ships” seamen also resorted to courts, struck, deserted or called for violence against captains (140). Rediker and Linebaugh even present pirates as a “pre-capitalist” riposte to the intensely hierarchal and exploitative capitalism of the merchant ship (264). However, in the face of the all-consuming logic of commodification that Melville’s novel posits, all of these forms of resistance can only resolve into failure, dehumanization, and the transformation of laborers into labor commodities.

*Redburn’s* central preoccupation is with the philosophical issues raised by commodity fetishization and misidentification. In *Redburn*, Melville seeks to make the processes of commodification and commodity fetishism both personal and alien again, to demonstrate the way that they elevate the thing over the person and conflate the thing with the person. Michael Taussig attempts, from an anthropological and sociological point of view, to make sense of a similar experience, when he notes the fact that the things people living within industrial capitalist societies see as natural appear strange or evil to those who live outside the society’s borders. He suggests that capitalist societies encourage individuals to see market-based cultural formations
and practices as non-historical, as innate and naturalized, but that societies that later encounter capitalism see it as unnatural and, perhaps, even supernatural (Taussig 3). Commodities, he reminds readers, are both inert things and animate entities in such societies, with spirit and godlike life-force (5). He describes commodity fetishism as the process “whereby products of the interrelations of persons are no longer seen as such, but as things that stand over, control, and in some vital sense even may produce people” (Taussig 5). Commodity fetishism grants the commodity thing an animate presence with the potential to relate socially with human beings, especially as human lives are increasingly given an equivalent status in the market. *Redburn*, in some respects, is an extended meditation upon the experience of commodity fetishism being applied to the maritime laborer, his body, his class, and his soul. More than this, *Redburn* suggests that the individual body or soul must be annihilated in an act of obliterative commodification to satisfy the demands of the market.

As a result, the novel traces a purely downward trajectory for its protagonist, even as his journey across the Atlantic is recursive. Redburn’s textual life begins with failure and proceeds to destabilize, fracture, and diminish as he becomes ever more directly involved with the market practices that have dictated his fate all along. The same economic circumstances that drove Richard Henry Dana to sea likewise initiate Redburn’s adventure of downward economic and personal conversion, but the narrative that follows shares little of Dana’s nationalist optimism. Wellingborough Redburn goes to sea as an educated but naïve young man in search of adventure and masculinity, but he is also driven there by the calamitous effects of price instability on his family, which ruined his father (Melville 54). Thinking it will help him, and evading the traumatic memory in the back of his mind, Redburn pretends to a certain laboring aristocracy as the son of a “wealthy merchant” (59). However, he later admits that it hurts him to “think of
those delightful days, before my father became a bankrupt, and died, and we removed from the city” (82). This same price instability dictates the terms of his launch to sea. He explains, “I had not procured a ticket, and Going to the captain’s office to pay my passage and get one, was horror-struck to find, that the price of passage had been suddenly raised that day, owing to the other boats not running” (54). Thus, even in these early chapters of the novel, Melville has embedded his narrator in an economic world in which families are ruined, fathers emasculated, and economic agreements voided, all because of a market that appears not to be controlled by human actors.

**Signing On: Embodying Contract Instability aboard the Highlander and in the Flesh**

Moreover, the novel undermines the use of contracts as mutually obligatory promissory covenants, insisting, instead, that they only assert and conscribe an individual’s market value. They are imposed upon the individual, not entered into freely. As a result, they are exposed to manipulation or outright dismissal by untrustworthy captains and owners, even as they bind laborers to a subordinate subject status. Redburn is, for example, cheated from the very start, though the naïve young man fails to see this reality, distracted as he is by friendly surfaces. As Redburn signs his contract to ship out, for example, the captain tells him that the company sometimes pays a portion of a sailor’s salary in advance but “in this case, as the boy has rich relations, there will be no need of that.” It is only in retrospect that Redburn admits “Poor people make a very poor business of it when they try to seem rich” (60). Essentially, Redburn expects contracts to bind and to create social cohesion. He expects to sign a book that will guarantee his inclusion among the market elect. Instead, he is punished for his credulity. Equiano saw the contracts he entered into as covenants-by-proxy that required the advocacy of a righteous man but that were still divinely binding. Melville, writing about a character whose travels disembark
from the same ports that were so important to Equiano’s seafaring life sees contract as the basis for a viciously unstable anti-community, in which responsibility has transformed into competitive deceit.

In this situation, contracts develop a kind of sacred talismanic power to delimit the borders of an individual’s free agency, to dictate a sailor’s destiny and, most of all, to reveal a laborer’s equivalent commodity value. Melville’s view of contracts as both omnipresent and unreliable is not, therefore, contradictory. Rather, it seems that Melville responds to the reality that, as contracts become more widespread among nineteenth-century Atlantic maritime cultures, laborers find themselves mastered by both the interpreters of contract documents, and by the documents themselves. The text dictates how much a sailor is worth in relation to the commodities the sailor stewards and, in so doing, reveals the otherwise obscure equivalence between person and thing. That the captain and ship-owners in Redburn violate the pact of laborer and boss underscores the fact of the central character’s commodification and embeddedness in the open market. Redburn himself has very little control over the exchange of his body, labor, and value, and relies upon the validity of a contract, which he doesn’t understand and which, it turns out, only functions to name and assert his commodity value.

In fact, the money Redburn does not receive reveals the pure commodity relation hiding behind covenant rhetoric. The seaman’s signature is not an agreement to mutual responsibility and the contract is not a promissory note of social inclusion and protection. Rather, the signature is a sign of acquiescence to the god of market forces. According to Marcus Rediker, the typical sailor of the time lived according to the whims of what Sir William Petty called “Political Arithmetic” (12). The sailor signs, and agrees to permit his labor to be traded promiscuously in the arithmetic market, and to transform his own body into a mere repository for valuable labor.
The contract attests to the fact that the sailor has become a kind of Marxian commodity, the thing through which buyers and sellers interact.

For sailors like Redburn, contract fails to provide the reliable haven of community it promises. If Melville doesn’t deny the omnipresent reality of contract-oriented social constructs, he does deny their supposed sanctifying or stabilizing effects. Indeed, not only does Redburn fail to receive adequate compensation for his labor for Captain Riga, but he even incurs debts, leaving Redburn’s friend, Harry Bolton, with no recourse but to exclaim “this is the reward of my long and faithful services!” (399). “This,” of course, refers to nothing, the only guaranteed reward in any contract, according to Melville. The contracts the sailors sign are failed attempts to establish security amid the forceful mobility of the labor market. The rest of the crew console themselves by offering the captain a rude scatological rebuke, and Redburn muses “they are here and then they are there; ever shifting themselves, they shift among the shifting: and like rootless sea-weed, are tossed to and fro” (402). The crew’s frustrations respond not only to Captain Riga then, but also to the system that empowers Riga and all the other captains to “shift” sailors endlessly, to use them as renewable commodity labor resources.

Knowing that they may all have signed covenants that might be subverted by the malevolent masters of the ship and the market, the sailors in Melville’s novel therefore craft their own covenants in their own bodies. In so doing, they reassert the centrality of the body to providential capitalism. Abused, unable to trust in the binding power of contracts, and constantly reminded of their subject status, the sailors aboard the Highlander cling to the only thing they can trust: their own bodies. Yet, even as they reconstitute the earliest logic of covenant ideology—that the text might stand in for a divine agreement first instantiated by Christ’s human sacrifice—the sailors tacitly confirm their own commodity transformations.
Melville makes the point clearly when he describes his fellow sailors’ tattoos. Redburn tells readers, “I saw a sailor stretched out, stark and stiff, with the sleeve of his frock rolled up, and showing his name and date of birth tattooed upon his arm. It was a sight full of suggestions; he seemed his own head-stone” (251). A moment later, Melville writes, “I was told that standing rewards are offered for the recovery of persons falling into the docks; so much, if restored to life, and a less amount if irrecoverably drowned.” He then describes the market for these marked bodies, writing “I observed them principally early in the morning, when they issued from their dens, on the same principle that the rag-rakers and rubbish-pickers in the streets, sally out…there seems to be no calamity overtaking man, that cannot be rendered merchantable” (251). This is a useful description of both covenant ideology and commodity conversion as it becomes a bodily experience. Typee’s Tommo resisted the tattooing that would mark him as a full member of the Typee tribe, seeing it as submitting to social imprisonment. Here, Redburn both longs for the sign of community, and recognizes it as a mark of dehumanizing commodification. Typee, however, does not contradict Melville’s reading of tattooing in Redburn. Rather, both texts demonstrate the author’s ongoing interest in the efforts of individuals to claim possession of their own bodies, as well as in their inevitable failure to do so. Given that value rests upon possible resale, one might read the act of tattooing as an attempt by the sailors to escape the market’s grasp. It is. But it is also an implicit admission of the seemingly limitless reach of the market into personal and social lives. The sailor’s flesh becomes a text affirming his humanity, even as, in death, it becomes a purely symbolic currency, representative both of a life that once was but is no more, and of that life’s specific commodity value.

Melville follows the logic of the signature as a sign of community inclusion into the marketplace where it has proliferated beyond the bounds of the church to include the fractious
mobile society of the maritime market as well as pockets of resistance to the market’s demands. If these tattoos implicitly resemble the signatures the sailors signed when they contracted as laborers aboard ship, they also function as a form of resistance. Michael Taussig, for example suggests that the devil contract is the exchange that ends all exchanges and thus violates social ethics because it removes the individual soul from the market (Taussig 118). The tattoos are emblems of a pledge the sailors make to an alternative moral order from the mainstream. They represent a pledge to assert self-possession in the face of a market that loudly asserts proprietary claims. However, the collection of bodies by the “rag-pickers” implies the market’s inescapability, even in death. And so, the binarism of good and evil, or even of life and death, has ceased to have meaning in the Atlantic market and has been replaced by an accounting divinity that uses both profit and loss for its own extension and expansion. Even the sailors’ attempts to resist or to escape can be granted a market value. Good and evil, life and death are but opposite sides of a divine ledger book, in which God organizes individual commodities.

**On the Whiteness of Redburn and the Specter of Slavery**

Just as Poe presented a central character surrounded by signs of his own racial instability, Melville’s Redburn consistently confronts the many ways in which whiteness can be commodified or rendered meaningless in the Atlantic market. He exclaims, “Miserable dog’s life is this of the sea! Commanded like a slave, and set to work like an ass! Vulgar and brutal men lording it over me, as if I were an African in Alabama” (119). Redburn’s unpaid labor establishes the degree to which he loses his privileged racial status through a more direct relation with the market’s inner processes. As Rediker notes, when ships could not find enough free and willing labor, they resorted to impressment, forcing imprisoned, indigent, itinerant, or merely unlucky men to serve (289). Doing so meant subjecting these men’s bodies to the same perils and
Green 326

punishments as those experienced by the enslaved laborers who shared space on the ship. xxxvi

Redburn’s body is, thus, potentially open to claim or in danger of disposal; his labor is potentially taken for free or by force. When Redburn is denied his contracted money exchange, he realizes, along with the reader, the extent to which “free” labor could resemble slavery and the degree to which whiteness served as a mere distraction from universal commodification. Where white supremacists see whiteness as an escape from commodification, this novel posits whiteness as just another value to be commodified or to be lost in the market.

Perhaps more than any of his other novels, Melville’s Redburn critiques the pockets of utopian liberty contained within the free-laborism of the sea. Sacvan Bercovitch observes that Thoreau’s Walden “embodies the myth of American laissez-faire individualism…the lessons it teaches echo those of the celebrated Homo Economicus of the mid-nineteenth century America” (Bercovitch 187-8). But Melville’s laboring protagonists are always circumspect in their approach to “free” labor that resembles unfree labor more than his contemporaries might like to admit. Ishmael, for example, went whaling, at least in part, due to a suicidal urge.

Redburn’s presentation of labor as an experience of sacrifice for the social order also demonstrates something of a generational pivot-point around which has turned an important element of Melville scholarship: whether the novel is a paean to free-laborism or a critique of the unfree elements hidden within free-labor ideology. Bercovitch, for example, looks to older critics like C.L.R. James, who observed that in Redburn, Melville “launches into a long defense of sailors as a class of workers. They carry around the globe missionaries, ambassadors, opera-singers, armies, merchants. The business of the world depends upon them; if they were suddenly to emigrate to the navies of the moon everything on earth would stop except its revolution on its axis and the orators in the American Congress” (James 78). However, Wellingborough
Redburn’s degradation and embarrassment stem from his utopian belief in the brotherhood of the working class. His experience, therefore, reflects a reality that Lisa Lowe more recently asserts when she says that “‘free trade’ policies lifted mercantilist barriers and broke up the company monopoly, yet in effect, they provided the means to secure a tight military hold” (Lowe 79). So *Redburn*, in the end, is both: a narrative that, as older scholars contended, praised maritime laborers and drew authenticity from the experience of maritime free-laborism, and, as later scholars would more fully recognize, a critical invective against the abusive practices that evidently empowered maritime economies.

In essence, the kind of labor that *Redburn* investigates permitted Atlantic national powers to extend the logic of mastery and command, which structured slavery, into a “free” market even though free labor could never be totally free. Rediker argues that the merchant ship was, like the slave or naval ship, organized in an intensely hierarchal fashion and owners and captains often worked to exploit their laborers, limit their rations, find cause to abuse or even murder them, or abandon them to cut costs and to exert control (Rediker 84). This brutal system of control even included the worst forms of personal violence. Rediker even notes that “Murder was clearly a part of the social relations of work at sea” (219). *Redburn* exposes the lie beneath the utopian notion of free labor, demonstrating all of the ways that the laboring classes could be taken advantage of and sacrificed for the benefit of the capitalist elite.

Coupled with the text’s undermining of Redburn’s expectations of the power of whiteness, the specter of chattel slavery hangs over the entirety of the *Highlander’s* journey. Redburn notes, for example, the appearance of “a little brig from the Coast of Guinea…the ideal of a slaver…her decks in a state of most piratical disorder” (245). The cynical but well-traveled sailor, Jackson, even plays upon this context with disturbing relish, in order to taunt the non-
working passengers of the *Highlander*, by spreading a rumor “that Riga purposed taking them to Barbary, and selling them all for slaves” (344). Later, Redburn laments that Captain Riga “was…actually turning a poor lad adrift without a copper, after he had been slaving aboard his ship for more than four mortal months” (399). Even Redburn’s transcendental contemplations are inflected with visions of the violence and death that attend slavery, such as when he passes a carnival and imagines “jet black Nubian slaves [who] flight themselves on poles; stand on their heads; and downward vanish” (334). Thinking about the “delirium” caused by his difficult work amidst dramatic nature, Redburn recalls “the feeling of mastering the rebellious canvas, and tying it down like a slave to the spar” (175). Slavery is an endemic part of this world and an innate element of nature. Sailors are, therefore, always in danger of losing their special status as free whites. The novel suggests that they may, in fact, have always been living under the delusion that whiteness and freedom were, in any way, distinguishable from blackness and unfreedom, in a labor society governed by market value and equivalency.

Moreover, the ship’s journey towards its destination, Liverpool, draws Redburn ever closer to the trade, which remains the true lifeblood of the Atlantic market. As a result, readers should hardly be surprised by the moment when Redburn beholds a statue celebrating Nelson’s “principal victories,” and sees the “swarthy limbs and manacles” that recall “four African slaves in the market-place” (222). Redburn recognizes the same violent social, economic, and ideological elements that would invite Ian Baucom to describe Liverpool as the “capitol” of Atlantic modernity. Redburn’s exposure to the abusive practices of the market, as well as his own experiences of commodification, have revealed the blood of the slave upon which all of the Atlantic market sails. He cannot look at nationalist victory or maritime power without seeing the loss and powerlessness that have been necessary for Atlantic society to develop. In Liverpool, he
is struck by “the absence of negroes; who in the large towns in the ‘free states’ of America, almost always form a considerable portion of the destitute” (277). Melville’s use of scare quotes gives away his dim, circumscribed view of what freedom means in a slaveholding society: there can be no such thing as freedom, only degrees of slavery. When Melville goes on to note that “to be a born American citizen seems a guarantee against pauperism,” readers should understand that he means to implicate the hypocrisy of white supremacist ideology in myths of democratic American exceptionalism (277). In this sentence “guarantee” is a vastly less significant word than “seems,” for whiteness is only a seeming appearance of freedom, beneath which lies potential impressment, capture, or slavery. For Melville, a nationalism founded upon white supremacy is a nationalism founded upon a lie.

**Redburn’s Cannibal Desire**

Consumption and suggestions of cannibalism in the novel further emphasize the violence at the heart of a society that purports to civilization even as it practices slavery’s barbarism, and reframe the novel’s project of using the body to instantiate all of the processes of the providential capitalist market. Recalling Hartman’s contention that submission and slavery are “a form of willed self-immolation” as well as Montwieler and Boren’s description of the connections between race, “violence, sexuality, and hybridity,” Melville, at first playfully and then more frightfully, restages the communion ritual of consumption of Christ’s body as the ghastly ritual of cannibalism at sea, but still allows the event to function as a tool to create social communion (Hartman 53). At one point, when Redburn transforms a sexual fantasy into one of cannibalistic ingestion, he uses a blasphemous version of sacramental consumption to create a communal relation. Melville writes, “There they sat—the charmers, I mean—eating these buttered muffins in plain sight. I wished I was a buttered muffin myself” (292). The sacrament
by which Christ allowed himself to become a thing to be consumed and, through this act, to instantiate a community, replays as a dark comedy in which the individual becomes a thing around which a society—here a society playfully engaged in group sex—may be formed.

This concept takes on a much darker aspect later in the novel, when the passengers aboard the *Highlander* begin to suffer from starvation and disease, and their deprivation becomes a form of communal suffering, debasement, and then cohesion. Redburn explains that the dying passengers “made inroads upon the pig-pen in the boat, and carried off a promising young shoat: *him* they devoured raw, not venturing to make an incognito of his carcass; they prowled about the cook’s caboose, till he threatened them with a ladle of scalding water...they beset the sailors, like beggars in the streets, craving a mouthful in the name of the Church” (371). Melville’s emphatic italicization of “him,” along with his intentional failure to clearly indicate what “mouthful” the starving masses seek, allows the reader to potentially confuse the consumption of livestock with the consumption of persons. There is no textual difference between goods and people when it comes to the needs of a market of the starving. Moreover, this episode of starvation, blood sacrifice, and consumption serves as a moment of social unity, albeit one that inspires horror at the same time that it initiates social communal action.

Given the way that Melville and Redburn have subtly drawn readers’ attentions to the similarities between merchant and slave vessels, readers would be remiss not to think of similar scenes aboard the slave ships that navigate the same seas. This becomes especially fraught when disease breaks out among the emigrant passengers, and death follows in due course. The crew begins pitching bodies over the side of the ship, prompting Redburn to remark “the bottomless profound of the sea, over which we were sailing, concealed nothing more frightful” (376). Yet these are not the only dead bodies “concealed” beneath the waves. They follow
countless scores of bodies, free and unfree, that have become the unfortunate but necessary sacrifices of the Atlantic trade. Ian Baucom, for instance, recognizes the importance of such bodies when he examines the case of the *Zong* massacre, in which sick slaves were thrown overboard, so that the crew could maintain their profits through insurance claims. Baucom presents this scene as the emblematic event of modernity, in which “the slaves were…treated not only as a type of commodity but as a type of interest-bearing money…commodities for sale and as the reserve deposits of a loosely organized decentered but vast trans-Atlantic banking system” (Baucom 61). Noting the way the insurance claim asserts the slaves’ value, even in their disappearance, he writes, “in a money culture or an insurance culture value survives its objects” (95). The bodies of the slaves were used as “promissory notes, bills of exchange...embodied, material existence but to their speculative, recoverable loss value” (139). Here the bodies of sick passengers serve a similar function. They have already paid for passage, so their absent bodies become secondary, in the pure logic of exchange, to their disembodied market value. The bodies become, essentially, unnecessary, and the “value survives its objects.”

That this grisly scene plays out with white bodies asserts the degree to which the flimsy protective status of white skin became a source of real anxiety for nineteenth-century white laborers, authors, and readers. It also telegraphs the novel’s overall interest in the classed dimensions of social sacrifice. The market economy of maritime trade sees no difference in skin color, reducing laborers to slaves and reducing people to livestock. In Melville’s comprehensive vision, Atlantic life is one of chattel slave conditions, in which everyone is potentially exploitable, and potentially consumable. However, these moments of consumption, obliteration, or sacrifice are all done in the service of a hierarchical economy that positions laborers, slaves, and chattel together as a group open to the exploitation. Whether aboard the *Zong* or the
Green 332

*Highlander*, the violent sacrifice and even death of slaves or laborers is necessary for the survival of the Atlantic communities linked through trade and exchange.

Such scenes, coupled with those in which the crew, and even the emigrant passengers find themselves the targets of hierarchal control and punishment, pivot from Melville’s depiction of a grim kind of communion to a totalizing vision of suffering and slavery as passion. In this way, Melville returns Christian metaphysics to their bodily ritualistic materialism. He also implicates polite society in the violence of the slave trade, by enshrining the slave as the sacrificial body around which Atlantic society revolves. Taussig suggests that, in Christian societies, Jesus is the fetishization of good, just as the Devil is the fetishization and embodiment of social relations of evil (Taussig 180). By this logic, the sailor might be considered the fetish object Melville uses to embody Atlantic labor. Each sailor experiences his own and a community passion, and each is potentially consumed in a sexualized or frightful play upon Christ’s sacrificial offering of self to community. The Kingdom of Heaven with a sacrificial Christ at its center becomes the market of the Atlantic with the sacrificial sailor at its heart. Implicitly too, the kingdom of modern Atlantic society has, at its center, a sacrificial enslaved body.

For this brutal but inclusive vision of the Atlantic market society to function, free persons must recognize their interchangeability with the unfree. Persons must become commodities so that they might equally be acted upon by the deity who inhabits the marketplace. Elect souls must recognize that election is possession, inclusion in a totalizing market that binds everyone through common and painful commodification. Money, according to Marx, acts as “all other commodities divested of their shape—the product of universal alienation—the commodity disappears when it becomes money” (Marx 205). However, the slave body both acts as money and retains direct use value. The flesh has an equivalent symbolic value and direct laboring
value. Melville posits that sailor is the slave, and civilian might be as well. As such, every living person similarly functions as both currency and commodity at the same time. Every body is a fetish object inhabited by use and exchange potential. Here readers can make a theoretical leap to read Christian metaphysics through the lens of industrial capital. If human beings are bodily containers for souls who act in the material world, they are also functional laboring commodities, haunted by a metaphysical and allegorical market value (Marx 205). These readings overlap, revealing the way that providential Christian logic and abstract capitalist exchange logic function in tandem, each influencing and shedding light upon the other.

Furthermore, the punishments meted out aboard the Highlander touch both crew and passengers alike, demonstrating the market’s ability to combine laborers with pilgrims for survival, so that community coheres around bodily sacrifice (376). The Highlander, carries a mixed crew, including merchant laborers, and immigrants and their families who have signed different contracts. If “signers” might function as a catchall for the diversely-contracted population on the ships, so too might “sufferers,” given that, as Redburn explains, “Captain Riga, issued another ukase, and to this effect: Whatsoever emigrant is found guilty of stealing, the same shall be tied into the rigging and flogged” (371). This reading builds upon the logic of covenant to argue that election means something other than a promise of divine protection. It is also a promise of bodily suffering. Yet that suffering is necessary in two respects: first, it keeps the ship running and, as a result, satisfies the demands of the market; second, it permits a society to combine in a mutual experience of mutual trial. The individual body becomes the site of a communal ritual of inclusion and, potentially, collective transcendence.
The Combustible Man and Commodity Misidentification

Redburn trades upon this interpolation and transference from person to thing, and the haunting of thing by a spiritual essence, as the central thematic concern of the text. For example, at one point, the text syntactically reinterprets Redburn’s discussion of himself as a jack of all trades as a revelation of his literal and figurative status as a tool. Redburn recalls how “often furnished with a club-hammer, they swung me over the bows in a bowline, to pound the rust off the anchor” (183). The man wields the tool, and swings it, but the crew wields the man, and swings him. Metonymically, Redburn and his hammer have become one and the same. Similarly, Redburn remarks upon the sailors’ function in the world economy by comparing them to the wheels of a coach. He writes “they go and come round the globe; they are the true importers, and exporters of spices and silks; of fruits and wines and marbles; they carry missionaries, ambassadors, opera-singers, armies, merchants, tourists, scholars to their destination: they are a bridge of boats across the Atlantic; they are the primum mobile of all commerce” (204). Amidst his reverent description of the centrality of Atlantic trade in the modern world, Redburn loses the clarity of his pronouns, letting “they” conflate the sailor with the ship. The confusion is telling, drawing the reader’s attention to the way that human bodies take on the attributes of the tools with which they work, and the way that objects take on the spirit of the people who use them.

Elsewhere, Melville notes that this proximal and metonymic commodity relation becomes a form of personal identification with commodities. Redburn describes, for example, being conflated with his outfit and writes “sometimes they used to call me ‘Boots’, and sometimes ‘Buttons’, on account of the ornaments on my pantaloons and shooting-jacket” (128). Such moments are presented to readers uncritically, encouraging Redburn’s transcendent sense of spiritual life adhering in nature to give life to objects, his providential belief in the sanctity of
work to transform humans into tools, and the crew’s uncanny belief in the spirit-life of things to become a paean to the importance of the working class. However, the text reveals an anxious and high-stakes consideration of the philosophical effects of these instances of commodity misidentification.

Most famously, Melville uses alcohol, an enormously important commodity in the Atlantic market, to develop the anxiety produced by commodity identification to its most shocking extreme. First, Max, a friendly face aboard the ship, is referred to as a “combustible man” partly for his coloring and partly for his drink-encouraged unpredictability (134). The moniker anticipates and prepares readers for the moment’s shocking sequel. A drunken Miguel Saveda, impressed while unconscious and taken aboard to fill the ranks of the crew, spontaneously combusts (326). “To the silent horror of all,” Redburn recalls, “two threads of greenish fire, like a forked tongue, darted out between the lips; and in a moment, the cadaverous face was crawled over by a swarm of worm-like flames.” Redburn goes on to describe the way “the eyes were open and fixed; the mouth was curled like a scroll, and every lean feature firm as in life; while the whole face, now wound in curls of soft blue flame, wore an aspect of grim defiance, and eternal death.” Finally, the Mate shouts down to the barracks, asking “where’s that d—d Miguel?” (326). In this moment, the anxious uncanny of commodity identification, which has, heretofore, lain dormant beneath the surface of the text, breaks out and reveals that it has been present all along. In this moment too, the novel’s preoccupation with the bodily effects of spiritual and material commodification becomes shockingly literal.

This is the most potent reminder, in a text full of such reminders, that the impressed and commodified body instantiates the processes of spiritual and commercial conversion, even as it functions as the site of community cohesion, and binds the judgments of the divine to the tools of
the commodity market. The Mate’s punctuating question seems to frame the entire scene as a hellish punishment. In this, it responds to an earlier moment in which a man “must have suddenly waked up…raging mad with delirium tremens…rushed on deck, and, so, in a fit of frenzy, put an end to himself” (99). Likewise, Redburn remarks “I almost thought the burning body was a premonition of the hell of the Calvinists and that Miguel’s earthly end was a foretaste of his eternal condemnation” (327). Alcohol-induced immolation is a potent and symbolically rich tool of punishment for the sin of excessive drunkenness. However, alcohol is also a central commodity around which the Atlantic economy turns. So the bodies damned by alcohol are, like the sick bodies thrown overboard, redolent of the human sacrifices necessary for the Atlantic world to persist and to prosper. The man and the commodity become intertwined in a circuit by which two of the Atlantic world’s most valuable and profitable goods—rum and human bodies, spirits and spirits—become equivalent, but do so within a spiritual framework in which the logic of damnation still pertains. Saveda consumes a commodity in such great quantities that it consumes him.

At the same time, just as Saveda’s soul is lost to its hellish fate, his combustion presents a question of profit and loss for the ship, reminding readers that death is no escape from the logic of the market, and that the absent body also has value. Jackson, for example, thinks that “the man had been actually dead when brought on board the ship; and that knowingly, and merely for the sake of the month’s advance, paid into his hand upon the strength of the bill he presented, the body-snatching crimp had knowingly shipped a corpse on board of the Highlander, under the pretense of its being a live body in a drunken trance” (327). Whose interpretation, Redburn’s or Jackson’s, is correct? By the logic of the text, and of providential capitalism, both men have rightly read the situation: Saveda’s is a lost soul, a profit made, and both at once.
The relation of humanity to divinity has curdled in this text, so that God either dislikes or disregards humans as the gears of the market turn on and on. Redburn explicitly invokes providence only once when he receives the interventionist protection necessary to return safely from his first attempt at slushing down the top-mast of the ship. He writes, “It was no easy job…I contrived to place my bucket in the ‘top’; and then, trusting to Providence, swung myself up after it” (76). Melville here situates providence in a scene of labor, in which his protagonist requests the kind of special protection upon which a providential capitalist writer like Equiano depended, but in a context that will only reward the company for which Redburn risks his life. This is also a scene of degradation, in which Redburn is forced to do the most humiliating and dangerous task, and his rescue only offers him the opportunity to continue to perform demeaning functions on the ship and in the market. If there is a providential god, it evidently requires debased sailing “boys,” rather than specially elect souls. Elsewhere Redburn’s invocations to the divine take the form of mordant jokes and blasphemy, suggesting Melville’s at-best cynical view of the conflation of God with the market. When Redburn exclaims, “And as for the ginger-pop, why, that ginger-pop was divine!” a simple platitude becomes a subtle critique of the market’s ability to profane the divine by way of intimate collusion (393). The exclamation rises to the level of parody, taking direct aim at a belief system that sells God as a consumer product and sells humanity promiscuously in the market.

Furthermore, the novel emphasizes a leery view of divine intervention and human knowledge by undermining sacred texts, the traditional means of knowing the mind of God. In particular, Redburn’s father’s guidebook, a precious family relic from his time in Liverpool, directs Redburn toward sites that no longer exist. Melville uses the failure of the book to highlight the endless churn of capital as it destroys itself to make itself new again. In the swift
currents of Atlantic capital, old signposts and landmarks are washed away with startling
clearness. Melville also uses the failure of the guidebook to put the final nail in the paternal
coffin, revealing Redburn’s father as failed businessman, failed author, and failed father. Finally,
the book suggests the disinterest of the market god. There is no paternal figure to communicate
Redburn’s path to him, even if the hand of God intervenes in the market itself. Redburn’s choices
are made for him by captains, by con-men, by fellow sailors, and by the universe that constantly
offers him reminders of his own embeddedness in the market, an embeddedness that will
continue even beyond his death. Unlike in Equiano’s narrative or that of so many authors
brought to epiphanic grace through a talking book, this universe offers books that talk but lie or
do not talk at all.

A Universally Unresponsive God

Nevertheless, Melville describes a universal but universally alienating spiritual culture to
which he has been exposed as Redburn travels within the Atlantic maritime market. This culture
is market-driven and oriented around exchange, mobility, and conversion. Furthermore, Melville
notices the way that the maritime market incubates heterogeneity. At one point, Redburn focuses
upon a peculiar scene of syncretic religious practice in the docks of Liverpool, describing the
“Floating Chapel…the hull of an old-sloop-of war, which had been converted into a mariner’s
Church” (246). Melville here telegraphs a universal religion of laborers. Redburn, watching
groups of sailors, dreamily intones “whenever, in my Sunday strolls, I caught sight of one of
these congregations [of sailors], I always made a point of joining it; and would find myself
surrounded by a motley crowd of seamen from all quarters of the globe, and women, and
lumpers, and dock laborers of all sorts” (247). Redburn immerses himself in the miscellaneous
community of people drawn together by Atlantic trade and sees divinity in this kind of
communal association through labor. He writes “Frequently the clergyman would be standing upon an old cask, arrayed in full canonicals, as a divine of the Church of England. Never have I heard religious discourses better adapted to an audience of men” (247). Redburn revels in this universality and Melville takes it as an opportunity to note the unifying potential of the market, although whether that union is good or bad, he does not disclose.

While Redburn does not discover any specific religion at sea, he does discover a kind of spiritual humanism that draws together the men and women who work the ships and docks that link Atlantic trade. In fact, the universal possibilities of maritime spirituality are a recurrent feature in Melville’s fiction. Brian Yothers, for example, notes that “Melville’s career from Typee (1846) to Moby-Dick (1851) is marked by an intensifying and broadening concern with the varieties of religious difference from nearly every portion of the planet” (Yothers 51). This includes spiritual practices that do not fit into the traditional categories of Christian practices. Redburn observes, for example, “a fortune-teller, an old negro woman by the name of De Squak, whose house was much frequented by sailors” (144). He also learns to understand the sailor’s propensity for superstition when, for example, the Highlander passes a ship with the dead crew still lashed in place (161). Likewise, the bunk in which Saveda died becomes taboo, although it is not clear whether out of fear of contamination or out of fear of haunting. Redburn tells readers that “an iron pot of red coals was placed in the bunk, and in it two handfuls of coffee were roasted. This done, the bunk was nailed up, and was never opened again during the voyage…after the event, no one sailor but Jackson would stay alone in the forecastle…he froze my blood, and made my soul stand still” (328). These are the signs of a syncretic religious culture, borrowing folk beliefs from the various peripheries of the Atlantic, and mixing them in...
the ships that move port to port, so that they reappear, in blended fashion, in the centers of trade that make a kind of cobbled-together universal system.

Commerce likewise collapses national boundaries, as Redburn finds himself conducting American business in an English setting that is truly cosmopolitan (196). Marcus Rediker sketches the contours of this community at sea that existed far beyond nationality, and was primarily composed of merchant sailors. The typical sailor of Rediker’s history, Jack Tar, was “in many ways a marked man,” an individual with features and habits so unique as to designate him a member of a mobile polity, rather than that of any one nation or creed (12). He dressed differently, spoke differently, even walked differently from others in the world on shore. Rediker notes that sailors’ common experiences of abuse could also create community, despite the best efforts of bosses and masters. Slave traders, for example attempted to disrupt community among slaves: “in order to prevent mutinies by slaves, merchant captains drew their cargoes from scattered locations and different linguistic groups” (Rediker 48). Similarly, writers like Equiano, Briton Hammon, and John Jea demonstrated the way that ports and ships could offer opportunities for the creation and curation of counter publics. Enslaved maritime writer, Briton Hammon jumped from ship to ship in search of relative liberty, while the preacher-author, Jon Jea used religious affiliation to generate community among the laborers who lived along the mobile trade-routes of the Atlantic. Here, Melville similarly demonstrates the way the maritime port functions as a democratic international and religious space, where commerce dictates all that goes on and creates communities of fellowship through labor and exchange.

In Redburn, the market also functions to bring together diverse faith traditions in the service of smoothly-running capitalism. For example, Melville describes the docks as “a small archipelago, an epitome of the world, where all the nations of Christendom, and even those of
Heathendom, are represented. For, in itself, each ship is an island, a floating colony of the tribe to which it belongs” (234). Yothers argues that “A recurring motif throughout Melville’s career is his representation of internecine strife among Christian denominations” (53). However, the “archipelago” of merchant ships reconciles not only Christian sects, but also a multitude of diverse worldwide faiths, all brought together through the influence of Atlantic trade. What makes Redburn unique among Melville’s fictions is its assertion of the democratizing influence of market exchange. If, in his earliest novels, Melville “registers [a] tense religious environment when he writes in Typee and Omoo about a series of conflicts among Protestant and Catholic missionnaires and Pacific Islanders,” here that tension dissolves into the universality of providential Atlantic capital (Yothers 53). Moreover, when Melville returns to the question of a universal church and universal moral directives in Moby-Dick, he presents a scene in which democratic utopias dissolve as the crew embraces Ahab’s charismatic tyranny. Different faiths are not brought together, but swiftly abandoned in favor of the cult of personality surrounding Ahab. In contrast, Redburn presents a market that allows and even thrives on difference, because difference allows it to spread along all of the trade routes of the world. Redburn expresses awe at the power of commerce to encourage sailors to exchange nationalism and religious denomination, and to accept entry into the elect community of sailors that maintains diversity even in its universality.

As a result, Redburn still sees through the lens of the providential capitalist jeremiad, imagining the horizons of possible universal humanism extending forever toward the horizon. He writes “The other world beyond this…was longed for by the devout before Columbus’ time, was found in the new; and the deep-sea-lead, that first struck these soundings, brought up the soil of Earth’s Paradise. Not a Paradise then, or now; but to be made so, at God’s good pleasure…”The
seed is sown, and the harvest must come, and the harvest must come.” Adhering to the nationalist tenor so familiar to such jeremiads, he continues: “then shall the curse of Babel be revoked, a new Pentecost come, and the language they shall speak shall be the language of Britain. Frenchmen, and Danes, and Scots; and the dwellers on the shores of the Mediterranean, and in the regions round about; Italians, and Indians, and Moors; there shall appear unto them cloven tongues as of fire” (239). All of this sounds relatively familiar to the jeremiadic form and it is important to recall that the New World paradise Redburn imagines was founded, developed, and will bear fruit, all because of the purported divinity of capitalist progress.

By using the Christian imagery of passion and communion, Melville can recast labor, loss, and sacrifice as a kind of communal interrelation of diverse Atlantic cultures and vice versa: the market interactions between Atlantic cultures become sacred moments of exchange and communal intimacy. This reading sees Melville’s curiosity about supernaturalism and investment in capitalism not as parallel interests, but as one comprehensive vision of the Atlantic as a space both capitalist and supernatural. Both generically and philosophically, this reading also expands upon something that Lisa Lowe uncovers with regard to the instantiation of community in oceanic discourse. Lowe sees trade as the means by which Europe, North America, Africa, and Asia not only interacted but also developed conceptions of freedom, labor, and market exchange. She describes the way that trade instantiated “modern liberalism” by which she means “the branches of European political philosophy that include the narration of political emancipation through citizenship in the state, the promise of economic freedom in the development of wage labor and exchange markets, and the conferring of civilization to human persons educated in aesthetic and national culture—in each case unifying particularity, difference, or locality through universal concepts of reason and community” (Lowe 4). It is difficult to improve upon this
description of mercantile “free labor” and trade as productive cultural forces. Nevertheless, Lowe leaves out the important role that spiritual culture played in developing this universal “intimacy.” Melville’s scenes of communal suffering and communion reassert the centrality of a spiritual interpretive framework for the people living within this market system and for the societies that used trade as the means by which to cohere and absolve difference.

Moreover, readers should not forget the classed elements of this communion. Redburn travels with and among the laboring classes that circulate the maritime Atlantic. As a result, his observations about power, submission, and even the reciprocity of homosociality are all contained within the class hierarchies that grow out of Atlantic commerce. If the sacrifices of maritime laborers allow broader Atlantic societies to develop and cohere, the event represents the sacrifice of one class for another. The communion that Redburn witnesses ultimately helps to instantiate a hierarchical society that subordinates and, if possible, frequently occludes the existence of laboring classes altogether. They are the invisible sacrifices that permit Atlantic societies to function.

Nevertheless, suffering and sacrificial bodies bring Melville’s characters together in moments of self-recognition and community instantiation. The heterogeneous crew of the ship, the American and European travelers aboard the ship, the African laborers and slaves who are present either literally or abstractly, in Redburn’s imagination, all come together around, for example, the disappeared body of Miguel Saveda, the sacrificial livestock, and the sick bodies thrown overboard. All meet under the threat of the same lash, a testament to the truth of Lowe’s contention that free labor was merely another name for the extension of practices of control and mastery. Melville presents these moments as both spiritually significant and market-driven. Doing so allows him to dramatize the intimate relations for which Lowe argues so incisively.
Melville’s metaphysics present the universalism born of international commerce and travel as the creation of a universal and divine kingdom. Crucially, his spiritual framework draws upon tropes of Christian sacrifice, rebirth, and communion, but remains open to syncretic interpretations of events and ritual practices. His is no strict or orthodox typology. In this too, the novel’s moments of spiritualism dramatize Lowe’s vision of intimate universality. Such moments are both truly intimate—scenes in which people touch, gather, suffer, labor, and commune together—and truly universal. Providential capitalism, therefore, the blending of Christian and capitalist values and epistemologies in the Atlantic, allows economic interactions to take on the significance they deserve as the means by which cultures meet and propagate.

As a result, although the novel purports to be a generically direct bildungsroman, a text not unlike Dana’s, in which a young man’s maritime adventures allow the reading public at home to experience the expanding scope of national and international commerce, conquest, and collaboration, it remains suffused and even initiated by supernatural spiritual experiences. Redburn, for example, was called to his vocation by what he calls “vague prophetic” inclinations (48). Taken together with the references to the fortune-teller, Melville offers a vision of universal belief not dissimilar to Equiano’s. In both, events are prefigured in near-prophetic visions; in both, a fortune-telling character underscores the orchestration of human affairs as well as their legibility; in both, the market appears to be the medium through which the divine and ordinary interact. The difference then is in the trajectory: where Equiano is able to seize on his visions to navigate the moral and economic cosmology of the Atlantic world, Redburn’s visions only set him on a course for ruin. There could be no other way. For, if Equiano is the “particular favourite,” implicitly, someone else is not: someone like Wellingborough Redburn. The philosophy of the divine ledger-book thus transcends and unites both texts. One man’s gain is
necessarily predicated upon the other’s loss. Still, even in an accounting of loss, the market-spirit nexus of providential capitalism asserts its universality. If Redburn and Equiano participate in the same economic and spiritual system, along with their captains, masters, and fellow crewmen, then the market truly is a binding force. It yokes together individuals from all over the Atlantic world and places their mobile interactions at the center of a dense cultural net.

Yet it would be much easier to take the novel’s ode to a universalizing market at face value if it did not end as it does: by returning to the scene of a sacrificial body but, now, with a nihilistic recognition that the sacrifice only serves to obliterate the individual for the sake of the market. The “tongues as of fire” Redburn invokes only remind readers of Saveda’s consumption and obliteration by commodity. Yothers argues for Jackson as an anticipatory figure of “all the worst possibilities of human nature” foreshadowing Ahab (Yothers 73). However, Jackson is as much a victim as he is a villain. Jackson, the consummate seaman, with no care for land, and no love for anyone in the crew, but with all the skill, knowledge, and commitment to vocation that, Redburn insists, will bring about a capital-fueled divine kingdom, falls to his death at sea. When he does, Redburn sadly recalls that the ship’s owners will not have to pay him. Foreshadowing Melville’s most famous examination of bodily sacrifice for social ends, Billy Budd, Redburn laments, “his death was their deliverance” (387). Melville’s conflation of the ship to a church, a conflation he literalizes and emphasizes to a much greater degree in Moby-Dick’s Father Mapple chapter, frames national, capitalist, and spiritual concerns as inextricably tied together. However, this moment reminds readers that this universal church ensures only the annihilation of individuals. The moment reminds readers that, although optimistic readings of providential capitalist events focus on the community that surrounds the sacrificial body, that body too has a perspective. The slave made invisible to the market that depends upon slavery, the indentured,
the sailor, the missing, and the dead, all who were sacrificed for the working of the market, had a humanity and personhood that the market absorbs and destroys in its efforts to distill the sacrificial person into a mere numeral in its arithmetic logic.

The novel therefore demonstrates a harsh reality that underwrote Equiano’s fraught but, ultimately, successful journey toward transcendence: the successful navigation of the increasingly universal providential capitalist culture of the Atlantic required the destruction, disappearance, or suffering of individuals who could not attain the kind of upward trajectory that the system promised. By the midpoint of the novel, Redburn, for example, secures his own survival in the market by offering up the life of the con-man, Harry Bolton. Though their relationship is based, ostensibly, upon friendship, Redburn essentially purchases admission into a higher echelon of more experienced seamen at the price of his friend, offering a new sacrificial body in exchange for his own security (298). As the text and the Highlander’s journeys double-back, Redburn makes his way toward becoming a man who understands and survives the economic structure that dictates the universe. However, as he does, Harry Bolton, who never learns to successfully navigate the maritime trade or its customs, dies at sea. Bolton then is yet another necessary sacrifice, another body and soul given to the merciless system of Atlantic trade, so that Redburn can survive.

Harry Bolton also allows Melville to try out what would evolve into one of his favorite literary types: the con-man. This is an important figure in Melville’s work in two respects: he simultaneously reveals the instability and untrustworthiness of Atlantic society, and suggests a way to navigate it. Michael Rogin, for example, recognizes the philosophical and personal necessity of the con-man’s disposition relative to the Atlantic capitalism of Melville’s age. “On the one hand,” he writes, “marketplace motives threatened to swallow up politics, religion, and
family life. On the other hand, the marketplace itself required mutual confidence and was vulnerable to confidence games...to trust was to be gulled, to mistrust was to go mad. Sanity required a trust in appearances that placed one in the power of confidence men” (Rogin 240).

Yet, in Redburn, even Bolton fails. No figure escapes from the novel truly unscathed, so, just as Ishmael’s escape from the disaster of the Pequod allows him to witness the catastrophic folly of Jacksonian democracy yoked to charismatic monomania, Redburn’s relative survival allows him to witness the totality of Atlantic capital’s rapacious obliterative appetite. It consumes every one and every thing.

The bodies and souls of men like Jackson and, ultimately, Harry Bolton, serve as the fuel to sustain providential capitalist trade. The pauper women with their sick babies dying in Liverpool, and the rag-pickers among the dead are the system’s incorporated excess. The will of God plays out in the uncanny destruction of a body by transformation into commodity. Membership in the crew is the only significant register of election, yet, although his crew promises to look for Redburn on their return, in order to compensate him for his lost wages, they never do. All that remains for Redburn is the grim awareness of his meagre value in the market. The only covenants are the ledger book, which tells God or the captain of gains, losses, and debt, and the crew list, which secures only degradation, loss of identity, and commodification. Jackson, the ostensible villain of the story, actually offers an incisive critique of faith among merchant men. A fellow sailor insists “all sailors are saved; they have plenty of squalls here below, but fair weather aloft.” Jackson responds “And did you get that out of your silly Dream Book, you Greek? Don’t talk of heaven to me—it’s a lie—I know it—and they are all fools that believe in it...Avast! When some shark gulps you down his hatchway one of these days, you’ll find, that by dying, you’ll only go from one gale of wind to another; mind that, you Irish
cockney!” (162). The universe of the novel turns on universal consumption, by the divine, by other people, and, most of all, by the market.

Conclusion

When Melville uses the vicissitudes of the maritime market and the whims of a shiftless captain to investigate the interventionist nature of divinity, he maintains a sense of natural cosmological order, but presents it as obliterative and threatening. Similarly, Poe’s strange novel taps into a long history of fears about the protective nature of whiteness and the relative possibility of commodification and dehumanization. Both authors assert the centrality of the body as a site of sacrificial communion, and reproduce that communion as a violent cannibalistic event at the heart of a system of violent consumption. They also maintain an interest in the body’s significance as covenant, a suffering or disappearing center around which a community can form.

As individuals in both of these narratives fail to elude the logic of commodification, consumption, and sacrifice, they tacitly assert the inescapability of the providential capitalist market’s universal reach. Lisa Lowe notes that, “while colonial power had employed ‘negative’ powers to seize, enslave, occupy, and destroy, a new mode of imperial sovereignty also expanded the ‘productive’ power to administer the life, health, labor, and mobility of colonized bodies. The productive powers of liberty were realized in the command of bodies that moved themselves” (102). The bodies in these texts, although nominally free, are dictated to by the market-oriented powers of Atlantic hegemony, and so they embody and reveal the underlying needs of that hegemony. Lowe notes that, for Marx, “slavery is situated as ‘precapitalist,’ rather than specifically embedded in colonial capitalism, or coterminous and interdependent with a spectrum of other labors. By positioning slavery as external or prior to capitalism, not integral to
it, the Marxist critique of capitalism is unable to grasp the complex combination of both waged and unwaged labor” (149). However, in history and in these texts, capitalism, slavery, and freedom are all mutually inclusive.

The interrelation of national expansion, liberty ideology, and slavery continued to expand in the period from the American Revolution, through the Jacksonian age, and into the antebellum era. Recent historians like Edward E. Baptist and Walter Johnson have commented on this point as well. Baptist, for example, presents both the southern plantation culture and the expansion of America as an international power as parts of a modern commodity-oriented exchange market that depended upon slavery and slave-produced goods. He explains, “[Andrew Jackson’s] policies repeatedly gave the frontier’s entrepreneurial elite exactly what most of them wanted: more Indian lands, more territories to the west for slavery, free trade for cotton, and, finally, destruction of all limits on their ability to leverage enslaved people’s bodies as credit.” He also argues, “The majoritarian philosophy of the new Democratic Party would be fatally alloyed by its commitment to both slavery’s expansion and the unregulated, unstable economy that one-eyed entrepreneurs desired” (Baptist 252). And so, expansion demanded disappearance, obligatory subservience, even death, whether in service to Jefferson’s dream of a spacious agrarian American landscape, or to the industrial and violently destabilizing Jacksonian age.

These novels explore the central motivating hierarchies that bound both Jeffersonian and Jacksonian ideologies to an expanding Atlantic marketplace. Johnson similarly notes that the Jeffersonian dream of an individualist planter economy and the Jacksonian drive toward economic expansion were both empowered by an increasingly international market of slave commodities and slaves as commodities. He writes, “The United States of America entered the second quarter of the nineteenth century with a vast public domain…the question was finding the
best mechanism to turn that land into a reservoir for the cultivation of whiteness of the proper kind” (Johnson 5). Admittedly, “Jefferson’s vision of social order through expansion had at its heart a household-based notion of political economy. Rather than cities sprawling across the American landscape, bound together by invisible financial networks and all-too-visible factories, white households were to be the serially reproduced unites by which progress was measured” (3). However, the very notion of a “white household” was dependent upon the exploitation of the black laborer, so, even in Jefferson’s most utopian-agrarian dreams, liberty, labor, unfreedom, and commodity-capitalism remained tangled together in the knot of American political philosophy and ideology. This reality continued throughout the early parts of the nineteenth century so that “The Mississippi Valley remained connected to the Atlantic world by the currents of global commerce that could be channeled, but never fully contained by the boundaries of the Unite States” (28). Johnson continues: “Creditors pressed debtors to cover the money advanced against it along a chain of debt—a chain that joined even the most isolated rural planters and country stores to the factors of New Orleans, the merchants of New York, the brokers of Liverpool, and even the Bank of England…thus were the science of political economy, the practicalities of the cotton market, and the exigencies of racial domination entangled with one another—aspects of a single problem, call it slave-racial capitalism” (282). So it is with questions of individualism, national identity, and economy in these novels: liberty, nationalism, and racial purity are always shadowed by the expansive reach of unfreedom and commodity capital. Commodification is the central fact of life in the Atlantic and, despite assertions of white supremacy, special election, or even national inclusion, commodification touches everyone included among the laboring masses the novels describe. These texts employ commodification as
the crucial conversion events of the narrator’s lives. The narrators come of age in their texts only
after being converted into and coming into contact with valuable things.

Moreover, where a writer like Equiano saw this lack of human control as a sign of divine
volition and a promise of divine organization, these writers present it as only human bafflement.
Humans cannot comprehend the intelligence of whatever force wills their conversion or destiny.
That force is, above all, the market itself, a force that mutely orders events, affects individual
lives, and intervenes in personal and historical narratives in inexplicable, even miraculous ways,
but does not care about humans any more than it does for rum, sugar, or other commodity goods.
If these writers avoid mentioning the Christian God at length it is because it has been supplanted
by the market itself.

What matters most, perhaps, is the sense that Melville and Poe can examine these tropes,
even as they amplify their supernatural elements, precisely because they have become tropes.
What began as the particular ideological position of capital-minded Christians, or Christian-
minded capitalists, in and around the Atlantic, has migrated into popular letters, and become the
expected generic matter of adventure fiction and exploration myth. Importantly, Melville and
Poe use the genre’s metaphysics to cast a critical eye upon Atlantic capital exchange, especially
upon its dehumanizing powers of commodification.

Because there is no entity to present as benign, these writers reveal the terror of the
potentially unelect: that God will stand in silence, that they are not special, and that they will not
be spared. Or they go further, to present an even more subversive anxiety: that we are all elect
only insofar as we embody market value. We are all equally things and we only interest the
market, the new God, in our exchangeability for and among other equivalent commodities.
Chapter 5

All is of Equal Value: Charles Brockden Brown’s Urban Gothic Captivity Narrative
In the wake of revolutions taking place in North America, the Caribbean, and Europe, the Atlantic—a geographic space, a net of interlocking mobile societies, and a market of trade and travel—presented challenges to power hierarchies, national polities, and individual conceptions of community, the state, and even spirituality. Given the equivalent-exchange orientation of Atlantic capital, it was, perhaps, natural that these challenges should revolve around questions of value. What value did the individual or the community hold for the state? What value did one individual hold for the communities that traversed the Atlantic’s routes of exchange? What elements constituted value? Race? Nationality? Economic and social participation? Could value be transferred from one person to another? Indeed, if persons possessed value, could one person be exchanged for another? In *Arthur Mervyn or Memoirs of the Year 1793* Charles Brockden Brown set out to interrogate these questions and all of their consequences. Brockden Brown critiques the complex intersections of race, politics, morality and commerce in the post-revolutionary Atlantic metropole. He does not stop there. His ruminations on value and its meaning interrogate the nature of God and reality itself. *Arthur Mervyn* suggests that Atlantic commerce has brought into being a new god, one that is both disinterested and interventionist, simultaneously a phantom “ruling genius” and an activist judge. Moreover, the text itself models this form of divinity, offering a narrator who generates narrative reality around the logic of personal equivalent exchange, and situating the reader in the position of arbiter, whose job it is to determine the value of all that has come before and all that will come after.

The novel, published in two parts—first in 1799, and then in 1800—follows the eponymous Mervyn’s involvement in an insurance and investment fraud scheme, his escape from that scheme, and his efforts to rescue a number of women and their inheritances from shame and waste, all set in the context of a Philadelphia debilitated by a Yellow fever epidemic.
Famously, the constant presence of the disease in the plot and setting of the novel evokes fears of contagion borne by ships travelling from port to port—especially from the slave plantations of the Caribbean—as well as fears of national moral rupture and, perhaps, spiritual degeneracy. And so the novel situates the city, and the characters that populate it within a mobile but intimately connected world of Atlantic economic, cultural, and moral exchange. These links underscore the fact that as the Atlantic’s constellated metropolitan centers of trade and culture like Philadelphia, took on new significance as sites of nationalistic identification, they advanced and were sustained by the same transnational ideals upon which the Atlantic market ran—ideals of virtuous capital, individual sacrifice, communal contract, and personal transaction. At the same time Atlantic metropoles reproduced experiences of mastery and submission defined by violence, personal commodification, commodity fetishization, and supernatural beliefs in the meaning and power of contracts and currency.

Taking on all of these subjects, Brockden Brown critiques a transnational and national culture that is haunted by its foundational links to the Atlantic’s oceanic market of captivity, violence, and exploitation, and by market logic that, plague-like, infected the social relations of the increasingly urban metropoles of the Atlantic world. As Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro note, the novel comments on how to build a virtuous society from the individual up, from Mervyn, to his social circle, to his city, to his new nation (xvii). By the same light, the novel interrogates the breakdown of virtue on all of these same registers. In so doing, it explores both the theological and the national implications of the economic and ideological system of transaction at the heart of Atlantic exchange. The ostensibly heroic protagonist of this novel reveals the unstable contours of his nation’s claims to liberty, racial caste, spiritual protection, and even geography, as he finds himself deeply involved in schemes intended to expand personal
wealth that, in turn, ought to enlarge the hegemonic claims of the country, but that draw power from the broader Atlantic slave trade.

Brockden Brown’s dramatization of the individual’s relationship to this broad and anxious market culture addresses an audience facing swift political, economic, and cultural changes that would not end with the year 1793. As Phillip E. Wegner points out “the antimodern reaction was…a significant component of late-nineteenth century U.S. culture” (75). Evidently the “antimodern reaction” was significant for Brockden Brown’s post-revolutionary period as well. Indeed, Philip Barnard, Mark L. Kamrath, and Stephen Shapiro note that the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 were part of an Atlantic “anti-revolutionary” response that took place at the time of the novel’s production (xiii). Readers might consider this “anti-revolutionary” shift as an under-articulated desire to return to a moment before the disruptions of the revolutionary period. They might then consider the novel’s response to anti-revolutionary hypocrisy. It, at once, portrays and critiques a national figure’s evocations of liberty and fears of true universal liberation.

In truth, Brockden Brown’s novel examines the North American metropolis from the perspective of an author whose metropolitan and nationalist experiences had been doggedly ambivalent. Julia Stern, for instance, argues that the Revolution and its “public convulsion…disrupts [Brockden Brown’s] childhood, violates the pacifistic principles of his Quaker upbringing, and deprives his family of a paternal presence” nevertheless produces the nation to which he pledged fealty by 1792 (183). She continues to examine “the attendant shift from spiritual to political innovation that occupies the city’s newcomers from the Quaker migration in the seventeenth century, to the Revolutionary War and establishment of a republican government in the third quarter of the eighteenth century, and finally to the post-revolutionary
climate of the 1790s, when French refugees from the Reign of Terror and the San Domingo Revolution pour into the city in great numbers” (188). And so, the production of modernity in this novel is always disturbing. It points the way toward a future ever more removed from the very principles that the new nation claims to uphold.

The novel’s primary critique addresses society’s embrace of value as a register of social belonging, along with the logic of transaction that attends the application of market-oriented value to human lives. Describing Edward Bellamy’s Looking Backward, Wegner notes that “the text clears a narrative space in which will appear a different, and very modern, social formation: what, for want of a more precise term, has been described as the new ‘consumerism’ associated with an emerging segment of the American middle class” (78). Similarly, Sian Silyn Roberts writes that Arthur Mervyn “performs a series of revisions on Enlightenment models of the individual, sympathy, and contractualism in order to yield a citizen who can enter into contractual relations in a setting where disparate people of radically diverse backgrounds and interests—including the American Mervyn and the Portuguese-Jewish-British Acsha Fielding—seek to unite as a social body” (308-9). She continues, “These assumptions turn both sympathy and the contract into exclusive forms of community” (308). Brockden Brown’s novel demonstrates that this concern with the nature of the emergent national community based upon consumerism goes back even further than Wegner observes, to the very founding of the nation, and that its economic concerns were always also personal social questions about the evaluative composition, direction, and moral parameters of intimacy and community. Such concerns were integral to Enlightenment debates over the relationship of the individual to the public. Hannah Arendt, for example, noted as much when she wrote that “the development of the modern age and the rise of society, where the most private of all human activities, laboring, has become
public and been permitted to establish its own common realm, may make it doubtful whether the very existence of property as a privately held place within the world can withstand the relentless process of growing wealth” (112). Considering Arendt’s interest in Lockean alongside classical philosophy, readers should also consider the viability of the private person relative to the growing state. Brockden Brown’s novel, therefore, plays out and experiments with pressing ideological and philosophical issues at the center of the emergent post-revolutionary nation.

The novel has long attracted critical attention for its critiques of both finance capital and the increasingly national societies that depend upon it, but readers should never lose sight of the moral and spiritual questions at the heart of these issues. Nevertheless, this critical element of the text has remained under-scrutinized for generations of Brockden Brown critics. For example, in an overarching review of early twentieth century criticism of *Arthur Mervyn*, Donald A. Ringe, noted that Brockden Brown “intends the commercial city, both before and during the plague, to assume symbolic import as the place of Mervyn’s adventures. The scenes of the plague, therefore, reinforce the concept of the corrupt city” (67). Ringe and his generation of Brockden Brown scholars offered a perceptive invitation to read the novel as a unique and uniquely probing urban gothic investigation of the rot at the heart of the would-be nation’s “commercial city,” but readers and critics must now go further, to see the novel’s exploration of the nature of social morality and even of reality itself.

To demonstrate the potential for personal, social, and especially moral failure, Brockden Brown slyly underscores the subtext of the same urban gothic genre he helped to popularize so that, if readers are meant to identify with the novel’s imperiled victims and their champions, they are also complicit in the violence, transaction, and commodification involved in narrative episodes of captivity. Regarding this philosophically ruminative element of the text, Bruce
Burgett has noted the “slippage between two adjacent literary genres: the philosophic dialogue and the seduction narrative” (136). However, Brockden Brown does not merely blend these generic forms. Instead, he uses them to suggest that, in a nation founded upon and funded by unfreedom, a nation at the border of a grander Atlantic economy that uses captivity as a means to assert power, society might have more in common with the captors and villains of urban gothic literature, than with its victims and heroes.

Brockden Brown also takes seriously the spiritual assumptions of urban gothic texts when he evokes the machinations of an ordering or retributive divine intelligence at work in the novel. He questions, for example, whether a “ruling genius had prepared [Mervyn’s] path” (45). At the same time, he suggests the possibility that the plague is a form of divine judgment over a fallen society. Thus, *Arthur Mervyn*’s active “slippage” between generic modes raises questions about personal, national, and universal morality that go far beyond critiques of “the commercial city.” If the marketplace is an expression of the nation’s moral character, Brockden Brown asks, then is morality or sociality a simple matter of market transaction? If divinity operates providentially and through market functions, does the Atlantic economy, and the nation’s position within it, suggest a disinterested god or the interventionist work of a coldly calculating but judgmental deity?

Crucially, the novel opens these interpretations of divinity and reality to scrutiny by modeling them in textual style and structure. Brockden Brown’s aesthetic choices—his decision to use a shifting and innately untrustworthy narrator, for example—reveal themselves as commentary upon the nature of national literature, the nation he observes coming into being, and, perhaps, the divine natural universe. Ezra Tawil argues that “Brown used his fiction not only to provide instances of ‘American romance’ but also to guide readers’ reception of this new
mode along the way. By both enacting and simultaneously theorizing the distinctness of American literature, and doing so in explicit relation to contemporary theories of aesthetic experience, Brown’s novels in effect operated not only as critics, but ore radically as a kind of aesthetic theory by other means” (106). This reflexive commentary on the very genre Brockden Brown produces is important, but when linked to other criticisms that note the novel’s engagement with social critique, it becomes profound. The text itself provides a space in which to try out and to interrogate different social and spiritual modes of relation.

All of this comes together as the novel nears its conclusion, when the text offers a seemingly off-handed epigraph, intended to close off a narrative that has, to that point, simmered with unresolved anxiety and has proven stubbornly irregular, circular, and difficult to trace. “All is of equal value,” writes Brockden Brown, as if to force the narrative to cease its rambling momentum and just end already (329). However, the phrase is significantly trickier than it, at first, appears, effectively communicating the novel’s most pressing themes and evidently holding the key to understanding all that has come before and all that the novel portends for the future. The phrase asserts the logic of equivalence that has functioned as the primary force for social contact in the novel. Throughout the novel, equivalence and transaction have initiated relationships, have proven binding forces, or have allowed individuals to exert autonomy over their own identities. The logic of value has also exposed the hierarchies of sex, class, and race that structure the Atlantic and its metropolitan ports. And so, the phrase insists that there is a hierarchy of value undergirding not only the logic of the novel, but also the logic of a life lived in the Atlantic world. All people, all lives, all stories have value. Some are more valuable than others. Some are equivalent. The transaction and exchange of each and all is the primary means by which society, the market, and even the society of souls in the novel enlarge themselves.
The phrase also bears scrutiny as a unique interpretation of the post-revolutionary nation’s definition of liberty. Like the founding documents of the nation that the novel’s Philadelphia represents, the phrase insists upon equality. At the same time, it insists that that equality is produced through value and evaluation. Thus, even as the nation and its rhetoric embrace liberty, they enshrine hierarchical evaluation as a primary element of the nation’s founding economic, philosophical, and theological ethos.

Brockden Brown also permits the phrase to carry spiritual connotations, a point left out of many important critical readings of the novel and its author’s intentions. Shapiro, for example, offers as succinct and inarguable a reading of the actions and significance of “value” in this novel as one could hope for, but neglects Brockden Brown’s theological intentions. He writes, “as value is brought in one floating vessel, the slave ships, it is transferred into another, the paper monetary instruments, which then become the currency for securing bourgeois marriages…Brown argues that the contradictions of mercantile accumulation in one sphere will float to reappear in another.” He continues, “Brown seems to insist that because the original moment of accumulation depends on violence on African bodies, this competitive force will be carried alongside the chain of exchanges manifested as acts of business fraud and forgery and the emotional deception in seduction” (283). It is difficult to dispute this reading, but Mervyn’s references to a “ruling genius” at work behind the scenes of all of these transactions imply that the transference Shapiro observes occurs within the sight, if not at the command of a divinity that the novel takes pains to trace, if not to comprehend.

With this in mind, the phrase is also notable for its source: spoken from an omniscient authorial perspective in a text in which narrative control has shifted and exposed itself to doubt. Throughout the novel, the author both controls the narrative that describes Mervyn’s past,
present, and future, and models an interventionist and providential divinity at work in the world in which Mervyn lives. Brockden Brown achieves this, largely, by disrupting narrative stability. The narrator, or narrators, produce narratives but do not offer obvious keys to their interpretation. They produce questions and force readers to offer their own answers. Tawil observes that “even when events are clarified retrospectively in the novels’ resolutions…Brown’s novels neither fully dispel this narrative disorientation nor conclude with stable epistemological resolutions” (120). As a result, the text’s invocations of value and evaluation, and of a “ruling genius” implicate both the author and the reader as models for divine intervention into reality, on the one hand producing equivalent and potentially transactional narratives and identities, and, on the other, evaluating them.

In *Arthur Mervyn*, equivalent exchange functions not only as a structuring element in the Atlantic economy, but also as the organizing principle of the natural universe. When the text skips over Mervyn’s happiness by casually informing readers that “all is of equal value” and therefore does not merit telling, it also asserts the reality-ordering nature of “value,” simultaneously narrative, moral, and market-driven. Mervyn’s happy ending is static; it has ceased to rise or fall. However, this represents only the final settlement of equivalent logic over the text and over Mervyn’s life story. All of Mervyn’s experiences have a value, but that value can be measured, transacted, or exchanged, all within the contours of a cosmology of time, social relations, experience, and commerce that resemble a self-contained marketplace. Moreover, in Mervyn’s final plan to remove to Europe and, after some time, to return to America a wealthier man, he traverses the routes of Atlantic trade that have carried the many troubled business dealings of the novel. Thus his experiences are bound, quite literally, within the Atlantic marketplace. Brockden Brown uses the un-narrated sequel to the novel to demonstrate Mervyn’s
A Transactional Universe

Although the novel explores the lived experience of transactional Atlantic life, an experience that often appears, as is right for an urban gothic narrative, deeply confusing, it also implies an ordered cosmological reality that sustains and intervenes in reality according to the market-oriented logic of equivalence. Readers must keep the novel’s symbolic conflation of infection, moral depravity, slave economy, and nationalism in mind as they approach critics like Carl Ostrowski, who argues that the novel should be read in light of the theory of “political economy,” a phrase that appeared in Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* and was first propounded by Sir James Steuart in his 1767 treatise, *An Inquiry into the Principles of Political Economy*. Ostrowski explains that “a number of incidents in the novel can be read as Brown’s comment on the social costs of speculation, a financial practice that generated controversy and scandal in America during the 1790s” (4). The world of the novel comprises a “political economy,” a space in which the logic of the ledger book dictates political motives, personal actions, and social bonds. However, the novel also expends a great deal of energy in examining the personal and spiritual costs of life lived in such an environment, especially if the “political economy” of the Atlantic and the nation are tightly bound to sinful, deceptive, or dehumanizing market practices such as speculation, untoward debt-finance, and slavery.

On this point, it is important to recall that the novel was hardly written in a vacuum. Indeed, Philip Barnard, Mark L. Kamrath and, Stephen Shapiro note that “Brown infused his writing with the cultural politics of the early national period. And as scholars turn to focus on competing material and ideological productions in the 1790s, they have become increasingly
interested in the role of authority and authorial agency…. especially as identity construction becomes a metaphor for the body politic” (xvi). Given this scholarly interest, it is crucial to recognize that the text does not merely trace the evolution of American nationalism or capital. Rather it demonstrates that, even as capitalist wealth expands, even as Arthur Mervyn develops into a more stable personality, even as the nation becomes more assertive, and even as the language of liberty becomes ever more insistent, the Atlantic marketplace imperils and captures fortunes, the protagonist’s life devolves into an experience of captivity and dehumanized market value, the nation’s status as a subordinate Atlantic outpost becomes clear, and the failures and limits of liberty come into focus.

In fact, Brockden Brown expresses potent doubts about the application and manipulation of capitalism in a time in which the proper use of capital was being challenged by abuse and fraud. Ostrowski explains, “the Yellow fever epidemic famously described in the novel might be seen as a judgment on economic liberalism, a vindictive invisible hand that punished the people of Philadelphia for their habits of conspicuous consumption” (4). Of course, these were old worries. Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro argue that commerce was suspect from premodern times through modern society, and, as a result, it became dominated by and linked to religious and ethnic minorities (xxiv). As the novel toys with racial hybridity, moral uncertainty, and ethically dubious commercial interactions, it will build upon these concerns. The text’s critiques are never wholly abstract: Ostrowski goes on to provide a thorough explanation of the process by which speculators in the 1790s essentially swindled Revolutionary veterans out of their due bonds. However, readers must not rush past the conflation of a debased economic culture and a debased social or moral culture. Brockden Brown writes from the critical perspective of one who sees the potential risks of Atlantic capitalist exchange firsthand and recognizes that they
undermine both the nation’s claims to economic stability and its claims to moral or even spiritual legitimacy.

And so, even as the novel acknowledges the power of the market to amplify nationalist authority, it withholds examples of the market as a salvific force. It presents it, instead, as a vehicle for the enlargement of the Atlantic economic-social cosmology, at the cost of personal and national morality. At one point, for instance, Mervyn launches into an extended discourse on the debasing power of money in the context of the economic disappointment that ruined his family and initiated his journey toward the city and toward the Atlantic marketplace. He writes, “The want of money would be no obstacle to prodigality and waste. Credit would be resorted to as long as it would answer his demand. When that failed, he would once more be thrown into a prison; the same means to extricate him would have to be repeated, and money be thus put into the pockets of the most worthless of mankind, the agents of drunkenness and blasphemy, without any permanent advantage to my father, the principal object of my charity” (290). If this is, in some ways, an apologia for Mervyn’s family’s failures, it is also a broader critique of the inextricable trap set for individuals and nations in the market: to rise, one must borrow; to borrow one must incur debt; once indebted, it is nearly impossible to pay off debts and rise.

The novel treats debt and ownership as, at once, foundational and threatening to the Republic, as well as to personal social relations and individual objectives. In fact, Ostrowski argues that the novel’s real thrust is the seduction of the title character away from “more productive pursuits” and toward debt speculation (7). This logic extends so that, Ostrowski observes, “one could say that Mervyn speculates in mentors, abandoning the promising but ultimately worthless Welbeck in favor of the more stable (but still modestly prosperous) Dr. Stevens. A similar exchange takes place during Mervyn’s search for a wife… the fortune that
Mervyn ends up with at the novel’s end…itself faintly bears the speculator’s taint” (12-13). As the novel bears out, social relations in the post-revolutionary United States are structured via the same logic that structures all of Atlantic society: transaction and equivalent exchange. Thus, the personal journey of Mervyn toward debt-backed modes of personal relations reverberates through national culture founded upon the logic and mechanics of exchange and transactional value—in goods, in morals, and in flesh.

Mervyn’s journey also takes him ever closer to the heart of the Atlantic economy: the slave trade. Despite its exotic distance, and despite the narrator’s attempts to encode references to it, the Philadelphia of the novel is a vital link in the Atlantic market of slaves and the products that they cultivate. In fact, the dependence of business speculators like Mervyn and his associate, the villainous con-man, Welbeck, upon wealth and commodities derived from the Caribbean attests to the fact that, as Ashli White has pointed out, at the time the novel is set, Le Cap, in San Domingue, was the most prosperous and populous city in the Americas, while Philadelphia was its dependent. Mervyn and Welbeck negotiate transatlantic business deals, which generally originate in the Caribbean, Mervyn and the doctor who becomes his benefactor battle against a Yellow fever epidemic, which originates in the Caribbean, and Mervyn works to negotiate the contracts that bind imperiled women to business and businessmen who originate in the Caribbean. Reading Mervyn’s repeated Caribbean business ventures, it is difficult not to conclude that the center of gravity for the novel is the same as it was for Atlantic culture in the 1790’s—the Caribbean, rather than North Atlantic cities like Philadelphia.

One effect of urban Philadelphia’s economic and cultural subordination to the Atlantic slave market is its necessary involvement in the allegorizing logic that allows the market to use human bodies as commodities. The text suggests the veracity of Ian Baucom’s claims of the
centrality of debt and insurance speculation to Atlantic society by representing the anxieties of commodification produced by such a system. Baucom’s discussion of the Zong massacre posits a number of important critiques of finance capital that Brockden Brown will take up in fiction. xlv

The commodification of bodies, their possession and disposal, the links between economy and death, contract as a force that binds human lives to powerful masters, and even the recirculation of the dead through the insurance market are all elements in Brockden Brown’s novel.

Welbeck’s misbegotten fortune is apparently “swallowed up” by investments in the slave trade. A letter reveals that a ship travelling from San Domingue to Philadelphia has crashed, incurring “the loss of his ship and cargo.” The “cargo” lost in transit indicates a loss of North American capital, and of African or Caribbean human souls. Mervyn’s narration both obscures the human reality of this cargo and reinforces the cold evaluative commodification of the slave trade when he recounts how “all was lost but one hundred and fifty dollars” (91). The human cargo lost in the ship is linguistically and conceptually transferred into dollars. Moreover, the dollars here named become an allegorical abstraction of the insurance logic that, in slavery, commodifies the entire person.

This point becomes especially clear with regard to the insurance market that, in the novel, stands in for both slavery’s most dehumanizing abuses, and the means by which market equivalence and transaction include even the unpredictable changes in the natural world in their eternally comprehensive schema. Mervyn explains Welbeck’s plan, by which, “should the voyage be safely performed, the profits would double the original expense [but] should the ship be taken or wrecked, the insurers would have bound themselves to make ample, speedy, and certain indemnification.” He continues, “Loss from storms and enemies was to be precluded by insurance. Every hazard was to be enumerated, and the ship and cargo valued at the highest rate”
However, this plan is violated when “Two French mulattoes [who] had, after much solicitation, and the most solemn promises to carry with them no articles which the laws of war decree to be contraband, obtained a passage” on their business partner, Thetford’s, ship. Ultimately “the vessel was captured and condemned, and this was a cause of forfeiture, which had not been provided against in the contract of insurance” (80). Regarding the importance of insurance to the world in which *Arthur Mervyn* is set, Baucom writes, “the Zong massacre is the emblematic event of modernity, in which “the slaves were thus treated not only as a type of commodity but as a type of interest-bearing money...commodities for sale and as the reserve deposits of a loosely organized decentered but vast trans-Atlantic banking system” (61). Baucom continues, noting the persistence of commodified individuals in a commodity-oriented society. He writes, “In a money culture or an insurance culture value survives its objects” (95). In such a culture, the bodies of the slaves were used as “promissory notes, bills of exchange...[embodying] material existence but [maintaining] their speculative, recoverable loss value” (139). Even the loss of the Caribbean “cargo” has a market value—if Mary Watson, the ship’s investor, or Thetford, or Welbeck has lost, presumably the insurance company has profited. As a result, both parties in the exchange reinforce the necessary commodified, dehumanized status of human cargo for the balance of capital exchange to be complete. Whether accounting a loss or a gain, the text is clear: “all is of equal value,” and transaction is the ordering logic of society.

Indeed, transactional logic extends even beyond life and death. Debt-backed unfree persons are taken from their homes, transacted upon in an unfamiliar space, and ultimately lost to violence. They are also captured and destroyed by the logic of insurance-backed allegorization, market exchange, and mobility. With this in mind, readers might recognize Mervyn’s late consideration that his death might allow his money to do some good in the world as less a
suicidal fancy and more a plain recognition that the dead still have a value in a market that continues to produce profits, even where individual human lives are lost. Chad Luck argues that “anxieties about the ambiguous purview of ownership and about the ephemeral nature of property itself only grow more insistent as the nineteenth century gets under way. The rising influence of market culture…increasingly treats property not as an embodied phenomenon, not as a phenomenological relationship between persons and things, but as an abstract commodity, as a legal construct designed to facilitate easy movement and exchange.” Luck calls this the “virtualization” of property (81). However, in this novel, the increasing “virtualization” of property suggests the expanding “virtualization” of persons as well. As Brockden Brown sees America become increasingly market-oriented, he presents his readers with a character who sees other people as property and struggles against his own transactional commodification, only to discover that everything in law and in nature, embodied or disembodied, alive or dead, exists alike within the market.

The novel also uses the transactional relations between men and women to replicate the links that were most important to Atlantic social construction; namely: those between slaves and their masters. This reveals the unsettling dark side of the Enlightenment liberationist rhetoric upon which the American state was founded. Mary Nyquist, for example, notes that the conception of freedom in the presence of unfreedom was a feature common to the discourse both of Greco-Roman societies, and to the modern states that looked to them as models for democratic polity. She writes, “Even when antityrannicism is being rejected, early moderns carry on the Greco-Roman practice of conceptualizing rule with reference to a distinction between household slavery and the state” (169). Looking to these classical sources, Nyquist begins to uncover the relation between mastery, slavery, and ownership that still adhere in modern contexts, writing,
“Polar opposition between servitude and freedom informs every move...in which oeconomize—a verb deriving from the oikos, or house-hold—applies to the nation” (173). Nyquist here notes the degree to which slaves were a part of the household and thus closely engaged in their masters’ lives. They were both household members and household items, both persons and things in close contact with free individuals and families. Although she does not explicitly spell out the connection, Nyquist’s classical sources also presage the turn that would come with capitalism. Readers should, therefore, update the intimate connection between master and slave that Nyquist describes to include the ways in which capitalism allowed the intimate relation between slave and free, owner and owned, to stay active, even in relationships in which captivity was less frankly obvious. Shapiro notes the dual significance of this intimacy in *Arthur Mervyn*, writing that the novel “shows how closely intimate relations in Philadelphia are built on the infrastructure of slavery and the Caribbean economy and thus under threat of being ‘undone’ by black rebellion” (*Culture and Commerce* 282). In the capitalist Atlantic, the commodity relations of individuals to their possessed captives burst forth from the confines of the home but maintained the intimacy of captive possession and the resilient logic of transaction.

Mervyn claims to enter into the world of Atlantic business relations with little understanding of how it works or willingness to accommodate himself to its logic. However, in his efforts to present himself as blameless, he demonstrates the extent to which the equivalence-generating operations of debt define his free movements, and personal and moral liberty. Crossing the bridge across the Schuylkill river on his journey toward the city, he realizes he has no money and notes “I had nothing to pay, and by returning I should only double my debt. Let it stand, said I, where it does. All that honour enjoins is to pay when I am able” (22). Yet the world does not run on the “honour” that Mervyn, as narrator, claims is his guiding principle, so he finds
himself unsheltered and unfed, trekking unhappily toward a future of abuse and disillusion. In fact, Mervyn’s narration subtly undermines its own pronouncements of “honour,” for it is “honour” itself that leads him to betray his own ethics and morals. He explains “I had an invincible aversion to the calling of a beggar, but I regarded with still more antipathy the vocation of a thief; to this alternative, however, I was now reduced. I must either steal or beg; unless, indeed, assistance could be procured under the notion of a loan” (37). In this world of social transaction, these are Mervyn’s options: beg, steal, or engage with the rituals of finance and debt.

Here the novel articulates its moral sense of money-matters. Money could, potentially, be used for good, but it is also sinful, existing within a world that is, at best, amoral. And so, it turns, ever and always, to debasement. In fact, the web of debt and exchange runs the risk of actually converting good into social evil. Mervyn admits, for example, that, “Good intentions, unaided by knowledge, will, perhaps, produce more injury than benefit” (242). Moral intentions have nothing to do with it. Brockden Brown concedes as much when he states, “if cities are the chosen seats of misery and vice, they are likewise the soil of all the laudable and strenuous productions of mind” (221). Late in the novel, Mervyn too confesses that all of his actions have either come to ruin or furthered the harm he wishes to limit. He wonders, “Is every man, who leaves his cottage and the impressions of his infancy behind him, ushered into such a world of revolutions and perils?” (248). The novel’s answer is, evidently, yes.

With this in mind, Mervyn wonders whether the divine does indeed care to pass judgment over the moral choices of individuals and societies. If it does, then it does so over a fallen world made crudely decadent because of its links to immoral elements in its economic system. Mervyn, for example confronts the uncle of Eliza Hadwin, a young woman whose family has been carried
off by the ongoing Yellow fever epidemic. Hadwin’s uncle hopes to use the legal language of Hadwin’s father’s will to exploit and take advantage of the young woman, and he shouts down Mervyn’s heroic entreaties, exclaiming, “‘God damn it! You then are the damned rascal.’” Mervyn goes on in an aside: “but permit me to repeat his speech without the oaths with which it was plentifully interlarded. Not three words were uttered without being garnished with a—"God damn it!" "damnation!" "I'll be damned to hell if"—and the like energetic expletives” (228). Hadwin continues, enhancing “each word by the epithets damnable and hellish; closed each sentence with— ‘and be curst to you!’” (229). Divine power resides in the minds of these characters, but only as something with the power to destroy, frustrate, or otherwise to condemn. Moreover, it does so in response to the same acts of economic transaction that have recurred throughout the novel. And so, the novel uses the insurance market to model a disinterested but still providential deity, and uses moments like this one to model a judgmental form of the same. In fact, this moment signals the simultaneous existence of both aspects of providential divinity. The man will be “damned to hell” because he stands on the wrong side of an equivalent transaction that takes place over Eliza Hadwin’s person.

**Feminine Peril, the Limits of Liberty, and Explosive Potentials.**

This event is hardly isolated, for, throughout the novel, Brockden Brown uses the imperiled white female body to expose the dangers posed by a broader market-oriented Atlantic to the nation founded upon and funded by unfreedom. As Paul Baepler has discussed, captivity narratives were alternately used throughout early American literary history to elicit interracial sympathy or to reinforce codes of racial difference. Brockden Brown toys with both of these generic effects as he situates transaction as the dominant experience of Atlantic life. In the presence of bodies that are literally held captive, literally transacted upon, literally open to
exploitation and commodification, Brockden Brown’s characters internalize fears that such might be the fate of supposedly free persons and bodies as well. In a world in which some people can be made into things, given value, bought and sold, all people should worry about the threat of valuation, possession, and sale.

The novel’s interest in scenes in which individuals are literally stolen away, kept in bondage, and traded as valued things in an economy of possession and exchange appears to have been a persistent theme or generic reflex for Brockden Brown. For example, Stephen Shapiro argues that, in a similar vein, “at its heart, Edgar Huntly is a series of male captivity narratives…where the trope of physical duress within an alien culture operates as an intimate code of shared experience” (225-6). Arthur Mervyn is also a “male captivity narrative,” but one that uses debt, contract, financial speculation, and, in some cases, the literal possession of bodies as the mechanisms of captivity. In Arthur Mervyn, Brockden Brown goes a step further than he does in Edgar Huntly, suggesting that the nation might resemble not only the captive but also the captors, traders in human flesh as commodities on the open market.

This aspect of Brockden Brown’s critique becomes clear in light of the fact that Arthur Mervyn is populated by characters who strive for liberation from literal and economic captivity, even as they are made complicit in the captivity of others. Clemenza Lodi, the first woman Mervyn attempts to rescue from financial and personal ruin, Eliza Hadwin, the second, and Acsha Fielding, the woman with whom he ultimately settles a mutually transactional intimate relation, are all women who are brought from home and confined to a distant and isolated space that they do not recognize. They are all threatened by violence and sexual assault, they all become the objects of financial transaction, and they all secure their freedom only through rescue efforts that carry transactional market costs. Other characters are held captive too—Welbeck to
his co-conspirators, and Mervyn to Welbeck—even to the point of literal forced transportation and captivity. However, characters like Welbeck and Mervyn also use debts and contracts as the technologies by which to capture or cheat others, as well as to transact for the freedom or possession of women. Welbeck swindles the businessmen, Thetford and Jamieson, through false checks, and does so with Mervyn’s assistance. Similarly, Welbeck entraps Clemenza Lodi, exploiting her sexually and economically, but he could not do so without Mervyn, even if Mervyn professes innocence.

And so, if readers can identify with Mervyn as a victim, they must also identify with him as a potential victimizer. For example, Clemenza Lodi is bound to Welbeck through a shared history instantiated by a will that keeps her his subordinate, and through seemingly-false documents and bills that maintain their connection. Although he ultimately works to free Lodi from these binding contracts, Mervyn initially acts as Welbeck’s go-between, his accomplice in the project of female exploitation. As a result, both men use debt to control Lodi, even as they, themselves, are bound through debt to other distant business partners. Moreover, this system of captivity has material, palpable effects upon the captives with which it trades. In Eliza Hadwin’s case, the novel suggests the possibility of sexual exploitation as an outcome of debt, for example. This fate actually does befall Clemenza Lodi, who becomes pregnant with Welbeck’s illegitimate child. She becomes the unfortunate victim of, if not rape, then at least sexual exploitation that has been made possible by her contracted debt. These experiences of mutual exploitation and debt-financed violence make it difficult, if not impossible, for the primary characters to avoid tacit responsibility for the exploitation taking place in the urban Atlantic. Every character in the novel has some exposure to debt finance. As a result, each one of them has a role to play in a system that draws its power from commodification, transaction, and bondage.
With this in mind, the novel recognizes that, in Atlantic societies, individuals have distinct values according to the hierarchies of trade, class, gender, and race. Women have a different market and social value from Mervyn, himself, and so they possess less free exchangeability and must, therefore, be transacted upon or for. Although white men—especially Mervyn—do find themselves imperiled in the novel, they usually find their own way out. Moreover, they do so by asserting their transactional acumen. They embrace exchange-oriented logic and, through it, experience their own freedom. Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds astutely gestures toward this fact when she notes the gendered elements of “virtue” in the novel. She observes that “the women of Arthur Mervyn are known by the property they keep, and as a result, loss of property threatens their reputation, creating a need for the benevolent interference of an Arthur Mervyn” (*Private Property* 70). She continues, “it is women’s *virtue* that is defined by the property they keep. Compared to Arthur’s economic freedom—his ability to suffer loss of inheritance and still prevail in a market economy within which he exchanges cash and benevolence for financial success—this property-defined virtue is rather confining” (90). However, if the novel and the society it depicts limit the degree of agency they lend to white female characters, they outright deny agency to the slaves who constitute essential elements of Mervyn’s Atlantic business.

Thus, the embodied and hierarchical perils of the market come into particularly sharp focus when Mervyn recognizes the ongoing presence of unfree persons in post-revolutionary America, a nation proclaiming liberty with the specter of chattel slavery in its midst. Late in the novel, Mervyn takes a journey through the American South to Baltimore, in order to settle Eliza Hadwin’s contract dispute. As he does, the text implicitly mirrors the captivity and exchange of black and white female bodies. Mervyn describes, “A black girl who sat opposite, and whose
innocent and regular features wanted only a different hue to make them beautiful.” He continues, unconsciously revealing his own biases when he notes that “near it, in a rocking-chair, with a sleeping babe in her lap, sat a female figure in plain but neat and becoming attire.” The disturbing dehumanization contained in his use of the pronoun “it” does not mark Mervyn as a villain in the novel, but does belie his own participation in the dehumanizing slave trade that he claims to detest. He even notes his frightful effect on the girl when he writes that, “the black girl, having occasion to change her situation, in order to reach the ball which was thrown at her, unluckily caught a glance of my figure through the glass. In a tone of half surprise and half terror, she cried out, ‘Oh! See dare! A man!’” (276). Although sent on an errand of liberating one captive, Mervyn, for a moment, reveals his own role as a captor. He never describes the fetters that hold the girl, for there are none, only the implicit, unspoken logic of possession and enslavement, logic to which Mervyn succumbs when he dehumanizes her in his own mind and in his narration. Despite her play, the girl is as much a captive of the Atlantic economy as the woman Mervyn hopes to rescue, and more so, for she has no white man to come to her aid. Mervyn’s sojourn through the South demonstrates the intimacy of liberty and captivity, placing the allegorical captivity of white women and their rescue by ostensibly heroic figures in relief against the experience of truly enslaved black women who are just as much captive but who lack an Arthur Mervyn with the will to rescue them.

Setting the scene in the American South also allows Brockden Brown to focus on the ideological and commercial links that connected the nation’s aspirational and ostensibly liberationist Yankee identity to its slaveholding and hierarchical partners around the Atlantic. As Walter Johnson points out, well into the nineteenth century, enslaved hands touched almost all of the commodity goods that flowed from the South and the West “for sale in the great metropolitan
markets of the Atlantic world: Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Havana, Marseilles, and, above all the others, Liverpool” (81). Because of Philadelphia’s centrality to the American economy and to the American national identity, and despite its stated religious and ethical refutation of chattel slavery, it could not escape its connection to the slave economy. Shapiro agrees, writing, “with Arthur Mervyn’s constant intersection of trade, slavery, domesticity, and violence, Brown suggests that no component of American society, even the Jeffersonian agrarian homestead or the interior space of Mervyn’s romantic imagination, can be insulated from the reverberations of Atlantic slavery’s accumulation by dispossession, since faraway commercial aggression will ultimately come home to roost” (Culture and Commerce 283). However, in this novel, those links not only “come home to roost” but also structure society itself. Jennifer Rae Greeson, for example, discusses the way the South functions as an internal other that brought the United States into existence even as it contradicted national ideals (1). Depicting the South, she says, allows writers to develop a national identity as a relationship of mastery over an internalized “other” (10). There may be some of this in Mervyn’s trip to Maryland. Yet his trip also reveals the dependent status of Yankee Philadelphia to slave business and finance culture. The center to which Mervyn is drawn is the slaveholding South, a space Mervyn views as alien, but which holds vastly more power in the formation and direction of the American state than he would care to admit. Similarly, Samuel Otter presents Philadelphia as “the city positioned near the border between South and North…the dividing line between slavery and freedom” (4). Brockden Brown explores this boundary status, but assertively presents that boundary as a point of connection rather than division between freedom and unfreedom. For this reason, Otter suggests that “it was a city of porous boundaries and unstable parts” (14). Held in a kind of death embrace with the self it pretends to reject, Yankee Philadelphia finds itself in the unique position of holding onto
what it claims to abhor, lest it perish. Mervyn’s liberating actions therefore perform, in miniature, his nation’s curtailed extension of liberation. Mervyn’s relative blindness to this reality only underscores Brockden Brown’s critique of racializing logic.

That Mervyn negotiates the escape of the white Hadwin, but not that of the enslaved black girl both safely reestablishes his society’s racial hierarchies and admits his tacit participation in the slave trade. Mervyn’s failure to act on behalf of the enslaved girl in the scene demonstrates the limits of freedom in a transactional and slaveholding society. He presents himself as a liberator but he is also, in this case, complicit in the continued captivity of another human being. And so, even when Mervyn sees the bonds and shackles of others, he fails to see his own hand upon them.

With this in mind, the text uses Mervyn’s own anti-romantic narration of the experience to cast a critical eye upon his intentions of liberationist heroism. Mervyn declares, “I will not describe my dreams. My proper task is to relate the truth. Neither shall I dwell upon the images suggested by the condition of the country through which I passed. I will confine myself to mentioning the transactions connected with the purpose of my journey” (275). The sentimental romanticism that he decries here functions to obscure the transactional logic that organizes and empowers the southern landscape through which he travels. This, in and of itself, exposes the cold transactional heart of a society too mannered to confess its own economic basis. Yet the narration contains a double critique, drawing the reader’s attention back to the fact that even Mervyn is absorbed by the logic of “transactions” that define both social interactions and economic exchanges. Sean X. Goudie strikes a similar chord, recognizing that “Brown’s novel exposes in unflattering ways the classificatory mechanisms used by the budding empire to constitute the national character, to establish the boundaries between acceptable and
unacceptable terms of identity for the nation and national citizen, and to devise frameworks for belonging and removal” (Specie 64). More to the point, after the Haitian revolution, “one did not have to be born in the South, or live in and around the southern plantation economy, to become racial in one’s thinking by the turn of the nineteenth century” (76). Indeed, Brockden Brown’s own opinions on the subject were complex. Barnard, Kamrath, and Shapiro, for example, note that, in correspondence, he demonstrated “militant critiques of slavery and…underlying prejudices concerning race and racial typology” (xxxiv). Rather than ignore or resolve these complexities, Brockden Brown brings them to the foreground through his protagonist. Although he claims heroic status, Mervyn’s words belie a mind shaped by and for the transactional economy of which slavery is such a key part.

What the novel does not name—what it cannot name—is the most important Atlantic event of the 1790s, an event of which the audience would hardly need to be reminded. Namely: The Haitian revolution. It does not name the event, because its characters deeply fear its significance. However, the novel’s seeming-erasure of history lends the revolution even greater power as a fearful potential eventuality in both the minds of the central characters and in the mind of the reader. In fact, Philadelphia could not escape its connections to the Haitian revolution because, as Otter points out, white planters escaped Haiti and brought their slaves with them to Philadelphia (6). Indeed, Barnard, Kamrath, and Shapiro argue that it is this very event that permits Welbeck and Mervyn to act at all. They note that the Haitian revolution disrupted established systems of ownership and trade, making profits and goods ripe for the taking by figures such as these (xxxiii). Goudie similarly argues for the novel’s attempts to explore these connections by stating that “Brown’s accomplishment…is significant: by limning the contours of U.S.—West Indian relations, he dares us to come face-to-face with disturbing
affiliations between U.S. and West Indian creole characters and cultures at the turn of the nineteenth century” (83). It is worthwhile to take this reading even further: the contagion that spreads in the novel from the West Indies to Philadelphia and from character to character, could suggest the possible spread of revolutionary abolitionist rebellion from the Caribbean to the industrial cities of North America—a deeply frightening possibility for the highly leveraged businessmen of Brockden Brown’s Philadelphia. Goudie likewise notes that the novel’s “narrative creole complex reveals that mastery and control of the United States nation-space, let alone the hemispheric waterways, has been replaced at the turn of the century by chaos and instability” (Creole America 198). Even worse, if that chaos could spread, then so too could a Haitian-style revolution.

Brockden Brown therefore allows his white female characters to revolt in ways that would be much more narratively and culturally disruptive for black figures. W. M. Verhoeven notes that “Notoriously, Brown’s idiosyncratic tales of the irrational beyond appear, on the one hand, to be geared toward promoting or sustaining an ideological status quo in the young Republic, while on the other offering a sustained strategy of representation…which seems to betray a resistance against the dominant ideology” (8). Verhoeven continues “if novels like Wieland, Edgar Huntly, and Ormond are ‘radical,’ they are so in the first place…because of their predominantly skeptical stance toward [Enlightenment principles of] self-determination, justice, truth, and providence” (24). At least in this case, this interpretation is astute. Eliza Hadwin’s negotiated liberation both upholds and upends the “status quo” of possession and transaction in the Atlantic. However, it also actively invites readers to critique that status quo by letting Mervyn, an unreliable and, in the end, morally ambivalent figure, reassert it. So Brockden
Brown’s skepticism toward the Enlightenment furthers the tense balance between upholding and critiquing republican values.

Given the prominence of contracts as sites of transactional authority in *Arthur Mervyn*, it makes sense that Brockden Brown also presents the rupture or failure of contracts as potential sites of rebellion. Eliza Hadwin, for example, finds herself beholden to her corrupt benefactor by contract of her father’s will. Following Mervyn’s advice, she destroys the will in order to avoid its execution and to decide her own fate. As she does, she announces, “‘Then I am free.’ Saying this, with a sudden motion, she tore in several pieces the will, which, during this dialogue, she had held in her hand, and threw the fragments into the fire” (216). Eliza’s destruction of her father’s will essentially displaces the possible revolutionary energy that seems to be creeping north from the Caribbean and reconstitutes it in the drama of a white female debt captive realizing liberation. As Otter points out, abolition remained a contentious subject in Philadelphia, so much so that by 1838 anti-abolitionist mobs were rioting violently against abolitionist groups (7). And so, one unfree woman does what countless unfree men and women cannot: she destroys the compact that holds her in bondage and marks her as another’s property.

**Sacred Vows, Sacred Transactions**

As Eliza Hadwin’s case demonstrates, transactional market logic traveled from the broad Atlantic market to the space of the home itself. This reflects both a transnational and a domestic trend, by which cultural contact was instantiated through transaction and, in so many cases, exploitation. The economy established the transnational “intimacy” that Lisa Lowe would identify as uniting disparate cultures across great distances, through trade and cultural exchange. It also established codes of political, social, and personal discourse in communities and homes throughout the Atlantic. Uniting Nyquist’s examination of household intimacy and Lowe’s
description of intimacy in terms of cultural encounter, Brockden Brown presents the intimacy of slaves to their masters as a human relation disfigured by larger economic forces—the household shaped by the culture beyond its front door. The logic of value infiltrates bonds of friendship, romance, and sex within the novel so that individuals become things to possess through debt-captivity and through articles of economic mastery. When Eliza Hadwin destroys her will, for example, Mervyn notes that “Marriage would render her property joint…but marriage was a contract awful and irrevocable” (224). Marriage, therefore, is not a sacrament, but a property exchange. The logic of the slave block travels even to the altar.

Indeed, Brockden Brown presents Mervyn’s exchange of women, including his negotiation of Eliza Hadwin’s release in the presence of and at the expense of the unreleased slave girl, and his exchange of Hadwin for Acsha Fielding as romantic partners, as exchanges of women as property. This is formative: transaction as the bedrock of social and domestic organization. As Luck points out, Brockden Brown draws upon Locke’s argument that “property ultimately provides the motive for men to organize themselves into a society” (65). Arthur Mervyn spends the novel preoccupied by the problems and possibilities of equivalent exchange, and ends up exchanging two women as equivalent commodities. In so doing, he ultimately creates his own society by developing personal bonds that mimic property relations.

This final synthesis of market ideology and personal experience serves as the culmination of the novel’s many confluences of domestic relations and the philosophy of value. For example, the doctor who takes in the sickly Mervyn notes the way this act of charity will tax his family, remarking, “no one knew better the value of that woman whom I called mine, or set an higher price upon her life” (7). The doubling of value in his assessment of his beloved anticipates the odd erasure of time and events that come in the novel’s hastily glossed-over final moments. Even
if such remarks are, on their face, benign, they suggest that the logic of commodification and valuation, so starkly presented elsewhere in the novel, and implicitly conjured in the specter of the trade of human bodies that looms over the protagonists’ Southern and Caribbean trading exploits, has come also to structure the social arrangements of courtship, love, and family for anyone living within the sphere of Atlantic influence. Love, companionship, help, and loved-ones all have a particular value, and that value is no different from that of a commodified slave, an item of cargo, a dollar or a debt.

Mervyn’s potentially less-than-altruistic motives in his sudden pivot toward Acsha Fielding, the woman he ultimately marries, signaled his moral shortcomings for an earlier generation of Brockden Brown Scholars, but a more complex interpretation of Mervyn’s decisions demonstrates that he is simply and correctly responding to the market-orientation of his society. Donald A. Ringe, for example, writes, “It is too much to say, perhaps, that Mervyn deliberately marries money, but the fact that material gain is never far from his mind when he contemplates marriage is surely significant” (77). This is of a piece with Mervyn’s behavior throughout the novel. He is constantly performing heroic acts that have the added benefit of moving him closer to his happy, economically stable ending. Ringe continues, “His ability to attach himself to an older person who can provide him with the means for material success is nothing short of uncanny” (77). Similarly, in a 1981 review of the novel, Emory Elliott notes that “if, as it seems, Arthur has chosen the financial security which Acsha’s wealth offers over the life of social purpose, moral purity, and vigorous labors he has claimed to desire, then his earlier idealistic expressions are called into question” (144). Furthermore, Elliott argues, “in view of Mervyn’s final end—which is apparently to live in the greatest comfort with the expenditure of the least energy—and his readiness to use any means to attain his goals” (145). Indeed, even
recent critics have examined these moments for evidence of Mervyn’s moral failures. Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds, for example, writes “Arthur cashes everything in for wealth: acquaintances, family, and ultimately even his stories” (Private Property 69). An ungenerous reader might conclude, from these generations-spanning analyses, that Mervyn is a liar, a cheat, and a thief. This may all be true, but it is important to intervene into these interpretations by acknowledging that Mervyn’s actions only make him better-suited for his cultural surroundings.

Harsh critiques of Mervyn’s decisions in these instances only make sense if readers believe that the morality of Mervyn’s society is anything but transactional. Brockden Brown has given readers no evidence that this is so. Elliott insists that Mervyn’s “search for identity, meaning, and authority is…spiritually empty,” but this assessment is incomplete insofar as it disregards the structure of the moral society that Brockden Brown has erected within the novel (158). Hinds comes close to recognizing this when she writes, “His virtue, then, joins forces with a will-to-wealth to the end of a specifically capitalist success” (69). Readers must recognize that this is the only sort of success that the society Brockden Brown crafts demands or rewards. Mervyn remains, ultimately, a semi-sympathetic character, or at least a character groping his way towards survival within the moral universe of capitalism, because the novel permits Mervyn’s final choices to remain morally ambiguous. Otter asks “does Arthur’s impending marriage signify patriarchal victory or dependence? A tribute to, or the spoils of, virtue? A sentimental elevation, or a capitulation to the market?” (68). It is all of these things. “All is of equal value,” and good and bad, altruism and self-interest are all exchangeable, even equivalent incentives within the moral and economic cosmology of the market-oriented universe. Although Barnard, Kamrath, and Shapiro remind readers that, in the novel’s initial conception, Brockden Brown intended Mervyn to end up with Eliza Hadwin, his union with Acsha Fielding provides a more
nuanced, and thus more pointedly critical conclusion (xxxix). Mervyn’s search for identity and family is neither a last-minute authorial transgression nor “spiritually empty,” but adheres to and demonstrates the rules of the society in which he lives. Transactions and contract relationships are the normative models for social interaction in and around the Atlantic, so Mervyn not only can use marriage as a vehicle for economic exchange, but should.

Indeed, a mutual circuit of economic transaction as love is the model of partnership at its most benign in the novel. Sian Silyn Roberts comments upon this contractual element of personal relations when she applies Enlightenment definitions of the individual and the community to the marriage plot. She writes, “According to the logic of the social contract, the individual voluntarily gives up his anti-social tendencies and enters into a mutually beneficial agreement with other individuals who likewise relinquish their disruptive qualities” (319). Following this reading, the essential element of exchange is what Mervyn’s relationship with Eliza Hadwin lacks and what his relationship with Acsha Fielding contains. Roberts writes, “Mervyn’s reluctance to contract with Eliza therefore stems from the logic of the contract itself, which would see the union of the constituent parties as supplying what is lacking in each. As Mervyn is well aware, neither of them has much of anything to exchange…Mervyn rejects Eliza—wisely, one could argue—because the product of their combined deficiencies would only result in something less than a complete individual at the level of the household” (321).

Similarly, Bruce Burgett notes that, in the second half of Brockden Brown’s novel, Alcuin, published in 1815, marriage is “a purely civil and voluntary relation” (135). Burgett goes on to argue that Brockden Brown interrogates “an ‘actuarial’ model of (sexual) subjectivity, one in which consent is irrelevant since a subject’s behavior is significant only as part of a larger, statistically imagined population” (140). According to the same logic, by embracing Acsha,
Mervyn enters into a mutually beneficial relationship. Sociality, in this case, not only mirrors contract negotiations but is also directly premised upon contracted transaction. Furthermore, his embrace of Acsha attests to the power of the Atlantic marketplace and its transactional logic to tame the unruly heterogeneity of Atlantic geography. Barnard, Kamrath, and Shapiro argue that the text’s frequent gestures toward Acsha’s “tawney” complexion suggest that Brockden Brown resolves the novel with a new normativity, a racially and culturally hybrid form that unites the diversity of the Atlantic in one domestic situation (xl). Shapiro likewise notes that “As Arthur Mervyn ends with the romantic pairing of a plebian native (white, Christian) male and an exotic wealthy female, Brown proposes egalitarian miscegenation, rather than recolonizing the slaves back to Africa, as the best vehicle for overcoming racism in a postslavery society” (Culture and Commerce 264-5). To this, readers can add that “egalitarian miscegenation” dissolves barriers of religion as well as class and race. Acsha, for example, admits, “I grew more indifferent, perhaps, than was proper to the distinctions of religion…certain it is, that my destiny, and not a happy destiny, was fixed by it,” and goes on to recount her father’s bankruptcy and eventual suicide, as well as her former husband’s debts (308). What neither Acsha nor Mervyn announce is that they never would have found one another and never would have been able to bridge the gap of distance or of race or even of religious denomination if not for the fact that their mutual experiences with debt occur in a market-spirit cosmology that has taken on universal totality. And so, the future that Mervyn and Acsha establish is spiritually syncretic as much as it is hybridized, pointing toward a social reality that extends even beyond Locke’s largely secular vision of liberal democracy, in which commerce, cultural exchange, and religious universalism all work in-tandem to knit together social bonds—a future that is capitalist and aligned with certain theological precepts that function within and alongside capitalism.
Nevertheless, even as he posits the transactional nature of Atlantic sociality, Brockden Brown leaves the door open for readers to critique the innately hierarchical nature of market-oriented personal and social relations. Shapiro argues that the second half of the two-part novel “charts Arthur’s revolution of racial consciousness as he moves from participating within the mania of structurally racist privilege to abandoning a ‘white’ status, which he comes to realize structures Philadelphia’s cultural and fiscal economy” (Culture and Commerce 278). He continues, “Mervyn’s union with [Acsha Fielding] conveys the claim that the traumatic history of Atlantic slavery and white fear of black agency can be removed in a time of revolutionary action through a new form of Woldwinitic rational intimacy that withers away racial distinctions through education, citizen participation, and, most of all, sexual congress and the creolization of America” (290). This analysis necessitates some critique. Yes, Mervyn discovers the degree to which race structures his world; yes, he ultimately establishes a seemingly interracial domesticity that appears to pressure if not to explode that structure. But the novel never fully dismantles racial hierarchies. Because the novel ends with a gesture toward the continuing logic of equivalence, it admits the continuing authority of hierarchical thinking, including hierarchical thinking about race. If all remains of “equal value,” then Brockden Brown can essentially argue both for how society should be and for how it truly is. Races should be equivalent, but “value” remains a force for assessment and understanding the nature of life and the world. As long as it does, race will remain a valuable and evaluable signifier in the marketplace that is Mervyn’s society. Brockden Brown leaves it to the reader to judge what form of equality will come next.

Here too, Brockden Brown invites his readers both to acknowledge the social propriety of these decisions and to critique their moral basis. For example, the oedipal nature of Mervyn’s attraction to Acsha is strongly hinted throughout their relation, and suggests that his story’s
resolution might really be a form of unnatural perversion of a moral ideal of intimacy and domesticity. At one point, Mervyn says, “Are you not my lost mamma come back again? And yet, not exactly, her, I think.” As if to drive the point home, he also asks, “what can I do to serve you? I read to you a little now, and you are pleased with my reading…I guide the reins for you when you chuse to ride. Humble offices, indeed, though, perhaps, all that a raw youth like me can do for you; but I can be still more assiduous” (318). The sexual connotations here are overt and testify to Mervyn’s guiding psychological urge to constitute the capitalist system as personal and embodied experiences—the economy made flesh. To the degree that the audience finds this off-putting, it is because Brockden Brown hints that the pairing is somehow wrong. Even so, it is as it must be for lovers in the Atlantic metropole. Chad Luck bears out this interpretation when he argues for “the possibility of amorous contact as a way to establish bodily and spatial boundaries” (58). That Mervyn’s encounters with women are encounters in which he discovers what is and what is not his own only further highlights the extent to which transactional logic orders his personal journey toward ostensibly normative stability in the Atlantic economy, but Brockden Brown never permits his novel to provide a full endorsement of the foundation of that stability.

Moreover, the novel presents these issues as intimately tied to problems of personal identification, even in terms of gender and sexuality. Shapiro, for example, reading Edgar Huntly, sees Brockden Brown offering up challenges to heteronormativity, but ultimately presenting those challenges as socially destabilizing (218). The ending of Arthur Mervyn potentially serves a similar function, as it forecloses the anxious possibility of love emerging from its various homosocial relationships and settles upon heteronormative family-construction as part of Mervyn’s acceptance of and entrance into the world of Atlantic society and economy.
However, Brockden Brown still places heterosexual love squarely within the realm of the transactional. “All is of equal value” in a proper and properly transactional heterosexual love affair. Mervyn’s search, therefore, is for someone with whom he can carry out the nation’s normative transactions of love, sex, and property settlement. Otter reads the novel as “republican” in that “the health of the whole [society] depends on the character of its individual members” (67). This reading highlights the way in which Brockden Brown uses the construction of a normative and ostensibly healthy individual relationship to model the construction of an ostensibly healthy national polity. Indeed, Barnard, Kamrath, and Shapiro largely read the ending as a “positive resolution” perhaps artificially affixed to the text (xix). Yet Brockden Brown remains subversive, establishing a family without ever fully dismissing his concerns with its transactional basis. And so, the familial foundation of the nation still marks it as a society beholden to the logic of captivity and transaction.

These experiences lead to larger philosophical and theological inquiries that, again, demonstrate its interests in matters that go beyond Lockean questions of liberty and democracy. Marriage, for example, is, as Mervyn recognizes, a contract modeled upon the “awful” covenant established between humanity and God and among humans on earth, but it is also an innately transactional relation. The relationship between man and wife, and between God and humanity, therefore, is not one of mutual protection, but of mutual possession. If such contracts are as “awful” as the originary covenant, then it is God who holds the ultimate promissory note. Brockden Brown, Verhoeven argues, believed in a “hypothetical omniscient intelligence: a manifestation of the determined order that—despite the progressive nature of human reason—is forever beyond man’s comprehension” (29). In a novel like Arthur Mervyn, that intelligence reveals itself as fundamentally market-oriented, operating beyond comprehension but through
financial transactions in order to arrange human affairs, and marriage is just one more market operation by which to do so.

Should the reader lose sight of the providential nature of these intimate economic experiences, the novel makes its gestures toward interventionist spirituality and even supernaturalism increasingly overt. For example, in the final passages of the text, Mervyn tells readers “I went to my chamber, but what different sensations did I carry into it from those with which I had left it a few hours before! I stretched myself on the mattress and put out the light; but the swarm of new images that rushed on my mind set me again instantly in motion. All was rapid, vague, and undefined, wearying and distracting my attention. I was roused as by a divine voice, that said, ‘Sleep no more! Mervyn shall sleep no more’” (323). Although Mervyn is, at first, frightened, this moment actually announces his awaited happy ending when he awakens to the realization that he loves Acsha Fielding. The moment evidences the role of the interventionist, providential divinity that has been quietly at work in the background of the narrative.

Eventually, Mervyn embraces the needs and dictates of the market economy and, in so doing, welcomes their evidently divine transactional thrust, along with their powers to delimit his actions in the world and in the economy. He writes, “The country was my sole asylum. Here, in exchange for my labour, I could at least purchase food, safety, and repose” (91). He returns to the scene of his disappointed beginning but, now, with a sense of the necessity of purchasing power in order to survive. Mervyn relives his journey through a harsh process of education, to an embrace of the market’s vicissitudes. He bemoans the fact that “The wretches whom money could purchase were, of course, licentious and unprincipled. Superintended and controlled, they might be useful instruments; but that superintendence could not be bought” (135). Yet, he also
describes poverty itself as “the worst of evils” (219). Even sickness and wellness are touched by the constraining logic of capital, as when a man notes of his dead friend, “I would have given half my fortune to procure him accommodation under some hospitable roof” (122). There are limits to the good that money can do, but, without money, few could survive long enough to do anything at all. And so, humans have little choice but to accept that the seemingly supernatural mechanisms of the market will use them for its own ends, with little regard for the health, safety, and desires of the individuals it repositions and uses up in order to enlarge itself.

Unreliable Identities and Uncertain Borders

Brockden Brown builds upon the anxiety produced by an increasing embrace of market exchange by demonstrating that commodity logic remains shaky, unreliable ground upon which to found community. The sometimes-narrator of the novel, Doctor Stevens, for instance, relates the tale of Thetford, “the uncle of him whose fate had been related by Mervyn, and was one of those who employed money, not as the medium of traffic, but as in itself a commodity. He had neither wines nor cloths, to transmute into silver. He thought it a tedious process to exchange today one hundred dollars for a cask or bale, and to-morrow exchange the bale or cask for one hundred and ten dollars” (173). This critique prefigures Marx as it draws attention to the way that currency acts as the symbolic locus of more complex commodity exchanges and as a binding repository, an object with no inherent meaning but with the power to possess and control all who touch it. It also demonstrates the innate instability of those transactions. The Atlantic market is organized around the logic of commodity-backed symbolic currency equivalence, but the value of equivalent exchange is subject to volatility and change, keeping individuals bound to the whims of a market in which they must participate, but which they neither control nor fully comprehend. The narrator continues, “It was better to give the hundred for a piece of paper,
which, carried forthwith to the money-changers, he could procure a hundred twenty-three and three-fourths. In short, this man's coffers were supplied by the despair of honest men and the stratagems of rogues” (173). Mervyn is initially leery of the exchange of currency for its allegorical, representational power because it only stands in for something; it is not the thing itself. It might act as a disguise used to dupe greedy or desperate investors or as a contract used to bind him and force him into yet another impossible moral quandary.

The deceptive unreality of money introduces broader themes of essentially unstable personality, intentions, and the natural world into the novel. For example, a series of evidently forged bills rests at the heart of Welbeck’s plot to defraud Clemenza Lodi of her inheritance. Thinking the bills counterfeit, Mervyn casts them into a fire, only to discover, moments later, that their falseness was, itself, a falseness. In a kind of double-negative logic, they turn out to be real. Welbeck has only presented them as false in the hope that Mervyn will hand them over to him (160). So the bills become the totems at the center of an odd logical puzzle that, ultimately, critiques the meaning placed upon essentially meaningless currency in the capitalist economy. The bills are both valuable and valueless—mere pieces of paper that, nevertheless, hold the totemic power of social exchange and universal equivalence as currency, and have the power to ensnare and control individuals under its sway. Again, Brockden Brown runs ahead of Marx’s interpretation of currency as a sacred repository for distant labor and commodity interactions, and as the means of social captivity in a capitalist society, but he also includes his own anxiety about the relative reliability of currency as a stand-in for reality.

Brockden Brown’s depiction of shifting individual personages also critically exposes the unstable nature of the nation and its efforts at racial, classed, and geopolitical identity. Goudie, for instance, notes that, from the beginning of the Republic, “citizenship was equivalent to
“whiteness” despite the fact that Americans were an uneasy hybrid people, at once evincing creole signs of connection to the Caribbean system to which it was connected and loudly rejecting such a lineage (Creole America 8). Shalini Puri similarly asks readers “to consider the range of ways in which different discourses of cultural hybridity have functioned as strategies for constructing, deconstructing, and reconfiguring trans/national imaginaries” (1). Hybridity, she notes, helps to describe the population and society produced through the rupture and rearrangement processes of cultural formation in the Atlantic (48). Nevertheless, “hybridity and hegemony have...been crucially linked…the former providing a vehicle for both populist nonclass integration of the masses and more utopian desires” (50). The hybrid status of figures like the Caribbean-derived Clemenza Lodi, the “tawney” Acsha Fielding, or even of the promiscuously identity-shifting Welbeck allows them to present the utopian vision of integration, even as they represent the disturbing effects of covert infiltration, embodying a nation that draws strength from its hybrid population but remains insecure about its own cultural identity within the Atlantic. Goudie addresses this dual-state when he describes America’s “paracolonially,” a state of being part colonizer, part colonized (11). This underscores Brockden Brown’s use of Mervyn to demonstrate the way that the nation can act as a victim and as a victimizer at the same time. It also returns readers to the question of racial thinking. Goudie observes that the novel examines the development of a faulty racial consciousness that disrupts the imaginary and ostensibly stable American self (178). He writes, “Brown’s carefully structured examination of the impulse toward such classification lays bare the logical inconsistencies and infinitely mutable nature of such impulses” (185). If racial classification is untrustworthy, then so is the nation’s emerging geographic, classed, or racial caste system.
The inability to match a face to an internal, inherent identity suggests the impotence of racial classification, but also the fragility and permeability of modes of classification. Goudie notes that “blackness and the fear of black insurrection are urgent issues in the novel” (63). Both blackness and the possibilities of insurrection are pressing themes in the novel, but they initially emerge from its emphasis on the untrustworthy and unstable codes upon which the nation is founded. Even more pressing is Brockden Brown’s sense that the emerging nation was cloaking itself in language of ideals that did not match its actions. Goudie writes, “These attempts to classify relations between faces and language in the novel are crucial because they are symptomatic of a much more systematic effort to put a pretty face on the illogical structures underpinning the nation’s foundational discourses and institutions” (65). Observing a new nation wearing a polite mask of freedom and speaking the words of liberty, all while practicing violence and slavery, Brockden Brown crafts a novel in which masks and coded language abound and in which the possibility of social rupture—whether as a liberating or as a destabilizing force—remains ever-present.

This critique extends as well to attempts to use an ostensible national identity to expand territorial claims in the Atlantic. Chad Luck suggests that Edgar Huntly responds to the 1737 “Walking Purchase,” in which John and Thomas Penn essentially duped the local Delaware people into giving up a much larger tract of land than they had intended. Luck argues that the novel “raised questions, specifically philosophical questions, about the nature of private property, about the process of boundary formation, and about the organization of lived space…in effect, the novel yokes more abstract investigations of boundary, property, and space to the particular circumstances of late eighteenth-century Pennsylvania” (36-7). In this, the novel presages the increasingly tense issue of the nation’s expanding identity raised in later texts like
Richard Henry Dana’s *Two Years Before the Mast*. There, as in both *Edgar Huntly* and *Arthur Mervyn*, tests to the geographical limits of the nation become tests of the nation’s ideological, spiritual, classed, and even racial identity. Brockden Brown proves that such questions can and perhaps should be raised in an urban space, just as they can be raised at the unsettled borders of the nation or in the shifting oceanic spaces that surround it.

In the urban-set *Arthur Mervyn*, the hero bursts into rooms in which he does not belong, ruptures the codes of feminine and masculine space, gains access to houses into which he has not been invited. These are lessons in the limits of his access and in Mervyn’s ability to transcend those limits by claiming command of space and by asserting his own protective proprietary claims over the women who reside in those spaces. Luck argues that “spatial boundaries get produced via a continuous process of small-scale phenomenological encounters between the individual and Other” (38). He continues, “The phenomenology of spatial boundaries is closely tied to the discourse of private property. To limit and to bound through contact with the other, the narrative implies, is also to take possession” (64). Mervyn’s transgression into the brothel where he finds Acsha Fielding, for example, is a similarly possessive discovery event, a moment in which that which is beyond Mervyn’s proprietary claim is made clear but in which he vocalizes his desire to extend that claim as a form of acquisition. These are personal interactions that suggest the nation’s own uncertainty over and attempts to extend geographic and ideological sovereignty.

The porosity and navigability of the city further underscores the Atlantic’s challenges to the nation’s claims to sanctity and authority. In fact, as Otter points out, the unique layout of the city was a subject of a great deal of discussion among writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (11). At once rigidly structured around the logic of a grid and, in Brockden
Green 395

Brown’s novel, labyrinthine, Philadelphia is, like the nation it represents, both highly ordered and frayed, both rationally logical and impossibly complex. It is an extension of the post-revolutionary drive toward greater urbanization, but also a space that continues to offer the same confounding psychological morass as the dense frontier wilderness. Brockden Brown’s ambivalent presentation of Mervyn’s behavior and goals within this confounding setting demonstrates his anxiety about the ideological and moral direction of the nation at the very moment when the nation was in the process of asserting its orderliness, its cohesion, its sovereign identity, and its claims to Atlantic power.

One crucial literary tool that Brockden Brown utilizes in order to develop his critique is his perspective: both metropolitan and oceanic. His Philadelphia is both a wilderness frontier and a national capitol within the Atlantic world. It is also, crucially, an emerging center of the United States’ political and imaginary identification. The city birthed the nation’s foundational Declaration and Constitution, served as the nation’s first capital, and, as Daniel Walker Howe points out, almost became the permanent capital again after the War of 1812, only to lose out in a narrow House vote in 1814 (67). It was also an important port city for the young nation, a direct connection to the economy and culture of the greater Atlantic. And so, as Brockden Brown makes clear, Philadelphia was an economic, cultural, and national urban center, even as it remained, relative to other ports like those in the Caribbean and Europe, a subordinate and even peripheral economic and political space. It was a capital city and an Atlantic frontier at the same time.

The arcs of the characters of this novel, therefore, remind readers that, as Ralph Bauer writes, “the discovery and conquest of America, in particular, was a thoroughly trans-(or, more accurately, ‘pre-’) national and trans-linguistic process” (8). This is true insofar as the
“discovery” of America is concerned, but Brockden Brown turns readers’ attentions to the trans-linguistic and trans-cultural processes inherent to, but so often occluded by, the formation of the post-revolutionary state and to the development of individual identities within that state. Arthur Mervyn’s titular protagonist, his collaborator turned captor, the duplicitous Welbeck, and the economically captive or disappointed women over which they contend traverse the Atlantic space, pushed on by economic shocks that occur elsewhere in the Atlantic, bound by economic compacts, and in search of economic stability. Brockden Brown uses these experiences to suggest the instability of what Immanuel Wallerstein calls "geoculture," a conception of national self and boundary defined by the "periphery of and in response and in relation to a 'center' culture...the manifestation of, and the undergirding for, global capitalism" (11). Wallerstein’s focus is upon the issues of “center” and “periphery” in the larger world that the Atlantic signifies in this novel. However, to understand Arthur Mervyn, readers must also recognize that Brockden Brown emphasizes the frontierist elements of these “global” issues in order to underscore the personal crises that arise for the individuals whose lives are shaped by and embody the geopolitical realities of their day.

As a frontier or wilderness, the city offers unique threats to the individual whose difficult task it is to navigate a daunting social, economic, geographic, and even spiritual space. Andrew Weinstock argues that “Brown…played a foundational role in establishing the haunted American wilderness as an archetype of American Gothic literature” (29). Moreover, he contends that “Brown’s achievement was to become the first American author consciously to appropriate the woods and their attendant anxieties for his Gothic romances” (33). This is true, but does not go far enough. Brown’s additional but underappreciated achievement is to present the urban space, itself, as a kind of wilderness, a space that trades the foreboding wood for the foreboding urban
landscape, but maintains the former’s sense of moral uncertainty and physical peril. As Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds puts it, Brown’s Philadelphia is “a wilderness disguised as a city” (Terror and Wonder 109). In fact, *Arthur Mervyn* is set in both the frontier and the metropolis, and disease, debt, and depravity travel freely between both spaces, suggesting their intimate correlation. The novel’s protagonist navigates a fluid landscape of uncertain moral, legal, philosophical, and even geographical laws, in spaces in which identities shift and convert, in which one can never be sure of what threat hides around the next corner, in which people can be whisked away to unfamiliar territory, perhaps never to return, and in which individuals are under constant threat of capture and captivity—in short: a wilderness in the very heart of the would-be urban American nation.

Once again, Brockden Brown elevates these cultural concerns by personalizing them, performing the North American metropole’s struggles to establish and maintain identity as dramas of ambivalent personal identification. Goudie notes that “Brown mobilizes the figure of ‘creole degeneracy’ as a trope through and against which to inventory the state of the nation’s character and culture. Unlike Northern secessionists, however, Brown exploits that disruptive figure not to critique the potentially deleterious effects of U.S. Western expansionism but rather the ways in which the nation’s rampant participation in the West Indian trades undermines the would-be model Republic’s claims to hemispheric exceptionalism” (*Creole America* 178). Uncertain identities, and the stakes they raise for national identity, however, go far beyond racial performance. Throughout the novel, friends are revealed as villains, villains are revealed as different villains, and everyone seems to harbor some secret. Even Mervyn holds a secret to his own identity in the opening passages of the novel that can only be revealed to the reader, and to Mervyn’s audience, Doctor Stevens, toward the end of the narrative. Unstable identities also allow the narrative to pile up its sublimations of nationalist and racialist anxieties. Remarking
upon the meaning of Mervyn’s oft-mentioned resemblance to other characters, including other non-white characters, Goudie writes “Convulsions in empires past and present, and volatile paracolonial relations between the West Indies and the United States, become embodied in the maze of relations heaped on Arthur Mervyn’s besieged though still pretty face” (190). Similarly, regarding the possibilities for Mervyn as a model for citizenship, Shapiro observes, “Rather than experiencing commercial culture as a Franklinesque platform of opportunities or Smithian realm of mutually civilizing satisfaction, he suffers it as an asphyxiating and battering cell of containment through unfair exchanges” (Culture and Commerce 276). Nor does he experience it as an Equiano-esque ladder. Rather, these shifting identities suggest a national character that relies upon transactions to unite individuals and their true selves—if such a thing even exists—as well as to unite them to other people in society.

The novel also uses its urban frontier setting to explore potentially destabilizing threats to the spiritual meaning of life itself in the Atlantic. As Weinstock points out, Wallace, the missing fiancé of Mervyn’s country benefactress, Sarah Hadwin, who Mervyn seeks and thinks he glimpses before finding himself trapped in an empty house, “is essentially a zombie.” Weinstock explains: “the impression of Philadelphia that Brown creates…is one in which the line between life and death has dissolved. The living are buried too soon and the dead—Wallace, Welbeck, even Arthur himself—keep coming back” (84). The very basis of reality is unstable in this urban wilderness, boundaries— even the boundaries between life and death—are unclear, and life is organized simply around profit, loss, deception, and potential capture and captivity.

The Ruling Genius and Providential Authorial Control

Despite all of this uncertainty, or perhaps in response to it, Brockden Brown explicitly gestures towards an interventionist and ordering deity in this novel, one that covertly holds the
fibers of a dense web of social indebtedness and captivity in order to undergird social, economic, and transnational relations. At first, Mervyn struggles to discern this fact, but, as he comes to recognize it, he also grows into his own role as the arbiter of narrative reality.

The process by which Mervyn grapples with the moral and spiritual consequences of his embeddedness within the Atlantic marketplace is difficult and treacherous, not least because he struggles to comprehend a system that might appear random and still contain divine organization. He notes, “Wealth has ever been capriciously distributed” (46). Even so, he foolishly “almost acquiesced in the notion that some beneficent and ruling genius had prepared my path for me” (45). At first, this contradiction suggests that Mervyn is confused as to whether fate and the universe are organized or random. However, Mervyn’s confusion really lies in his belief that the economically organized natural world is “beneficent.” He explains that he “was conscious that my happiness depended not on the revolutions of nature or the caprice of man. All without was, indeed, vicissitude and uncertainty; but within my bosom was a centre not to be shaken or removed. My purposes were honest and steadfast” (235). In time, he will come to understand that it is not caprice, but the push and pull of living in a society—which is to say an economy—inhabited by other people and structured by a divinity that acts through the market. The market-oriented universe in which Mervyn finds himself appears unforgiving and uncaring. It reproduces and enlarges itself, with no concern over whether individuals either comprehend or survive its dictates, because, while one individual experiences loss, another experiences gain, and the cosmology of economy and society remains intact. The “ruling genius” seems to exist, even if it is not “beneficent.” There is a god, the novel suggests, a ghost in the machinery of exchange-capital, but it is hardly interested in revealing itself to individuals like Arthur Mervyn. Instead, it focuses its attention on constructing a moral and economic system that so limits free movement
that individuals must succumb, obey, and accept their forced mobilization. This is providence as social determinism and market manipulation.

Even the worst excesses of the market serve as demonstrative evidence of providence’s power to orchestrate events. Doctor Stevens, for example, while considering the inevitable demise of Welbeck, emphasizes the way the market limits free choice and human volition. He announces, “Mr. Welbeck, you are unfortunate and criminal. Would to God I could restore you to happiness and virtue! But, though my desire be strong, I have no power to change your habits or rescue you from misery” (146). The market will permit what it will, and, just as Welbeck was incapable of escaping, so too is Doctor Stevens incapable of rescuing him. This is, in a word, predestination. But it is predestination of a particular sort, organized around the logic of limitations and constraints placed upon human volition and activity.

Nevertheless, despite the ignominious end to which the narrative leads him, Atlantic history belongs to Welbeck. Why? Because Welbeck’s failures fuel the further development of the system that first made him rich and then destroyed him. It is the dark father-figure, Welbeck, who, even in his own dissolution and demise, ultimately teaches Mervyn how to survive within the market-driven Atlantic urban society. Shapiro observes this point, writing, “Welbeck is only a single manifestation of a much broader rehierarchizing of the bourgeoisie at the century’s end” (Culture and Commerce 272). As for Mervyn, himself, Hinds notes that, “Arthur executes perfectly…the role of late-eighteenth-century American capitalist citizen…with a theatrical sensibility, a capacity to shift roles according to need and situation [an] entrepreneurial sort” (Private Property 72). This description leaves out the morality that Mervyn models for the nation as well. The world that Mervyn and Welbeck inhabit is a coherently organized system, what Arendt calls a “public,” in which values “come into being whenever any such products are drawn
into the ever-changing relativity of exchange between the members of society” (Arendt 164). This world is organized around the amoral logic of the ledger-book, rather than around the mutual social-moral covenant, and so individuals might rise or fall as valued commodities, succeed or fail as participants in the market, all while reaffirming the power of the Atlantic economy and its logic. And yet, Brockden Brown insists that readers attend to the spiritual dimensions of this society in ways that Locke or Marx or Arendt do not. The figure who understands the nature of this public and providentially-organized world will not only survive but prove elect. Over the course of the novel, Mervyn accepts his identity as the sort of person that the Atlantic’s “ruling genius” demands.

This occurs not despite but because of Brockden Brown’s invitation to question Mervyn’s personality, intentions, and self-justifications. At various points in the novel, Mervyn offers competing explanations for his own background. This instability does not merely create an unreliable narrator. Instead, it generates the possibility that the transactional self, the self that can be exchanged and shed like the costumes Mervyn sometimes wears, mirrors the natural universe that transports and transacts persons as if they were equivalent and exchangeable commodities in the market. In fact, this thematic undercurrent accentuates the text’s relationship to the guiding political philosophies of the era of its production. Frank Shuffelton, for example, argues that the United States, itself, emerges from multiple sources. It was, he argues “peculiarly a creation of written texts” ranging from the Declaration and Constitution to Paine’s Crisis to Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia to the variously-authored Federalist Papers (90). This text also permits multiple authorship to initiate the plot and the world it depicts. It therefore personalizes and performs the national foundation process. Given the text’s allusions to an interventionist divinity, readers should expand upon this point to include a theological perspective. The novel
reflects the boundaries of the market, the nation, or of the divine kingdom—a space of equivalence and exchange, where multiple selves are possible, and, as the text states explicitly, “all is of equal value.”

The text becomes the site wherein competing realities can share space, mingle, convert, and exchange. This is not merely identity curation, but a definition of identity modeled upon market logic. Describing the necessity of trust that emerged from the breakdown of older landed forms of wealth, Ian Baucom writes, “the decoupling of public personhood from those inherited and landed forms of property which tie individuals to a fixed, traditional community of obligations and the concomitant collapse of a republican practice of virtue as the fate of a citizenry...the invention of an abstract, anonymous, mode of personhood invested not in the inalienable claims of the locale but in the well-being of an anonymous collective” related by interest and debt, more than by anything else (56). Readers might consider the possibility that Arthur Mervyn embodies this process in one person, acting as a singular encasement for the equivalent and exchangeable “anonymous collective” that Baucom describes. With this in mind, all of the roles that the produced self plays in enlightenment thinking bear scrutiny: as an individual, the self manifests among and against society’s othered alternatives. As a model of personal freedom, the self manifests among and against the unfree. As a model for national citizenship, it situates transaction as the ultimate national character. Finally, as a spiritual value—the self as the soul—the self exists as a spirit that can be moved, traded, or converted according to the needs or desires of the market and its governing hand. The text insists that readers can and should exchange Mervyn’s identities because he lives in a world in which those identities are innately exchangeable. All is of equal value, indeed.
Amplifying this theme, the novel insists that authorship, and the productive authorial voice are crucial elements in a world that appears unstable, even as it contains order. Welbeck, for example, makes use of “biloquism”—a favorite trope of Brockden Brown from, for instance, *Wieland*—a handy tool for deception but also a symbolic effect of the novel’s view of economy as a series of distant and interlocking authoritarian voices. Welbeck confesses “I desired to escape detection, and repelled your solicitations for admission in a counterfeited voice” (148). The voice doubles the act of counterfeit instantiated through the false bills. Here the text raises an important question that the author apparently recognizes has no answer: if a thing with no materiality can wield material power in the real world, what is its value and how does it reproduce value? This is a dual critique: of equivalent commodity capitalism as a system rooted in empty signifiers, and of a system of inescapable tricks and traps rooted in transactional relations. Shapiro recognizes the importance of this narrative mode as well. He writes “Mervyn’s motives seem hieroglyphic at times because Brown is placing pressure on familiar modes of narrative perspective to indicate the coming to dominance of commercial political economy as a historical passage that requires a different form of representation than is currently available to him…this procedure is used by Brown to craft a new relation between literary production and social transformation and suggest how progressives might intervene within a world that is rapidly altering toward conservative and capitalist predicates” (*Culture and Commerce* 259-60). It is fair to agree that Brockden Brown uses narrative to model a response to a cultural shift “toward conservative and capitalist predicates,” but he also uses it to model something else: the spectral but evaluable self that exists within the divinely-ordained natural world of financial relations. This is a self that possesses exchangeable value that can be dislocated from the
material self and accounted against other individuals within the equivalence-oriented cosmology of the natural world.

As the author of multiple narratives of self, Mervyn occupies this role of master or god over the text. To that point, Shuffelton quotes Cathy Davidson who describes the American after 1800 as the interpreter “which is to say…a creator of events” (91). With this in mind, Mervyn’s multiplicity of interpreted and interpretable selves and narratives mirrors the American citizen as interpreter-cum-creator of a new national public. Again, this is a useful critique, but one that leaves out the text’s evident interest in the spirit. Mervyn speaks and brings realities into being, and his audience can only listen and attempt to piece together something firm and reliable. The novel will conclude by essentially asserting that all realities are equally valid and exchangeable as they derive from the same manipulative authorial master or divine source. The narrator stands in for what Mervyn calls the “ruling genius,” the ordering, interventionist intelligence that keeps its true motives obscure but arranges people, commodities, and even narratives, for the sake of its own enlargement and cultivation. Mervyn’s shifting self-presentation only further underscores the one element that unites them: the embrace of market logic.

Brockden Brown’s disruptions of the supposedly stable narrative self could, Shapiro argues, only have come at a particular historical moment. He writes that they “were only possible within the 1790s larger indeterminacy as a semiperipheral temporality, a transition between two longer waves of social organization, which creates the space for otherwise suppressed possibilities to appear” (260). It is true that the upheavals of the 1790s provided Brockden Brown with a unique opportunity—or responsibility—to depict instability from levels personal, social, national, and philosophical. However, it is limiting to call this a mere transitional phase. Rather, it seems clear that Brockden Brown foresaw an oncoming transactional age and created a hero
who would learn how to navigate it. This is why the novel ends as it does: with an expectation that the reader will judge what has come before and what will come after in moral and pragmatic terms. The author tasks his reader with judging Mervyn’s development into a citizen capable of surviving in the new age, and with judging the political, social, and spiritual parameters of that age.

**Transaction as Transmission and the Plague of Judgment**

The novel develops its model of divine intervention from disinterested authorship to active judgment as a response to the personal and moral stakes of one individual’s connections to the wider Atlantic world of exchange, particularly to the exchange of human bodies in the slave trade. This element of the text emerges from its most politically charged symbol: the plague that seems to emanate from business dealings with slavery. Throughout the novel, the specter of infection comes explicitly from trade with the West Indies and, implicitly, from the moral and real contagion of business relations with Caribbean slavery. Mervyn recounts the tale of “a youth who appeared to be French, who was wholly unacquainted with our language…[who] had been seized with a violent disease” (70). This young man’s fever seems to be a kind of revenge for the designs of his father, Vincento Lodi—relative to Mervyn’s first imperiled woman, Clemenza—who “had flattered one of his slaves with the prospect of his freedom but had, nevertheless, included this slave in the sale that he had made of his estate” (72). The assassination of the elder Lodi is the slave’s revenge for manipulation, but the spread of the disease reminds readers that slavery’s vices, its horrors, its moral degeneracy are as endemic to its nature as is its profitability.

As Barnard, Kamrath, and Shapiro note, the connection between the disease and Caribbean slave-backed business dealings has dominated much recent Mervyn scholarship (xxxi). Indeed, they argue that the “city’s corruption is produced by a damaged social environment” that comes
about in the wake of the Haitian revolution (xxxiii). The disease then is also revenge upon a market that draws the immorality of slavery along trading routes that link all of the ports and spaces of Atlantic culture and commerce. As a result, even economic and national development incur moral and economic debts that must be paid by suffering.

Consequently, the plague represents harsh judgement upon a city that claims to spurn the trade, even as it profits from it. As Goudie points out, “[Benjamin] Franklin proposed two treaty articles to his British counterparts that sought to neutralize the West Indian trade issue as potential source of ongoing conflict. More precisely, Franklin hoped that the West Indian trades might continue to benefit the New Republic economically without the United States becoming entangled in a commercial war with Britain…that might jeopardize the short-and long-term stability of the nation” (55). The disease that spreads to Franklin’s Philadelphia suggests the impossibility of this hope: a society cannot both profit from and condemn slavery at the same time.

A city founded as a religious haven for Quakers, and the center of the American Republic, Philadelphia is also a city bound to an immoral trade. As a result, both it and the nation it represents are potential targets for divine retribution. Brycchan Carey observes that, during the colonial period, Quakers, who were especially concentrated in Philadelphia, remained economically tied to slavery. As a result, early campaigns were for the end of “perpetual” slavery after “a vague ‘term of years’.” Such calls “maintain the appearance of taking a stand while allowing slaveholding Friends to conduct business as usual” (65). This was the policy including among figures like John Fox who, after experiencing Barbados first hand, became quite vocal antislavery opinion leaders. At the same time, even early Quaker abolitionist rhetoric struggled to distinguish between the unfreedom experienced by chattel slaves and the constrained freedom
experienced by laborers in the emerging Atlantic market. Some Quakers, like Morgan Godwyn, for example, noted that slavery threatened “the economic rights of poor colonists, whose wages are depressed when they have to compete in the same market as slaves” (161). These debates reveal a religious community deeply troubled by the ambivalent implications of the market that defined the eighteenth-century Atlantic. Although the religious sect moved, ultimately, toward officially banning slavery in 1758, it struggled with its members’ personal involvement, their community’s reliance, and their city’s commitment to Atlantic slavery. Moreover, the Quakers who sought to come to grips with the moral wages of slavery remained fully cognizant of the broader Atlantic context of society and market of which Philadelphia was a part. Carey points out, for example, that writers like Anthony Benezet recognized that “the campaign against the Atlantic slave trade must itself be a transatlantic campaign” (212). Brockden Brown draws upon this history, presenting Philadelphia’s links to the Atlantic trade as an explicitly moral and spiritual crisis that was not, by the year of the Yellow fever epidemic, at all settled. The city’s sinful past remains active in its present as death follows the market’s links between the city and its slave-trading partners.

The novel’s conflation of immoral economic transaction and contagion become personal issues for Arthur Mervyn, allowing the protagonist of the novel to embody the nation’s own connections to the slave trade, its struggles to assert a more righteous moral standing, and, perhaps, its groping discovery of a path towards possible redemption. As Mervyn takes hold of the duplicitous bills from Welbeck, he wonders “What, said I, is my title to this money? By retaining it, shall I not be as culpable as Welbeck?” Only a paragraph later, Mervyn will explain that “the city…was involved in confusion and panic, for a pestilential disease had begun its destructive progress…. the malady was malignant, and unsparing” (99). The close metonymic
relation of money and malady anticipates what is to come for young Arthur Mervyn: by accepting the seemingly-false notes, he does in fact become as culpable as his untrustworthy benefactor. In so doing, he exposes himself to the same fate or invites the same signs of providential rejection. Both men contract the plague shortly after their dealings with the ill-gotten money. In this case, the epigrammatic phrase, “all is of equal value,” implies transaction as transmission. All can equally exchange commodities or diseases or diseased commodities within the Atlantic’s moral and literal marketplace.

The plague provides the backdrop for *Arthur Mervyn*’s many personal and moral dilemmas, but its conspicuousness invites critics and readers to approach the novel primarily as an attempt to grapple with the traumatic shock of Philadelphia’s plague experience. This makes it, in the words of Stacey Margolis, “all too easy for critics to assume that *Arthur Mervyn* is a novel about contagion” (346). As a result, *Arthur Mervyn* has held a great deal of critical interest for its depiction of the plague outbreak through which Philadelphia suffered in 1793. Strong analyses of Brockden Brown’s work by critics like Goudie, Shapiro, Luck, Weinstock, Mark Kamrath, and Timothy Francis Strode read the novel as thematically centered upon issues of transmission, outbreak, and exposure. In fact, Brockden Brown’s portrait of a city under siege by illness draws upon a history with which the author was intimately familiar. As Weinstock points out, “during the summers of the 1790s Yellow fever epidemics occurred annually in large American cities, especially those along the Eastern seaboard. In 1793…the disease claimed over 2,500 lives in a roughly six-week period between late August and September, and more than 5,000 died overall—almost one tenth of Philadelphia’s total population” (18). Brown even contracted and recovered from the disease in 1798. However, any reading of the novel that stops here is incomplete, for the plague only exposes and underscores Brockden Brown’s questions
regarding the theological nature of the economy that allowed that transmission to occur, and the 
economic nature of a divine intellect that would not only permit that exposure but orchestrate it.

Indeed, the outbreak first reveals the contours of Philadelphia’s hierarchical society, and then implies the moral problems produced by those hierarchical relations. As Barnard, Kamrath, and Shapiro observe, even death in the Atlantic metropole was classed and raced given that the urban poor and the urban non-white classes died at higher rates than wealthier citizens who could retire to the country (xxiii). So the plague is also a marker of class contact and class division. It is also potentially a theatrical display of Atlantic providential capitalism’s insistence that wealth signified virtue. It furthermore traces the complex connections of the entire Atlantic market and world. Margolis, for example, argues that the novel “is at once an example and an analysis of the rise of an early information society…Brown’s novel both imagines a world threatened by revolution and reckless financial speculation and recognizes how little anyone understood the hidden ties that made a decision in one place wreak havoc in another” (344). Margolis recognizes that the links that the novel traces between sometimes unnamed business partners also signal the emergence of a more intensely-connected world, held together by routes of information, trade, and debt finance. She argues that “there are no…evocative chains of transmission in Arthur Mervyn. Instead, the disease emerges in seemingly random locations throughout the city, destroying some individuals and leaving others untouched” (349). Margolis also notes that the incomprehensibility—for the characters and for readers—of the disease mimics the incomprehensibility of the Atlantic economy’s networks of exchange. Meanwhile, Barnard, Kamrath, and Shapiro link the unpredictability of infection to the social ruptures of the period, in order to argue that the disease underscores “underlying concerns with commercial corruption, Caribbean slave revolution and abolition, and the larger social transformations of the
revolutionary 1790s” (xxi). It might be better to bring these critics together to note that the
disease marks the way that disruption actually, and, perhaps, counterintuitively, unites Atlantic
society. This is a society produced by social disruption, with only market equivalence remaining
stable. As a result, when critics describe the transmission of Yellow fever in the novel as an
element of the “unpredictability” of those networks, they minimize the novel’s moral and
spiritual argument.

In fact, the transmission of Yellow fever from the Caribbean to Philadelphia is highly
predictable if readers interpret the disease as either an outbreak of the slave trade’s social and
moral ills made manifest, or as divine judgment for the way those networks of information and
trade have built up around the sins of slavery, violence, and economic dehumanization. Samuel
Otter agrees, pointing out that Brockden Brown “implies the dangers of mobility and
importation” by tracing a winding epidemiological path amongst “dwellings, bodies, money, and
texts that circulate between the mainland and the plantations and upheavals of the West Indies
and particularly Saint Domingue, often cited by importationists as the likely source of the
epidemic” (59). If readers approach the disease as a moral problem, a new spiritual argument
emerges. The providential deity that orchestrates events in the novel and in the Atlantic market
may, simultaneously, intervene to punish participants in that market. If so, then, in an economic
culture bound to and built upon violent unfreedom, no one is safe, even the innocent may suffer,
and all of society is culpable for sins that have allowed the nation to prosper.

With this in mind, the novel might properly be read as an ongoing series of anxious
questions about the future of the Republic. Central to those questions is the plague—potentially a
communicable result of exchange with the broader Atlantic, and potentially a source of
providential retribution for economic involvement in the Atlantic slave market. Rightly so, for,
as Otter points out, this epidemic raised serious doubts about the sanctity of the nation’s
temporary capitol, and about the potential for the nation itself. He writes, “The medical and
social crisis in Philadelphia led to reflections over the character of residents, city, and nation.
There was concern about the vulnerability of national boundaries, worry that the fever had
spread to the mainland United States from revolutionary Saint Domingue” (26). And so, the
novel is about infection, but that infection is potentially as allegorical as it is historically-rooted.
Ostrowski argues that “the Yellow fever is a judgment on the people of Philadelphia for their
indulgence in luxury,” a contention that coheres with his sense that Mervyn, himself, is a
speculator and, therefore, an individual exposed to judgment through contagion (15). So the
“ruling genius” of the novel both produces a society, and, evidently, enforces harsh justice
against that society.

Why divinity might do this is at the heart of Brockden Brown’s most vexing questions,
but the answer may be found in the novel’s forward-looking perspective. xlviThe novel leaves the
nature of the plague undetermined. Is it a form of divine judgment? Is it a symbolic link between
the spaces of the Atlantic, bound together by a market that produces death just as it produces
commodities? Is it a symptom of a closely linked but amoral Atlantic universe that extends from
the maritime markets, to urban centers, and even to frontier spaces? Is it all of these things at
once? The only clue appears when the novel makes a crucial shift from presenting a purely
evaluative God to presenting a judgmental God. Both versions of the divine are innately
interventionist, but one intervenes only to reproduce itself, while the other intervenes to punish
or to reward.

Once more, Brockden Brown uses the text’s structure and the role of the reader to model
this divine form. Shuffelton argues that “the end of literature lies in ‘judgment,’ and civic
virtue…is merely a byproduct of the performance of judgment necessary for both readers and citizens” (92). However, Shuffelton does not address the theological connotations of this move. Ultimately, Brockden Brown leaves it up to readers to evaluate and to judge the nature of the society he has just dramatized, inviting them to occupy the new godlike position of judge over events, characters, and realities in the novel. Shuffelton goes on to say that Brockden Brown is “playing a language game about the nature of judgment itself that simultaneously values the procedures of rationalized legal judgment and undermines its pretensions to sufficiency in regulating human life” (96). In fact, as Shuffelton notes, Mervyn presents himself as a kind of social outsider open to the reader for ultimate judgment. Indeed, Shuffelton notes that the “silence” of the ending leaves it to the reader to decide the ultimate morality of the text (107). Shuffelton attributes this to the ambivalent nature of the 1798 Alien and Sedition Acts, to which Brockden Brown responds by making judgement of the “other” an individual and personal act. Shuffelton limits his view of “judgment” to the political and the moral, and his recognition of the text’s performance of uncertain feelings surrounding such measures as the Alien and Sedition Acts is well-taken, but Brockden brown also invites readers both to participate in God’s judgment of Atlantic society and to critically examine any deity that would orchestrate and pass even a neutral verdict over such a society.

For Brockden Brown, there was no denying the inextricability of political, personal, and theological issues, and, therefore, no denying the inextricability of questions about the divine from questions about the state. Brockden Brown’s father was, as Shuffelton points out, “one of the Quakers exiled from Philadelphia by the revolutionary government” (93). His views of the republican rupture were, therefore, bound to be ambivalent. This is not all: Brockden Brown’s views are not strictly in line with Quaker orthodoxy, and, therefore, unite political and
theological degrees of ambivalence. He implies a universe guided by a providential hand that judges and punishes in instances in which people cannot or do not. Shuffelton argues that, in the novel, crimes are frequently punished in private, rather than in unreliable courts (101). However, the disease is a very public form of judgment meted out by a mysterious but, in the eyes of the primary characters, actively interventionist God.

And so, in his search for a way to use money to do good in the world, Mervyn questions whether only his death will release his money into the world in a productive capacity. He writes, “The evils which had befallen this city were obvious and enormous. Hunger and negligence had exasperated the malignity and facilitated the progress of the pestilence. Could this money be more usefully employed than in alleviating these evils? During my life, I had no power over it, but my death would justify me in prescribing the course which it should take” (137). In this moment—surely intended by the narrator to demonstrate his virtue through suffering—Brockden Brown presents Christian self-sacrifice as both an economic and a spiritual operation as Mervyn meditates upon the possibility that his death might not only relieve himself of sin, but also cleanse the economic and social world around him.

At the same time, Mervyn also wonders whether his attempts to assist the various unfortunate women in his life might not uncover a way to pay off his own personal moral debts. He muses, “It occurred to me…that my death might preclude an interview between us, and that it was prudent to dispose, in some useful way, of the money which would otherwise be left in the sport of chance” (155). His desire to dispose of the money, to use it for good, evidently keeps his disease at bay. That Mervyn does not die, while Welbeck does, is thus potentially a result of his finding a cure, or a sign of his virtuous election as one willing to do the work of improving and preparing the ordinary fallen world. That is: the dispersal of accursed money. Otter suggests that
readers should approach the bifurcated text by imagining “the first part as diagnosis and the second part as cure” (61). This makes allegorical sense whether the fever stands in for social corruption or, as Otter argues, “tyranny.” It also makes sense in light of the larger spiritual argument that Otter does not take up. The “diagnosis,” in this case, is sin, specifically the sort of economic sin that evolves from relationships of debt and involvement in the slave trade. The “cure” may be Mervyn’s rejection of money that comes directly from the trade of enslaved bodies.

At the crucial moment, Mervyn’s intentions do have some effect—if not upon the world, then upon his own soul. Of his salvation from the disease, he remarks that, “Some inexplicable principle rendered harmless those potent enemies of human life. My fever subsided and vanished. My strength was revived, and the first use that I made of my limbs was to bear me far from the contemplation and sufferance of those evils” (133). The language is clear. Indeed, in the very first words of the text, the narrator names “the evils of pestilence.” One might be rescued from this evil only by an “inexplicable principle.” Here, the “principle,” might be read as merely the rationalist’s word for providence. Given this arc, the disease is not evil at all. It is one more tool that divinity uses to orchestrate its will. It is a trial through which individuals like Mervyn are judged. His desire to do good with money marks him as virtuous or elect, and he is delivered.

This optimistic reading implies that there is still hope for the nation to reject unfreedom, whether in the form of chattel slavery or in the form of debt-bondage. There is another option: Mervyn may prosper precisely because he has come into contact with the most debasing elements of Atlantic trade. Goudie wonders whether productive trade in the Atlantic can only be conducted by a figure that, like Mervyn, has been inoculated against “potential contagion
signified by the West Indies.” Notably, Mervyn’s happy ending appears “only after being exposed to the pervasive presence of West Indian figures circulating through the American urban landscape” (Specie 69). In this reading, Mervyn’s successful interaction with a morally debased marketplace allows him to interact with it and to come away unscathed.

An even more pessimistic reading suggests that the nation might well establish its future, as Mervyn does, only by going through a crisis of self and, ultimately, securing Atlantic capitalist liberty at the cost of the chattel slaves it leaves in bondage. Brockden Brown may be suggesting that Mervyn, Philadelphia, and the nation will ultimately and unfortunately reject revolutionary possibilities and choose to accept a morally fallen state within the marketplace. Barnard, Kamrath, and Shapiro argue that “Brown’s circle sees slavery in radical-Enlightenment terms as an illegitimate use of force that typifies premodern societies but that is not part of any eternal human order” (xxxv). Perhaps so, but Brockden Brown also appears to warn that slavery might be part of an “eternal” order that will come about and proliferate if the modern era continues to embrace the morally problematic practices of Atlantic debt and slave capital. The lack of moral or even true narrative resolution in the novel allows readers to ponder this possibility. If readers recognize that Brockden Brown has constructed a moral universe that is structured around capitalist modes of transaction and exchange, then Mervyn achieves his own personal autonomy by claiming liberty for himself, but only selectively extending it to others. Mervyn’s fate suggests that there might be a way for the nation to thread the moral needle within the Atlantic market, but there is no evidence that it has, no guarantee that it will, and no assurance that, having done so, it will not backslide.
Conclusion

The fearful uncertainty of life in a market-oriented social system—whether at its center, in San Domingue, or at its peripheral, but urban, frontier, in Philadelphia—has personal, moral, and spiritual stakes. For example, Mervyn tells his readers that “it seemed as if I were walking in the dark and might rush into snares or drop into pits before I was aware of my danger” (56). As David S. Reynolds notes, authors like Brockden Brown evoke the language of the pulpit meaningfully. Brockden Brown writes here in the mode of a late jeremiad. However, by emphasizing the pitfalls of contemporary social life but neglecting to present an obvious schema by which to repair it, Brockden Brown offers a critique of the nation’s economics, society, politics, and spirituality that is a good deal less optimistic than even the jeremiad generally presents. Considering the fate of the treacherous Welbeck, Brockden Brown similarly writes, “His career would have continued some time longer; but his inveterate habits would have finally conducted his existence to the same criminal and ignominious close” (99). In this text, as in the most perilous jeremiads, the fall is sudden, inevitable, and steep. By evoking the language of the sermon but taking a financial episode as his subject, Brockden Brown suggests the conflation of both ways of thinking. Moreover, he suggests the co-instantiation of finance and spirituality by suggesting that the uncertainty into which Mervyn is plunged threatens both his spiritual and economic futures.

Moreover, Brockden Brown draws attention to the way that this conflation contributes to the inextricability of captivity from post-revolutionary expansion. Captivity is not a foreign experience to the national center, but an endemic feature of national organization, and this raises tense moral challenges for the individual. David Brion Davis addresses this logic when he points out the intimate link between the emergence of an Enlightenment national identity and the
economic circumstances of the Caribbean. He writes that “the Age of Revolution coincided with the economic decline of the older sugar colonies in the Caribbean. It also witnessed the peak and gradual decline of the African slave trade…But [if] the Age of Revolution had intellectually isolated the major slaveholding regimes, it had also, with the exception of the British West Indies, increased their independent political power” (83). This may be so, but Brockden Brown insists that the echoes of the slave economy remain as the links that permit Atlantic societies to establish stability through trade and debt. He is not alone in presenting debt as a kind of foundational moral decadence. Davis writes, “Sugar and slaves were not a source of opulence, once discovered, but of debt, wasted soil, decayed properties, and social depravity” (62). Davis’ work builds upon Eric Williams’ observation that investments from the slave trade fueled markets and also recirculated slavery’s profits through investment in banking, heavy industry, and insurance (98). As a result, Davis writes, “the Revolution may not have been disruptive enough to destroy the existing social order, but it did result in a period of uncertainty, self-doubt and unpredictable identity” (279). It is exactly this doubt that Brockden Brown examines as he considers the paradoxical relationship between revolutionary liberty and bondage. He surveys a society securing its national future without shedding the vestiges of unfreedom that define its past and present. As a result, the nation’s very social, economic, and philosophical foundations and initiatives remain brittle, open to manipulation, and potentially exposed to rupture. Such a society demands much of the individual who wishes to navigate within it.

Mervyn ultimately proves, despite his claims of naiveté, an animal well-suited to the market-driven world, able to contort himself into whatever shape necessary to survive and even to thrive. Elliott admits as much when he writes, “to survive his desperate situation, Mervyn must be able to transform every event that occurs to him into an opportunity and be able to re-
create his own identity into a new personality which would engage the attention of others enough to allow him to gain access into society” (152). Similarly, Barnard, Kamrath, and Shapiro note that “Brown clarifies problematic individual perceptions by reference to social structures. The novel’s characters are mainly bearers of social positions, and their often unstable mental processes are the results of manifold pressures” (xix). Shapiro sees a generational shift among scholars, from those who, like Elliott, questioned the “individual character as nationalist allegory,” asking “to what degree can Arthur Mervyn be comfortably consecrated as a typically mythopoetic American spirit?” to a critical consensus that readers should pay more attention to “the narratives social contexts for the period’s gendered economy, epidemiological debates, and construction of scientific racism” (269). It is, however, possible to reconcile these readings. It is the very instability of Mervyn’s depiction of self that makes him well-suited to prosper within his period’s contextual preoccupations with gender, transmission, race, and class constructions.

Readers must therefore now intervene into scholarship that recognizes Brockden Brown’s importance as a social critic, to emphasize the author’s interest in moral, philosophical, and theological inquiry as well. Bryan Waterman notes that “cold war-era” scholars like Ringe and Elliott “found Brown’s prose ponderous, his plots disjointed, his morals didactic, and his nationalism questionable…for critics of this era who were attempting a history of American authorship, Brown was either a failure for his inability to transcend gentlemanly amateurism and make literary writing a viable profession, or he was an unfortunate example of the difficulties faced by would-be writers in a society too attuned to nation abuilding and money making to support a literary publishing industry.” Waterman, however, notes that later readers first embraced Brockden Brown’s salacious gothic plots and then began to recognize the importance of his cultural criticism (175). Yet, even if critics like Barnard, Kamrath, and Shapiro, writing a
Green 419

generation after critics like Ringe, and Elliott, represent a growing critical recognition of the
text’s sociological perspective, critical fissures persist. Waterman notes, for example, that
“recent criticism divides into two camps: one that reads Brown’s work symptomatically, looking
for evidence of early America’s political unconscious or Brown’s own political
partisanship…and another camp that, though it sometimes runs the risk of overdetermining
Brown’s political radicalism, reads him as a diagnostician of his culture more than a participant
in its ideological or partisan conflicts” (236). What none of these readings do is to connect
Brockden Brown’s personal, political, and social critiques to the questions he raises about the
soul. This then is perhaps the way to reconcile the competing schools of criticism that Waterman
names: Brockden Brown’s novels are not exactly moral fables, but they are interested in raising
moral and theological questions that are both personal and more broadly social, in an Atlantic
world in which spirituality and market ideology function as one and the same.

Moreover, these issues help to illuminate studies of Brockden Brown as an author
invested in the issue of authorship, itself. As Tawil notes, Brockden Brown has been recognized
as a “self-conscious” writer. He writes, “The phrase is apt because it registers Brown’s abiding
awareness of his writing and its goals…yet a certain formal self-consciousness is also woven into
the novels, themselves. Surely one of the most notable and familiar aspects of Brown’s fiction is
its nearly obsessive concern with reading, writing, interpretation, and the whole realm of
signification more generally” (105). This represents an important step in Brockden Brown
scholarship, and one that allows readers to make an even more exciting leap. In his
representations of authorship and reading, Brockden Brown investigates the most complicated
philosophical issues of his age: the morality and theology of production of value and assessment
of value, in a society organized around transactions of value.
How, asks Brockden Brown, can God both orchestrate and condemn transactional practices? Because the market-oriented world he investigates is truly evaluative and transactional, generating plots and personalities that hinge upon characters’ attempts to produce and to understand value, and upon readers’ abilities to judge and to exchange value. In the end Brockden Brown transfers godlike power from one mode to another and from one source to another, from the socially and personally generative mode borne of equivalence, embodied by the ambivalent Mervyn, to a mode of narrative and social judgement, embodied by the audience itself, from the authorial narrator to the judgmental reader. In so doing, Brockden Brown evokes the difference between the god who creates and the god who judges, both of which exist at the same time within the Atlantic marketplace.

To recognize this is hardly to throw aside the cultural or political intentions of the novel. In *Arthur Mervyn*, the North American metropole establishes itself, just as its representative character does: through an exchange of persons, a conversion of identities, a repositioning of souls, a purchase of self at the cost of another or a settled relation of mutual possession. The emerging nation’s soul is likewise subject to the debts it contracts through trade and business, including trade in human lives. As long as the nation remains involved in the economy of flesh in the Atlantic, it remains bound to that system’s vices, exposed to apocalyptic contagion, or even damnation. Likewise, the nation’s dual ignorance and complicity matches Mervyn’s own. It remains a nation of unfree persons who wrongly think themselves heroic, simply because they resist seeing the shackles by which they hold others, and by which they too are held. “All is of equal value,” and that value places the individual and the community within the realm of a divinely orchestrated marketplace that, they might discover, is not as “beneficent” as they might wish or pretend.
Chapter 6

The Ghosts of Atlantic Capital: George Lippard and the National Apocalypse
George Lippard’s novel, *The Quaker City, or the Monks of Monk Hall*, published serially between 1844 and 1845, presents the urban Atlantic at its very worst: as a trap loaded with enticing opportunities to gain advantage in an economy that runs on the exchange of souls and bodies, a trap that men from every sector of society attempt to master but that none can control, a trap set to spring on one and all. The novel is, in many ways, a prototypical urban gothic narrative. It is also a charged assault on the philosophical and political assumptions of an increasingly nationalist culture built upon a hypocritical understanding of liberty purchased through unfreedom. In it, ostensible heroes compete with supposed villains over the bodies and virtues of imperiled young ingénues. In it, a mysterious sorcerer holds sway over a harem of dehumanized undead women, whose very existence speaks to the market of flesh upon which the Atlantic economy survives and thrives. In it, events happen according to the orchestration of a seemingly providential hand that really belongs to a demonic consigliere. In it, the Atlantic marketplace appears both eerily supernatural and devastatingly familiar, evincing signs of divine intervention through degrading, often violent market interactions taking place in the very heart of the urban metropole. In it, finally, the sins upon which an Atlantic nation is built render its future bleak. The novel posits the mutual instantiation of capital and providential supernaturalism as both productive forces in the Atlantic, and as debasing threats to individuals, nations, and social moral ideals. Monk Hall is America, Lippard argues, a hive of vicious schemers and conjurers in the Atlantic cultural and financial economy, both made powerful and doomed by a debased union between capital and spirituality.

The novel is organized around a number of intersecting plots, all of which, when taken together, offer a vision of Philadelphia, the United States, and the greater Atlantic economy as moral and personal hells. Two men make a bet over the seduction of a woman, only for one man
to turn on the other. Another man plans complicated schemes of phony land sales. A priest attempts to take possession of and to exploit a young woman. A sorcerer oversees a harem of undead women. Over all of the schemes presides a figure of seemingly endless depravity who secretly harbors designs of upward mobility, even as he is haunted by visions both of the violence that has helped to elevate him, and of the nation’s capital-driven post-democratic future. These plots diverge and reconvene, tangling endlessly and, at times, confusingly. Yet they present a coherent vision and a coherent argument: the urban metropole would not exist without an economy of vice and unfreedom that is given the backing of divine ordination, but that same economy abuses, traps, and destroys individuals as it plunges society forward, toward a post-democratic reckoning.

For all the apocalyptic gestures that seem to foreclose national or spiritual potential, however, the novel maintains ambivalence about the outcome of that reckoning. Some characters do evince spiritual growth, although they remain trapped in a spiritually fallen world. Other characters appear to transcend class boundaries, although they do so in covert fashion. The novel even offers a vision of the future where class and racial differences have been utterly dismantled, but presents that vision as equal parts enticing and horrific. It is, above all, a future-oriented text. It builds upon its own cynical reading of American history and its own dim view of the nation’s present to ask what the future holds for the polity, the economy, and the moral culture of the Atlantic society.

This ambivalence arises, in part, because instability attends the city’s and the nation’s identifying codes, moral structures, and even geographic boundaries. The Quaker City is closely connected to Westward expansion, to the cotton fields of the Southern plantation economy, and to the slave markets of the Caribbean. In the novel, Philadelphia appears as a central hub of this
Green 424

web of commerce and exchange because, by 1845, Philadelphia had established itself as a central part of a much larger nationalist economic and political project. In addition to Philadelphia’s crucial role as a trading hub, for example, Daniel Walker Howe notes that coal helped Pennsylvania to become “the geographical center of industrialization” during the 1830s and 40s (535). Nevertheless, the circularity of exchange that happens within Monk Hall speaks to a wider exchange culture that maintains the cultural practices of a syncretic and mobile Atlantic economy. This larger society continues to reveal the North American metropole’s cultural, ideological, and economic dependence upon the currents of Atlantic trade.

*The Quaker City* therefore also challenges notions of where religious and cultural practices reside—whether in the Atlantic’s periphery or at its center—by situating fortune-tellers, astrologer wizards, and racially hybrid figures in the very heart of the urban cosmopolitan space of Philadelphia. The city itself is bound to and subordinate to a more expansive Atlantic market. Philadelphia’s status as a liminal space, a transitory route through which people and commodities are meant to pass, marks it as the Atlantic’s frontier, rather than its center, even if the politicians, businessmen, and religious figures who cavort and scheme in Monk Hall mark Philadelphia as an emblematic site of American national formation and market participation.xlvii

This liminal perspective of the city involves dismantling notions of America’s racial, geographical, or class-oriented cohesion. The central characters in *The Quaker City*, like the sadistic, but indisputably clever host, Devil-Bug, the diabolical anti-priest, Ravoni, or the disguised con-man, Fitz-Cowles, are haunting figures of the Atlantic’s heterogeneous past and present, vital fixtures of an Atlantic nationalist space that denies their existence. They demonstrate that, as a result of Atlantic commercial and cultural intercourse, no identity—national, racial, spiritual, or even individual—is fixed or is isolated from the machinery of
finance that takes on spiritual authority in the Atlantic. Fitz-Cowles’ hidden "Spanish" heritage, for instance, suggests an expansive and multidirectional view of history such as the kind critics like Ralph Bauer propose, even as his projects of Westward expansion suggest the deceptive capitalist schemes upon which the continental nation was built (Bauer 13). The novel therefore implies an under-articulated hemispheric history that challenges the Quaker City’s claims to Atlantic centrality and identification.

For example, the hidden creole status of Juan Larode, in the guise of the ostensibly Anglophonic Fitz-Cowles attests to the simultaneous importance and erasure of Spanish conquest in North America. Anna Brickhouse notes this history when she investigates Spanish Catholic incursion into the Chesapeake, as well as North American historicist efforts to cast that history as one of failure, in contrast to English claims to “First Discovery” (212). She writes, “Busy fashioning themselves in chaste and temperate opposition to the ‘all-devouring Spaniard,’ [Anglophonic historians] sometimes recorded in their writings—but did not seem to wonder about or to investigate—the signs that a Spanish settlement had preceded their own colonial endeavors” (191). Yet here in Monk Hall is an occult remnant of North America’s narratively and historically erased past, and an integral element of its Westward-facing future. Lippard uses Fitz-Cowles and, to an even greater extent, the hybridized Devil-Bug to challenge attempts at historical occlusion, along with attempts to center American history on claims to liberationist Yankee Northern heritage.

Monk Hall is a unique space in which the protective cohesion of national borders and national identification can be performed, in order to be challenged. Phillip E. Wegner writes that “if ideology creates the synchrony or place of a given social reality, then utopia marks its potential for diachrony or historical becoming” (18). The nation is always an imaginary utopia
for those elite groups who benefit from its codes of racial, gendered, and classed hierarchy. Wegner insists “Utopia becomes ‘useful’ as a literary form precisely to the degree that it enables its audiences to think through…various scales of personal, cultural, and epochal transition” (31). However, the space of Monk Hall forcibly defies this vision of community and reality. Identities constantly shift, not in transition from one stable identity to another, but in a state of permanent flux. Monk Hall, itself, is a space that allows Lippard to explode utopian myths of the state, and to establish the terms of the dystopia toward which the state rushes. Wegner observes that “space itself is both a production, shaped through a variety of social processes and human interventions, and a force that, in turn, influences, directs, and delimits possibilities of action” (11). Monk Hall is just such a space—a production of a hypocritically debased Philadelphia, and a toxic influence on the society around it. The monks of Monk Hall enter but never leave, even as their debauched immorality spreads like a contagion, from the Hall to the city to the Atlantic trade routes that link the city to the wider world.

And so, the market in which the men of Monk Hall conduct their trades is universally deceptive and captivating: even as they conspire to capture, possess, exchange, and exploit other people—especially vulnerable, white women—the so-called “Monks” of Monk Hall become ever more bound to each other’s possessive leverage. Lippard presents the Monks in a society not of mutual cooperation, but of mutual debt and captivity. Each man holds power over others because of his knowledge of his vice and sin, even as others hold him in their thrall by the same means. Each owns a debt on others, and finds himself indebted to others. Even knowledge—knowledge of the criminality of one’s fellows—has a competitive market value, rather than a socially constructive function.
Like the signers of the *Declaration*, the Monks ensure their election by signing pacts with each other, with the blessing of an approving deity—in this case, the organizing intelligence of the Hall, Devil-Bug—and in the presence of the unfree. They use these pacts to engage in social relations but also to convert themselves, to achieve new identities and, they hope, to ascend to a higher social status, by forcing someone else to fall. As Shelley Streeby notes, "In Lippard's account, the ‘Book of God’ and the ‘Declaration of Our Fathers’ fail to protect the poor and laboring because the rich and powerful exploit, crush, and cannibalize their bodies, and then interpret these two documents in self-serving ways, emphasizing a disembodied soul and an abstract citizen" (450). Conversion and circulation, exchange and commodity equivalence, contract-oriented social election, and the machinations of an interventionist divinity—all of the hallmarks of capitalism as divine providential technology appear in Monk Hall and all are granted the ritualism, and the supernatural and allegorical significance of a universal spirituality held together through commerce. Election, however, becomes entrapment, possession, and loss of agency.

If the model of the binding social contract, upon which Atlantic community was premised, was a sacred compact, this universe’s model is the contract Fitz-Cowles makes with his duped investors. This is only right, given that, at the time that Lippard was writing *The Quaker City*, the market of individual and even spiritual value had long infiltrated the legal and social codes of Atlantic economies and social polities. For instance, Edward E. Baptist singles out one local example when he describes how, “in 1828, Edward Barnes paid eight of the twenty-seven people enslaved on his Mississippi cotton labor camp a total of $28.32 for picking on Sundays, the day of the week when it was technically illegal for enslavers to force field labor”
Barnes’ actions implicitly recognize that both labor and the Sabbath have a certain value within the same marketplace, and, in fact, that labor has greater value than spiritual observance. In the context of this breakdown of Atlantic codes of sociality, morality, and identification, the novel offers up a dark inversion of the economically successful individual, a singular figure who succeeds in the Atlantic economy not because it is pious or trustworthy, but because it has learned to prosper in a world that is violent, decadent, and captivating. In this world, Devil-Bug is the central emblematic figure. Devil-Bug uses the economy to commodify his prisoners and even to commodify himself, on his way toward shedding his humanity almost utterly as the walls of the economic Hall come crashing down around him. He uses it as the mechanism that will ensure personal destruction, spiritual debasement, and national calamity. Yet, in so doing, he also models modes of if not personal survival, then generational advancement. So the focus of the novel is placed firmly upon masters who will soon discover their own enslavement and upon the marginal figures who covertly navigate the fallout from that unsettling discovery.

Moreover, as its plot plays out, Lippard makes clear the fact that the Atlantic economy has not bound itself merely to Christianity, but to an emphatically providential form of Christianity. Even within a Quaker city, the divine hand intervenes materially in human affairs. Moreover, it unites individuals in a universal kingdom and offers demonstrations of personal election. In some cases, that election is surprising—Devil-Bug’s daughter, for instance, experiences rewards that imply her election despite her father’s utter depravity—or ironic—the deceitful Gus Lorrimer thinks himself elect and preserved only a short time before damnation overtakes him. In all cases, the interventionist divine acts through economic forces. At times, it even does so through the unifying powers of earthly market-based vice.
The novel’s treatment of sin as a force that unites all of the branches of society through economic bonds of mutual mastery and submission takes center stage in the passage entitled “Ravoni the Sorcerer.” The mysterious sorcerer, Ravoni, creates a society with all the rituals of religious devotion but dedicated simultaneously to decadent humanism and to captive, dehumanized possession. Indeed, Ravoni’s church invokes slavery quite directly. At one point, he sneers at Devil-Bug, “‘Slave!... How dare you cross that threshold unbidden…to your knees dog! Am I not your master?’” (400). Elsewhere, the text goes further, explicitly announcing a Christological typology for the master-slave relation and for the evaluative logic of the supernatural economy. Even Judas, it seems, had his place in the market. Luke Harvey, a wealthy man reclining in Monk Hall notes, “Judas Iscariot…went and hanged himself after he sold his master…wonder how full the town would be if all who have sold their God for gold would hang themselves? Hooks in market house would rise” (35). The comment links the market to divine reciprocity, finds an avenue for personal profit in the downfall of a sinful society, and notes the pervasiveness of a kind of capitalist exchange that proves spiritually blasphemous and personally captivating. Mastery and slavery are invoked as spiritual conditions rather than as legal states, but these moments reinforce the sense that slavery is the essential model for social relations in this society because religious belief empowers it, because it empowers capitalism, and because capitalism and religion work together as mutually reinforcing elements in the church-market of Atlantic culture and commerce. It is Ravoni who fully dramatizes the supernatural experience of mastery, Ravoni who reveals the occult centrality of slavery in the society of Monk Hall, and Ravoni who lays bare the full frightening spiritual implications of life in the Atlantic market.
The demonic priest is likewise presented as a supernatural embodiment of the economy’s uncanny or occult aspects. Both ethnically exoticized and possibly deathless, the novel even implies that he was present at the signing of the *Declaration* (423). Ravoni suggests a “simple and beautiful” utopian religion of sensualist humanism, but his project, like that of the nation itself, is innately corrupt or, perhaps, even demonic (424). It becomes clear that this is the universalist and syncretic faith of the providential capitalist Atlantic. It is a church of “Universal sympathy” that unites classes “from the slave to the prince” from any and all parts of the Atlantic sphere (447). Truly, this is the new faith that capitalism brings into being. But it is no shelter from divine judgement. Quite the opposite: in fact, it is this religion that, although populist and inclusive, will lead society, irrevocably, toward social destruction and personal possession. This is a vision of the market run out of all human control. It is supernatural and universally inclusive—all are members of the elect of this church—but election here means equal moral and economic hazard along with equal commodification and control.

Lippard’s interest in using the generic codes of the urban gothic to interrogate society at all levels was not confined to *The Quaker City*, although the novel, despite its erratic structure, offers a fully-formed critique of the nation and the market in moral terms. Christopher Looby, for instance, also notes Lippard’s interest in disembodiment as an element of social interaction in his writing for the *Spirit of the Times* periodical. There, Lippard wrote occasionally about a character named Flib who, Looby argues, possesses “a kind of fantastical equivalent to the pretense of disembodiment and depersonalization that any number of scholars of early American literature and society have claimed underwrote the fiction of the early print public sphere itself.” The magical ring that Flib wears “literalizes this self-abstractive function” so that Flib acts as “the otherwise uncredited and invisible functionary of the print sphere” (5). Looby’s contention
that depersonalization underwrote the publishing industry of which Lippard was a part is instructive: the market with which Lippard had most direct contact was one that magnified the impact of seemingly invisible investors and capitalists, and that used the labor of writers without always offering them attribution, name, or personhood, in return. This is the model of market that Lippard places at the center of Monk Hall’s multi-faceted economy. In fact, according to Looby, Flib’s invisible infiltrations expose the corruption at the heart of society’s institutions, including “the box office of a theater…the Court of General Sessions, and the post office…a bank…where his invisibility enables him to gain access to the directors’ room of one of these ‘temples of the Money-God’” (6). All of this anticipates The Quaker City’s presentation of a classed society united through vice, a society in which concealed misdeeds are given the ironic aegis of a social “Money-God,” and a national culture in which money-matters are indistinguishable from political ideology and even occult supernaturalism.

The Philadelphia of the novel is a product of America’s founding as a philosophically and economically capitalist culture, a space that is emblematic of the nation’s embrace of capitalist ideology as a sacred guiding ethos and of its reframing of providential design around market operations. Democracy subordinates itself to the dictates of the market, freedom collapses into despotism, and social interactions resemble captive markets of exchangeable flesh. The market of vice empowers the logic of slave commodification to extend beyond the slave block and to structure social relations between even ostensibly free white individuals in the Atlantic. Readers discover late in the novel, for example, that the novel’s supposed hero, Byrnewood Arlington, seduced a woman who killed herself after becoming pregnant. Moreover, his rise through the novel, from cad to champion, is facilitated by the fall of its villain, his supposed friend, Gus Lorrimer, who essentially does the same thing to Byrnewood’s sister, Mary. Thus, all of the
novel’s characters, whether overtly villainous or ostensibly heroic, are engaged in the business and practices of commodification and exchange. All of them are engaged in the competitive game of exchange capital, their fortunes rising and falling as they transact over other unfree persons.

All men die. Societies die. Death is, perhaps, the only reliable constant in the world of *The Quaker City*. Lippard insists that the self-serving union of the exchange economy with Christian vocation and conversion logic can come only to this conclusion. The society founded upon and enlarged by such values is, according to Lippard, already one that resembles Monk Hall, more than it does any proper church or market floor. It is already a den of competitive, vicious, and unreliably transformative cheats and slave-traders. Looking ahead, Lippard argues, the nation and Atlantic culture more broadly will bear out the results of such a social foundation. It will become a space in which every individual’s unfree status is made plain, in which the few masters work the machinery of both market and church to keep the slaves in chains. It will become a space in which the demonic Devil-Bug, ever less human, ever more sadistic, is the model individual, the man made in the image of a god that doles out suffering for its own pleasure, and is, ultimately, disinterested in who gains or loses so long as the market continues to run.

*The Quaker City’s* many spectacles of violence, and social, political, personal, and spiritual anxiety evidently held a great deal of appeal for Lippard’s readers. As D. Berton Emerson points out, the novel was “reputedly the most popular nineteenth-century novel prior to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” (105). Leslie Fiedler notes that the novel sold 60,000 copies in its first year of publication and continued to sell 30,000 copies a year through the year of Lippard’s death in 1854 (Fiedler vii). David S. Reynolds likewise observes the
“record-breaking pace” with which the book sold (Reynolds xii). In 1845, there was, evidently, a market for these anxious investigations into the moral future of Atlantic national society.

Nevertheless, critics, recently including Emerson, Looby, and Sari Altschuler have taken particular note of the roots and effects of the text’s digressive, even, perhaps, incomprehensible structure. These critics offer a number of explanations for the unusual nature of the text, mostly involving its serial publication history and Lippard’s authorial proclivities, but readers should also consider the possibility that the novel’s unusual structure models its arguments about sociality, the nation, and the moral universe that the individual must navigate. Looby argues that the novel’s seriality creates a “public” readership, a group of people “gathered in anger at the malfeasance he was exposing” (13). This is intriguing, and should come coupled with a recognition that the novel also performs the unifying function of supernatural vice: the novel’s many parts and digressions are unified only by the market within which the actions are bound and by Devil-Bug’s occult interventions into individual and social lives. The novel, then, is also a model of the market-oriented moral and social cosmology that Lippard describes, a social and multi-vocal space held together by common—and commonly debased—goals of economic competition and supernatural mediation.

The novel’s serial publication also offers critics legible evidence for the author’s evolving ideas, particularly about American politics and political activity. Looby, for example, argues that, in contrast to the more fully formed democratic activism of Lippard’s later career, *The Quaker City* is “an unexpected, hectically improvised, and unpredictable production”(3). This can be true, but it should not halt readers from recognizing that Lippard’s critique goes beyond social or political criticism, in order to take on the philosophical assumptions of an Atlantic society and national polity. Lippard interrogates a society that increasingly insists upon the
divine irreproachability of its claims to moral and market liberty, and finds that society both wanting and hypocritical. It is true that the first half of the novel revolves around the drama of Byrnewood and Mary Arlington, targeted by Gus Lorrimer, along with a darkly inverted romantic competition between Albert Livingstone, Dora Livingstone and Fitz-Cowles, while the second half becomes significantly more detached from conventional plot or character, with the prophetic dream that Devil-Bug experiences—probably written during a break in publication after December 1844 and March 1845—acting as a kind of launching pad into more atypical territory (Altschuler 85). However, the inconsistency is not so great as it seems.

The second half heightens and amplifies the anxious moral ambivalence at work beneath the surface of the first half’s more conventional plots. After all, the heroes of the novel are never far removed from their villainous foils. Altschuler’s reading of the novel’s indebtedness to newspaper and penny-paper formats is essential, but it would be reductive to suggest that Lippard merely changes formats or authorial goals as his novel evolves from its original publishing methods (Altschuler 95). D. Berton Emerson likewise recognizes that Lippard’s compositional intentions and faculties evolved as the narrative progressed alongside the author’s politics. He points out that “at decade’s end, Lippard’s pro-labor anticapitalist politics would take on more coherent (albeit still unedited) shape when he came to run his own periodical, also named The Quaker City, from 1848 to 1850” (106). This is one explanation for the messy production and stylistic digressions of the novel. Another is that The Quaker City represents a politics of chaos out of which emerges possibilities for resistance or manipulation, along with a theology that follows a similar course. The novel contains a consistent element of supernatural intervention that gives order to seemingly chaotic events, apparently for its own sake. This market-oriented but inchoate intelligence only becomes clear as the novel moves towards its
conclusion, in which social and personal production and destruction, along with social production and destruction, coalesce around an image of commodification as the ultimate and perhaps sacred event of human life.

The novel, therefore, incriminates economics and politics, American identity-curation and hegemony, racial classification, class-formation, and social interaction in the Atlantic as moral issues and spiritual problems. Fitz-Cowles’ duplicitous nature implicates the process of national expansion as part of a larger Atlantic drive toward power established through trickery and violence. Meanwhile, the twofaced Gus Lorrimer, the ambivalently heroic Byrnewood Arlington, and the women they use as playthings or victims reveal the extent to which the capitalism of the Jacksonian period built upon some of the most troubling economic trends of the post-revolutionary era to evolve into a perverse game of mastery, exploitation, and competition with spiritual and even supernatural effects that invited destruction. The apocalypse glimpsed as a dream in the novel argues for the end result of national and racial identities that assert stability as they disguise their heterogeneity, of polities that pretend to freedom even as they practice slavery, and of democracies that build paeans to virtuous, expansive liberty upon the haunted graveyards of the expended and unfree dead.

**The Original Sin: Slavery and State Formation**

Whether they wanted to admit it or not, Atlantic societies like Philadelphia, were complicit in the reproduction of a slave economy and had either to willfully or ignorantly turn a blind eye to the violence that attended that economy. Edward E. Baptist helps to contextualize this point when he observes that even outwardly antislavery societies were utterly dependent upon the maintenance of the slave economy. He writes, “neither Britain nor any other country that followed [America] down the path of textile-based industrialization could have
accomplished an economic transformation without the millions of acres of cotton fields of the expanding American South. To replace the fiber it imported from American slave labor camps with an equivalent amount of wool, Britain in 1830 would have had to devote 23 million acres to sheep pasture—more than the sum total of the island’s agricultural land” (128). The novel demonstrates the all-consuming power of this market, by demonstrating the harsh stakes of challenges to that power. One of Fitz-Cowles’ commercial partners describes doing business with “a planter from the South,” and, a moment later, relates a disturbing episode in which they “Roasted an Abolitionist…for tryin’ to steal my niggers. Lynched a Yankee, the day afore that, for sellin’ me some Jersey cider for sham-pane!” (Lippard 218). Even beyond the overt invocation of slavery and white-supremacist terrorism, the message of the text is clear: Northern business depends upon Southern slavery, and to meddle with this reciprocal system is cause enough for execution. If this fact offends the sensibilities of Philadelphia’s Quaker-derived Yankees—or even Lippard’s own readers—it is only because they are too blinded by hypocrisy to see their own seat at the banquet being served in Monk Hall.

Indeed, the geography of the city and the architecture of the Hall both reinforce the inextricability of moral and economic practices throughout the Atlantic. Samuel Otter argues, for example, that “rather than departures from the famous grid of symmetry and propriety, [Lippard] represents a foundational instability linked to the city’s political history and contemporary social violence” (169). The city is, at once, highly ordered and confounding, a rigidly structured social and economic hierarchy that functions also as a dense thicket from which individuals may never emerge. Otter also points out that Monk Hall itself is structured around a revolutionary-era foundation joined to the architecture of a decadent new urban style as well as to the Second Bank of the United States (173). The Hall is the literal and symbolic link between the deceptive pieties
of the nation’s received history and its destructive economic culture. Similarly, Otter argues that in *The Nazarine*, the unfinished 1846 sequel to *The Quaker City*, Lippard uses the geography of the city to present “a burgeoning capitalist ‘North’” in contrast to its “iniquitous ‘South,’ bound to slavery and transmitted in the register of the gothic” (186). The city thus contains both the nation’s North-South unity and its disunity, the Northern city’s attempts to alienate slavery and its irrefutable ties to the slave industry.

Appropriately, these symbolic links offer locales in which the business of Atlantic slave commerce can explicitly take place. Discussing *The Killers*, Lippard’s novel, serialized in 1849 and reprinted in 1851, Otter notes that Lippard “points to the continuities between slave traders (the fathers) and race rioters (the sons), situating the events that occur on a discrete Philadelphia night in systems of commerce that extend across the eastern Seaboard and into the Caribbean” (190). Likewise, Luke Harvey, a character connected to *The Quaker City*’s central figures through complicated links of disappointed relations and investment, frankly notes the way that Northern wealth maintains intimate and troubling bonds to Southern slavery. He muses, “Got lots of money—a millionaire—no end to his wealth. By the bye, where the d—l did he come from? Isn’t he a southern planter with acres of niggers and prairies of cotton?” (38). Cotton speculation is an important driver of business in Monk Hall, where businessmen discuss “a large purchase in cotton” made by “the respectable house of Grayson, Ballenger, & Co.” The speculators expect the planter, “Mr. Ellis Mortimer [to] visit Philadelphia, with a letter of credit…for one hundred thousand dollars” (40). That this letter of credit is, ultimately, a forgery, only reinforces the immorality of a system that, nevertheless, maintains centrality in the Northern economy.
Lippard forces the nation’s many transactional social arrangements and sins to coalesce in one social space, the beating heart of a local, national, and trans-national culture grown rotten with vice. Doing so brings attention to the central place that even the least savory elements of the Atlantic economy held in the urban metropole, no matter how much the figures of national power might attempt to deny or distance themselves from them. The metaphorical and literal center of society is not the church or even the trading ship, but the slave block, situated in an urban square that exists not as an open public space, but as an enclosed cell. The grid that Otter discussed as being both central to Philadelphia’s conception as a rationally organized city and, in its intimidating density, a challenge to those claims, becomes, in Lippard’s text, a warren for the sinful, a prison for the condemned.

It is important to add to Otter’s social critique an appreciation for Lippard’s spiritual argument. The Quaker City is a city founded upon religious principles, so the “instability” produced by the links between its past and present also evolve from the city’s moral development as a spiritual space that was, nevertheless, linked to innately immoral economic practices. Neither space, nor history, nor theological strictures can isolate this Quaker society from its links to the broader Atlantic trade of the enslaved.

An antislavery “Quaker City” whose lifeblood is slavery and slave violence, Philadelphia is demonstrative of a national culture that asserts liberty on the backs of the enslaved. Early critics, like Raymond Williams, for example, critiqued Quaker hypocrisy by tallying the profits some Quakers made from the slave trade (Williams 43). Similarly, Brycchan Carey argues persuasively for a slightly altered timeline of historical consideration for the Quaker antislavery movement. Rather than settling on 1758, the year in which antislavery discourse codified into official Quaker practice, he looks much further back to consider the dialogues and discourses
that brought antislavery to the fore. London Quakers had, “on paper at least, banned Friends from trading slaves in 1713 and, when this was ignored, did so again in 1727” (1). Nevertheless, this remained a contentious issue—and one that centered upon the Philadelphia hub of American Quakers. Early on, Quakers recognized that, in order to obey their belief in the “inner light” of all human beings, they had at least to treat their slaves better, but whether to cease the trade or even to protest the trade were separate issues, entirely. This debate took place especially in Philadelphia because there “Quakers came into contact with slaves without being economically dependent upon their labor...there was a higher concentration of Quakers in Pennsylvania than anywhere else...Friends were both the spiritual and secular power in the land…and the withdrawal of the Quakers from colonial government in 1756 in protest over the Seven Years War” (32-33). *The Quaker City* is, therefore, a title both deeply ironic and deeply appropriate. The debate over a city or a community’s involvement in the slave trade was very much alive to Lippard, drawn from a long history of violent discontent over the issue, rather than a mere abstraction about the nature of freedom.

Furthermore, Lippard’s presentation of Monk Hall as an intimate microcosm of the society at large allows his focus upon slavery both to cross the ostensible boundaries between secular and ecclesiastical debates, and to demonstrate that, in a Christian-inflected capitalist cosmology, economic, moral, and class-oriented questions about involvement in the slave economy were inextricable from one another. Otter, for instance, links the riots that roiled the city during the 1840’s to their implicit legal sanction, arguing that Lippard intended to critique the city’s overall support of classist and racist antidemocratic violence (179). In fact, the novel itself produced such an outcry that it almost incited a riot when the Chestnut Street Theater
attempted a dramatic performance in 1844 (180). Lippard therefore does not limit his critique to
the Quakers of Quaker City, but extends it to the whole of post-revolutionary American society.

As Devil-Bug, notes, Monk Hall is home to all of Philadelphia’s elite. In fact, Monk Hall
uses mutual culpability in the slave trade to unite all levels within the nation’s social hierarchy.
“Here in fine were men of all classes,” writes Lippard, “poets, authors, lawyers, judges, doctors,
merchants, gamblers, and –this is no libel I hope— one parson” (56). Lippard unites these diverse
figures in a singular space, allowing Monk Hall to act as the nation in miniature, implicating
every profession, every vocation, and every individual in the interconnected violence, decadence,
and moral compromise of attachments to the Atlantic economy of violence and mastery.

Lippard’s is a philosophical challenge, taking aim at all of the elites that make up Yankee
American society and that have most profited from the union of Christian narratives of virtue to
capitalist social structures. Crucial to this challenge is the novel’s presentation of a providentially
interventionist spirit-world—rather than the more disinterested but individualized God espoused
by the Quakers—as the true motivating force within the mechanisms of Atlantic capital. With
this in mind, he looks at the social edifice that providential capitalism has erected, recognizes the
hierarchical demarcations of class, religion, race, and politics, and implicates everyone within the
society represented by the debauched Monk Hall.

Furthermore, Lippard’s interest in the city’s riotous social upheaval demonstrates the
similarity between class-oriented discontent, anti-abolitionist violence, and nativist white
sentiment that influenced his view of the nation at an uncertain crossroad. For instance, in The
Nazarene, Lippard used the historical backdrop of violence in Philadelphia’s Kensington district
between Protestant nativists and Irish Catholics to demonstrate the way that classist and racist
violence was more complicated than a simple black or white issue (Otter 182). Otter reads this as
evidence of Lippard’s investment in the relative liberties of the white working-class. This is so, but, as Timothy Helwig notes, by presenting scenes inspired or directly evocative of anti-abolitionist violence side-by-side with scenes revolving around violence directed at working-class Whites by nativist Whites, Lippard implicitly suggests the similar condition of white laborers and their enslaved black counterparts (Helwig 89).

_The Quaker City_ demonstrates Lippard’s ongoing concern with the social and personal effects of labor conditions that challenged white working-class laborers to confront the similarity of their condition to that of the enslaved. For example, Lorrimer admits, “The town swarms with such fellows, who will sell themselves to any master for a trifle…they hire themselves to me for the season—I use and, of course, despise them” (Lippard 22). Likewise, during Devil-Bug’s prophetic dream, he sees slavery presented as an element of society that crosses class and racial boundaries: “Then came the slaves of the city, white and black, marching along one mass of rags and sores and misery…so they went trooping by the slaves of the cotton Lord, and the factory Prince” (389). In this dystopic vision, white wage-slavery is no different from black chattel slavery, and the logic of the latter has structured the rituals and hierarchies of the former.

Even if Lippard was more concerned with the plight of white wage-slaves than with that of black chattel slaves, his displacement of the chattel experience onto white bodies, combined with his warnings about the nation’s apocalyptic future, are of a piece with common early nineteenth-century antislavery concerns. Walter Johnson, for instance, writes, "Opponents of slavery argued that the institution should not be allowed to establish deeper roots in a new region of the United States. With slavery, they argued, spread the threat of a rebellion that could destabilize not only the region, but the whole nation" (31). Lippard offers the outcome of revolutionary fears on full display. A society that maintains links to slavery and that limits the
democratic possibilities of even its ostensibly free laborers will come to moral, political, and literal ruin.

Moreover, the resemblance of white wage slavery to black chattel slavery was an ongoing concern for Lippard. Discussing Lippard’s 1853 novel, *New York: Its Upper Ten and Lower Million*, Helwig argues that “Lippard’s inclusion of black slavery as a pressing social ill, and his designation of slaveholders as oppressors, shows how the popular writer linked chattel slavery and the working poor and indicates his growing commitment to end chattel slavery” (89). This is correct, but does not go far enough. Lippard appears just as committed to demolishing wage-slabery as he is to critiquing chattel slavery. And so, his critique is not strictly focused within an abolitionist context, but, instead, demonstrates his critique of culture that degrades, abuses, and dehumanizes any and everyone caught in its race, gender, and class hierarchies. In fact, Lippard was, according to Otter, “uncomfortable with the abolitionist movement,” prioritizing white working-class freedoms from wage-slabery over the freedom of African Americans who, despite the author’s sympathies, remain subservient or disguised characters in the novel (181). And so, Lippard uses the tropes of captivity to articulate the worst fears of white readers: that in a world structured around indebtedness, commodification, and captivity, all persons become potential subjects of captivity, capture, and unfreedom.

At the same time, these scenes of captivity indict American chattel slavery as a production of an immoral, even evil economy that binds American culture just as Monk Hall appears to house men from every class or field in the American economy. The degenerate host of Monk Hall, Devil-Bug, for example, places Mary, Byrnewood Arlington’s sister, into the hands of Lorrimer for the sake of seduction and ruin and claims, “I’ve sold the girl to you for one hundred dollars, and you shall have her” (Lippard 348). *The Quaker City* suggests that captivity
might not demonstrate a violation of social norms at all, but might, instead, exemplify them. In a society in which the real commodification, captivity, and trade of human beings is commonplace, the ostensibly free begin to worry—rightly, according to this novel—that their freedom is contingent and might be stolen or revoked at a moment’s notice. Devil-Bug merely makes explicit what is elsewhere treated implicitly or, in the case of Byrnewood Arlington, treated as a tragic circumstance of class inequality. The women in this novel are used as commodified things, bodies to be sold for an equivalent sum or to be captured for their potential trade value. This projection of slavery onto white bodies performs a dual-function, simultaneously invoking white slavery as a special kind of horror, and critiquing American involvement in the broader Atlantic slave trade.

The arcs of all of the characters in this novel suggest at least partially thwarted attempts to achieve transcendence through evocations of a form of liberty hobbled by the slavery at its heart. Eric Sundquist argues that “revolutionary millenarianism” could exist only in a place where religion dominates society and collapses the distance between it and secular power structures. In the 1800s, he points out, church rhetoric largely adopted liberationist rhetoric and secular spaces secularized religious values (77). Characters like Byrnewood evidently wish to fit themselves into this kind of liberationist narrative and, in some respects, this is the story of Byrnewood’s spiritual redemption and his discovery of his own liberationist instincts. Nevertheless, if an escape from sin and an escape from wage-slavery go hand in hand, none of these characters ever fully do escape. Or, if they do, the novel gives readers enough evidence to understand that they will not escape for long. The “revolutionary millenarianism” that Sundquist describes largely fails, even though the Quaker City quite explicitly “collapses the distance between [divine] and secular power.” Sundquist further discusses the “linguistic and conceptual
tautology at the heart of slavery—what is a thing and what is a person? What is and what is not?” and insists that “Only violence could truly break through this circular dialectic” (182). This novel is rife with violence, but, again, it is self-defeating and sadistic violence. The Widow Smowlet is murdered for a handful of change; Devil-Bug murders simply for the pleasure of it; Byrnewood’s attempts at heroism see him reduced and sidelined for most of the novel; the heroes in *The Quaker City* attempt to use violence to untangle the knot of their own subject status, only to discover that the knot cannot be undone by force.

On the other hand, late in the novel, Devil-Bug and his daughter will achieve what, Lippard suggests, so many among the white working-class—ostensibly Devil-Bug’s racial and class superiors, if still the victims of the capitalist aristocracy—cannot. He will essentially smuggle his daughter, Mabel, into a higher echelon in the racial and class hierarchy of the Atlantic. Still, even this victory comes about through violence, emerging covertly from the ruins of social collapse and death.

**Hierarchies of the Living and the Dead**

The novel treats violence and death as social productions, reflections of the capitalist machinery that relies upon violence to perpetuate the hierarchies of the Atlantic, and death to extend the Atlantic’s logic of mastery and control into the afterlife. As Vincent Brown notes, the division of cemeteries functions similarly to reinstantiate hierarchies of class, wealth and power. Discussing funerary practices in Jamaica, Brown observes, “White funerals enshrined the pursuit of wealth and white-supremacy as society’s first principles.” Moreover, he suggests that the size and location of memorials was used “to signal [a person’s] achievements, aspirations and claims to status through final rites of passing, in the process enacting and affirming hierarchical principles of social value” (78). Furthermore, he notes that “the graduated fees for progressively
more prestigious burial palls and grave lots gave the parish and the church a stake in the
reproduction of social hierarchy” (85). Although Brown is writing about Caribbean chattel
market cultures, Lippard invites his readers to apply the same perspective to the nationalist and
commercial center of republican life in Philadelphia. Violence, death, and the grave are all parts
of a class system that props up the local and national culture, and, as the novel’s characters
engage in violence or find themselves haunted by their violent histories, Lippard presents that
class system as all-inclusive and powerful enough to transcend the boundaries of life and death,
rationality and supernaturalism. Joseph Roach notes that “the cemetery grows on the margins to
define the social distinction of the fictive center: the dead will dwell in separate houses suitable
to their status” (53). Lippard’s novel both demonstrates and challenges Brown’s and Roach’s
readings of the cemetery’s role in society. Lippard recognizes the hierarchies that transcend
death, but, within Monk Hall, collapses the distance between the living and the dead, so that the
living must confront their exploited, sacrificed, or marginalized victims.

Monk Hall is both a staging ground for class and race hierarchy and a haunted cemetery,
a space filled with supernatural reminders of the violence that attends the maintenance of
Philadelphia society. The narrator describes Monk Hall in such a way as to suggest that the
discarded or ruined individuals touched by the economy remain in a kind of circulation even
after their demise. They are the ghosts that Devil-Bug sees; they are Devil-Bug himself, the self-
proclaimed “soul” at the center of the Hall. This novel conflates the graveyard and the market
floor, presenting both as constitutive elements of a society in a fallen state. Lippard describes the
way “it looked just like the house which all the restless spirits in the city, gentlemen and lady
ghosts, who frequent graveyards nightly, and prevail very numerous in Christmas-time, about
the halls of old mansions, would choose for their scene of assemblage, in case the spiritual
fraternity, determined upon a National Convention of all the ghosts in the union; a sort of death s head festival, with the Skeleton-God himself in the chair” (199). In fact, there is no excess in this novel: the people who die represent both their own loss and someone else’s gain. The absent dead, the violence of mastery, and the death that allows this society to perpetuate itself, all maintain presence in Monk Hall. Avery Gordon reminds readers that, “ghosts are never innocent: the unhallowed dead of the modern project drag in the pathos of their loss and the violence of the force that made them” (22). Monk Hall thrives on this “pathos.” It is a home for the economy of souls and sins, standing as a comprehensive market that keeps both in interactive contact. Because death and loss both still have values in an economy, some remnant, ghostly aspect of absent persons remains in circulation. In such an economy, there is no ultimate loss or absence, only the evacuation of persons into their purely symbolic or allegorical epitaph as figures on a balance sheet in the ledger-book that is modern Atlantic capitalist society.

These haunting spirits exert material influence upon the characters in the novel, reasserting the state of presence-in-absence by which the market binds them and keeps them in circulation within Monk Hall. Devil-Bug, for instance, is haunted by the people he has had to harm on his way to his position atop an economic hierarchy of vice. “It’s been there ever since,” he muses, “If I sleep, or if I’m wide awake, it’s there always on my left side, where I hain’t got no eye to see it, and yet I do I do see it” (105). Even Bess, the young woman who helps Devil-Bug, but who is moved by Byrnewood’s sister’s plight to reform and help her escape, recognizes these ghosts, exclaiming “Don’t you see the corse [sic] at your side” (278). Similarly, the murderous Widow Smolby also appears to be haunted by the people she has lost on the way to gain. She recalls “Her daughter, for whom she had mourned so long, was forgotten when she remembered the five thousand dollars stolen from her house that very morning by the Jew,
whose accomplice lay sleeping on the bed” (209). George Handley suggests that readers of Atlantic texts need a poetics of the forgotten or suppressed to account for the historical patterns of eradication in the Atlantic (27). Readers, he argues, need a form of literature that “recognizes oblivion” (27). To recognize such oblivion is also to recognize the social processes that have produced it. Although Handley does not address this link, Lippard does: the mutual co-instantiation of market and spirit-worlds are parts of an all-encompassing haunted Atlantic cosmology. The providential capitalist marketplace itself is the “oblivion” to which Handley refers.

In the case of *The Quaker City*, haunting draws attention to the grim equivalence at the heart of the Atlantic spirit-economy—for example, one daughter and five thousand dollars. Even in their absence, loved-ones retain a value, even if that value is expressed in loss. Noting that “the phantoms of [Devil-Bug’s] murdered victims rose before him,” Lippard reminds readers that the dead are at once the necessary prices paid for advancement in the economy of Monk Hall, and posthuman echoes that remain in circulation in its economy (369). Avery Gordon addresses this lingering presence in other Atlantic contexts, noting that “the ghostly haunt is a form of social figuration that treats as a major problem the reduction of individuals ‘to a mere sequence of instantaneous experience which leave no trace or rather whose trace is hated as irrational and ‘overtaken’’” (20). Similarly, Ian Baucom describes “mourning” as “the determination to exchange some lost thing for a viable substitute [like insurance]” and “melancholy” as “the decision to keep the sense of loss folded in with what remains” (135). These readings should be united, in the case of *The Quaker City*, with a recognition that the culture that Lippard addresses is neither wholly commercial nor wholly spiritual, but both at once, feeding upon the “ghostly” effects of the market to extend its powers, and asserting a
spiritual component to the “exchange” economy. Devil-Bug is, in a sense, mourning his own crimes and, in so doing, both calling forth the violent social processes of the competitive economy he inhabits, and revealing the persistence of commodified subjects in the market’s ledger-book of equivalence. The dead are never really forgotten, only transformed into losses so that another may gain.

**Devil-Bug’s Dream: The American Project’s Self-Immolation**

Lippard explicitly argues that the market that helped to found the nation will also ensure its impending doom. The novel’s primary antagonist, Gus Lorrimer, is, in fact, related to the very beginnings of the nation: “From father to son, since the family had first come over to Pennsylvania, with the Proprietor and Peace-Maker William Penn, this temporary derangement of intellect, had descended as a fearful heritage” (147). Likewise, the con-man, Larkspur, describes the death of the Widow Smolby by declaring her, “Dead, my darlin’, as the ‘Nited States Bank!” (351). The novel is acutely aware of a past national history that binds capitalism to Christianity in an unholy union, the present economic circumstances that, in Lippard’s day, reduced so many to poverty and ruin, and to a potential future for the nation that only builds upon this history to erect a state that resembles Monk Hall itself.

This historical context helps to ground the novel as a critique of the nation’s founding principles and of its current business practices. The Quaker William Penn’s colonialist and spiritual enterprise founded the city that turned into the spiritually-oriented colony that functioned as a center for profit and politics for the nation that Lippard now critiques. Lorrimer demonstrates the preexisting moral inadequacy of this original colonial event. With this background established, Lippard turns his eye toward his present moment, to the Jacksonian drive to dismantle the banks, an act that introduced instability into the market and which, here,
suggests the essential unreliability of both the economy and the lives of the people trapped within it. The novel tells the tale of a missing person, for example, in the context of “the spring of 1836, when this town as well as the whole Union was convulsed with the fever of speculation” (61). Daniel Walker Howe explains this fever, writing that “the unpopularity of banks among working people derived not only from their age-old suspicion of the wealthy but more immediately from the uncertainty of paper money” (382). The distrust and financial instability at the heart of the novel therefore stems directly from the economic upheavals of the Jacksonian period. In response, Shelley Streeby observes that, for Lippard, “capitalism drains the sap and blood from the heart of republican institutions and entitlements, transforming words like freedom and equality into meaningless abstractions and making the U.S. democracy a more murderously efficient engine for powerful exploiters of bodies rather than a vehicle for the transcendence of inequalities. The solution as Lippard imagines it involves world revolution, not the gradual refinement and perfection of U.S. democracy” (454). The Quaker City thus uses its temporal and geographical setting to critique a national culture erected upon a foundation of debt-duplicity and captivity, and to suggest what comes after: the possibility of generative or degenerative social upheaval.

The nation has a fatal flaw, Lippard tells his readers, that has always been present and that will ensure calamity. The racial and class hierarchies upon which the nation was founded and upon which it continues to thrive are so powerful that even their destruction may unleash their obliterative potential. By founding the nation as a capitalist enterprise, and by imbuing both nationalism and capitalism with the spiritual significance of universal religious directive, the founders guaranteed the failure of their democracy as a democracy, in order to ensure its success.
as a capitalist venture, ostensibly favored by God. Lippard uses Devil-Bug’s dream to dramatize the philosophical and even supernatural implications of this trade.

If the novel has a unifying figure it is the demonic Devil-Bug, the operator of the titular den of vice. As such, Devil-Bug wields critical authority in the text, particularly in the form of his prophetic dream announcing the market-driven failure of the United States. Devil-Bug’s dream looks back at the nation’s founding as a capitalist state, and looks forward to its destruction as a result of capitalist practices run out of control. Moreover, this capitalist critique is couched in a supernatural context, implying the mutually constitutive nature of material and supernatural worlds. The ghost in Devil-Bug’s dream shows him that “the lordlings of the Quaker City have sold their father’s bones for gold…blasphemed the name of God…have turned the sweat and blood of the poor into bricks and mortar…they tear down Independence Hall and raise a royal palace in its ruins!” (Lippard 372). This reversion to a royalist dystopia functions as the pivot for the novel’s backward glance and forward critique, suggesting that the sin of founding America as an Atlantic market-driven capitalist state has undermined its essential claim to democracy and will, in the end, return it to its pre-democratic state. All this because the businessmen of the thriving American metropolis “cheated the poor out of their earnings, wrung sweat from the brow of the mechanic and turned it into gold, traded away the bones of their fathers, sold Independence Square for building lots, and built this palace for a King!” (374).

When Devil-Bug cries out “Good folks…Don’t you see yer town is alive with dead!” it is clear that the city, like Devil-Bug, himself, is haunted by a betrayed past and an inevitable capitalist post-democratic apocalypse (377).

Devil-Bug returns to the theme of inter-class and inter-vocational guilt in the breakdown of morality and democratic ideals in the nation, when he exclaims, “America was born, she grew
to vigorous youth, and bade fair to live to a good old age, but –alas! Alas! She was massacred by her pretended friends. Priest-craft, and Slave-craft, and Traitor-craft were her murderers” (388). The parallelism of this list once again asserts the equality found among trades united in the depravity of this stage of providential capitalism’s development: priest, slave-driver, financial traitor, all are alike the central drivers of this sinful economy that has come to define Atlantic society. There are no escape routes—not through the church, the economy, or even sly self-interest. The collusion of all of the worlds of the spirit, of politics, of personal advancement will ensure the violence that will greet the guilty and the innocent—if anyone may be so described—alike. Readers should not take Devil-Bug’s close rhetorical relation of “Priest-craft, and Slave-craft, and Traitor-craft” for granted. The phrase articulates the fact that his society has tightly bound self-interested duplicity to the immoral Atlantic slave trade and given such an economy its literal blessing.

Furthermore, the prophetic dream reinforces the mutually constitutive nature of supernaturalism and economics in the novel as it simultaneously looks back to the biblical injunction against raising false-idols in the book of Exodus, and looks forward to an apocalyptic moment in which the avaricious nature of Atlantic capitalism will undo America’s claims to freedom and democracy. The ghost points to a message written in the sky, lamenting “Wo Unto Sodom,” and announces that “To-morrow will be the last day of the Quaker City. The judgment comes, and they know it not” (378). Raising the specter of an apocalypse like the one that befell the biblical city of Sodom, the spirit promises divine retribution for sins that have, throughout the novel, taken on an explicitly capitalist nature. When that retribution does come, when Monk Hall is destroyed, readers see again that it has been the society in miniature, an economy of vice produced by the union of capitalism and supernatural belief in its processes, collapsing around
itself. D. Berton Emerson argues that the novel “grapples with alternative political possibilities of regenerated, localized democracy, a politics that shared the spirit of ‘city democracy’ yet imagined possibilities beyond these labor-focused efforts” (104). However, this novel is a critique of a culture that is equally economic and spiritual, so these “imagined possibilities” extend beyond the politics that Emerson describes. The novel functions here as a jeremiad, warning of sinfulness, finding a biblical typology with which to compare society’s present circumstances, and arguing for renovation through social revolution.

However, Lippard leaves the nature of that revolution open to interpretation: whether it is something to be feared or embraced is, to some degree, open for debate. When the apocalypse does come, the novel warns or promises that it will destroy the class differences that have empowered and doomed society at the same time, but it will also unleash indiscriminate violence and anti-democracy. “What cared the Poor if they too shared the ruin?” asks the novel, “Was it not triumph to see the rich and corrupt dragged down from their high places—was it not triumph worth all the deaths in hell?” (383). The possibility of this class-blind destruction acts as a kind of class-revolution, which plays out Devil-Bug’s mutually constructive and destructive urge, dismantling class hierarchies but demonstrating a willingness to tear down all of society in order to do it. In so doing, Devil-Bug undermines eighteenth and early nineteenth-century notions of what freedom means altogether.

To this point, freedom has come at the cost of subordination, premised upon the ideal of mastery and subservience. Moreover, freedom has depended upon demarcations of the unfree. Lisa Lowe notes that John Stuart Mill “offered a precise hierarchy of states—for example, the ‘savage’ is above the ‘slave,’ the European above the ‘savage’”—to characterize a good government as that which deduces what is necessary to progress and improvement for a
particular people” (114). Lippard and Devil-Bug violently push back against this hierarchical perspective. However, at the same time, Lippard critiques the nationalist directives of both the corrupt banking schemes he describes and of the Jacksonian efforts to break up the banks as a means of violent nationalist populism. Howe, for example, directly links the bank crisis to nationalist expansion and genocide in such a way as to underscore the full and troubling scope of the characters’ plans to invest in Western expansion, tied to the failure of the banking system, as well as to the national desire for violent domination. Howe writes, “Jackson’s Bank War…Indian Removal and the Maysville Road veto…set the pattern for Jacksonian Democratic support for continental imperialism and white-supremacy” (386). Fitz-Cowles, the novel’s characteristically fraudulent debt speculator, presents his scheme of western expansion as both a commercial and nationalist project. He insists, “The plan is feasible…but there’s a rough desert to pass through before we reach the mines. Plenty of Mexicans and Texans—not to mention the Indians and wild beasts” (Lippard 169). On both counts, commercial and national, this is a dishonest scheme, and its inclusion in the novel suggests Lippard’s sense that the nation’s militarist and commercial expansion projects are equally debased. They may extend the nation but, in so doing, will only extend the flawed ideology of debt capital, trickery, and violence that underwrote America’s foundation and has always underwritten the nation’s expansion.

The novel’s violence, therefore, presents the social revolution that Lippard imagines as retribution for social and economic sins, even as its grotesquerie and uncontrollability imply the potential dangers of class revolution. Emerson notes that “subsequent moments in the sequel show less confidence in the reform potential of national rhetoric” (122). Lippard’s novel thus both exacts revenge upon the architects of social and economic instability and criticizes the Jacksonian urge to rashly and violently seek revenge. In the church of the mysterious,
blasphemous sorcerer, Ravoni, for example, Lippard offers the spectacle a man who was “the President of the Bank that broke,” executed as part of a ceremony that doles out retribution to the worst among the sinners against economic justice (405). Lippard describes the way that “the legalized Robber lay beside the wretch whom he had plundered. The well-fed Bank President who not ten hours past, had refused the starving Mechanic one solitary dollar, now lay beside the victim of his lawful fraud…Say, was not this the justice of God?” (413). David S. Reynolds explains the historical context surrounding this moment. He writes, "In 1837 most of the nation's banks suspended specie payment, refusing any longer to redeem their paper notes in hard money. The great depression of 1837-44 put nearly a third of Americans out of work at a time when hundreds of banks were failing and when some leading bankers were being tried for criminal activity" (xxxiv). The effects of the violent retribution dramatized in the novel are therefore ambivalent, both socially leveling and uncontrollably destructive. How could it be otherwise? For the culture Lippard describes runs on fundamental moral ambivalence, meting out liberty bound to captivity, justice bound to violence, and revolution bound to destruction.

The dream, therefore, is not strictly destructive, and certainly contains potential signposts for how to move forward. Emerson, for instance, argues that the novel abandons “an initial reliance upon national principles such as ‘Liberty of the Press’ and symbols like Independence Hall that would provide remedy for the social, economic, and political wrongs on display in Local Philadelphia.” He continues, noting that “In their place, the sequel grapples with alternative political possibilities of regenerated, localized democracy, a politics that shared the spirit of ‘city democracy’ yet imagined possibilities beyond these labor-focused efforts” (104). The novel, suggests Emerson, is innately radical, eschewing belief in national politics to embrace localized political possibilities, all while recognizing the innate rot in social structures.
“Shuffling the seduction plots to the background and discarding faith in nation scaled practices,”
writes Emerson, “the latter numbers of *The Quaker City* spotlight a different set of bodies,
particularly those of the dismembered and haunting variety.” Emerson explains, “these register a
complaint against political power divested from material bodies in local spaces and rerouted to
distant sites of national governance” (107). As is so frequently the case with Lippard scholarship,
this analysis focuses upon Lippard’s political intentions. In this, the reading is deeply instructive.
However, Lippard seems to have had more on his mind. He critiques not only a “divested”
political system, but also an economic and philosophical system that privileges disembodied
authorities and empowers those authorities to make utilitarian use of individuals as dehumanized
things within a market-oriented universe.

Many critics have claimed that Devil-Bug’s dream pulls back the curtain on Lippard’s
own political beliefs (Reynolds xl). However, if the dream represents Lippard’s antislavery and
even anti-capitalist politics, it does so in highly ambivalent fashion. Instead, the dream is a vision
of Atlantic—particularly United States—society both produced and undermined by its own
hypocritical claims to liberty. It is not only a critique of the nation’s commitment to unfreedom,
but rather a recognition that the nation would never have come into being at all without
committing its original sin. Emerson argues that “the narrative betrays no evident concern with
expansionist politics,” but Devil-Bug’s dream implicitly suggests otherwise (113). America is an
unfree state, the spirit demonstrates for Devil-Bug. To imagine it as anything else is to imagine
its obliteration. And so, the future that Devil-Bug prophecies can only ever be both productive
and destructive, a terrifying harbinger of post-democratic dismantling of social norms, as well as
a potential release from the grip of those same norms as forces of classed, raced, and gendered
captivity, and as producers of slavery.
Devil-Bug can only imagine liberty brought about through the leveling powers of violence because the world he inhabits lives and breathes violence. The market runs on competitive violence and the apocalypse Devil-Bug envisions is the natural outcome of that system, a process by which he gains the ultimate advantage by destroying the system altogether. True to Lippard’s forward-looking, but ambivalent, anxious perspective, even the process by which false hierarchies fall does not guarantee the liberation of the souls captivated by capitalism’s imprisoning mechanics. Instead, the logic of mastery and hierarchy by which Atlantic capitalism instantiates itself, a logic that has been taken up as both a nationalist credo and a sacred gospel, may be so all-consuming and powerful that its collapse may only ensure that all shall alike experience perdition.

**The Economy as Black Mass**

Both the uncontrolled violence of even a circumscribed class rebellion and the recirculation of the dead throughout the economy bring readers to Ravoni’s church, where the abstraction and depersonalization of human beings for the sake of the market becomes horrifically literal. For example, when Ravoni revives the woman who has killed herself after Byrnewood’s seduction, she is not reborn as a class-liberated independent soul; rather, she becomes Ravoni’s undead servant. The raising of the dead here is presented not as a promise of future reward, but as a vision of a zombie apocalypse, explicitly reactivating tropes of white female captivity in this urban gothic milieu and with more apocalyptic significance (Lippard 452). All might be reborn, the novel suggests, into this new universal society, brought together by trade and vice, but they will be reborn as captive subjects to their masters. Each individual is potentially the enslaved commodity of another market participant. The zombie, the revived woman, evacuated of her personhood and made into a mere commodity to be traded, possessed,
exchanged, is the vision of the future that Ravoni’s Atlantic cult promises. Such figures are the “willing slaves of his magnetic glance” and become valued commodities in a bank of power, sex, and wealth (527).

The undead perform, in race-swapped fashion and as fantasy, what was a disturbing reality for so many black women throughout the Atlantic slave economy. Such women were treated as things to be traded and treated as if non-human. They were to be bought and sold, put to work, exposed to sexual exploitation, and discarded. Baptist points out that even poetic descriptions of figures like the “Sable Venus,” who captivated the hearts of white writers and planters, implied, through obscuration, the marketplace of sex, violence, and labor that satisfied the lusts of white masters, and helped to reproduce the needs of the slave economy. He writes of a poem written by Jamaican planter, Bryan Edwards, in the 1790s, that a “depiction of the Sable Venus as a goddess who lures white men into sexual bondage is nonsense. The poem is about buying slaves. Edwards was not ruled…he could buy each of them. Or all. After purchase, taking, consuming, could replace longing” (236). Ravoni’s walking dead are the true embodiments of the white working-class’ nightmare: white bodies subjected to the same logic, made utterly subservient, despite their racial classification, and made to haunt Monk Hall as reminders of humanity denied.

Their dehumanization also suggests the multivalent experiences of transactional equivalence in the novel. White can be exchanged for Black; freedom can be exchanged for slavery; the living can be exchanged for the dead; everything has a price and a commodified equivalent in the material and supernatural market of Monk Hall. These equivalent conversions, coupled with acts of commodification, help the market to reproduce itself. Individuals can be equated with things open to transaction, and identifying elements of race, nationality, even life
acquire a particular value that can be exchanged within the market. These transactions are the engine by which the economy of vice and commodified flesh achieves the velocity necessary to move forward and, the novel argues, to arrive at its prophesied apocalypse.

Sex and sexual longing were always inextricable from mastery, transaction, commodification, and possession in the Atlantic marketplace. Ravoni’s church only amplifies the drama of commodification endemic to the Atlantic market’s many theaters of mastery and, particularly, of sexual exploitation. As Altschuler notes “enslavement, erased lineage, and threat of rape together suggest the conditions of black slavery” in the drama of Mabel who is first taken captive by Ravoni, then sold to Parson Pyne who intends to rape her and then sold again to Fitz-Cowles (98). Thus, as is characteristic of so much of the novel, Lippard houses this troubling fact in the bodies of white women, creating an anxiety among his white readers that becomes more personal and direct, perhaps, than even their potential antislavery sentiments. This too responds to the presence of unfree bodies among ostensibly free Philadelphian society and commerce. Baptist writes “American religious reformers had begun to identify nonmarital sexuality as a major social problem, in part as a reaction to the way the increased mobility of young adults brought new temptations into their lives. Commercial quickening turned New York and other cities into hunting grounds for prostitutes looking for traveling businessmen, and vice versa” (237). Partially because of society’s elements of captivity and mastery, and partially because of its intense and hastening mobility, throughout the urban and plantation Atlantic, sex became a market unto itself. Lippard reframes this reality as a blasphemous supernatural event in order to underscore the broad threat that the market of flesh, whether free or unfree, posed to the morality, the soul, of the nation.
Byrnewood’s seduction experience likewise underscores the ways in which class and commodification entwine with hierarchies of sex, spirituality, and race in the novel, in Philadelphia, and in the nation. Lippard writes, “A poor girl, a servant, a domestic...these are fair game for the gentleman of fashionable society; upon the wrongs of such as these the fine lady looks with a light laugh and supercilious smile” (417). Byrnewood’s sister’s own seduction and ruin are treated as a tragedy elsewhere in the novel, yet this woman’s is treated as both her own fault and Byrnewood’s mild indiscretion. The difference is stark and presents a rather radical attack against the social double-standards that follow class and economic inequality. David S. Reynolds observes that "Capitalism, in Lippard's view, governs not only politics, justice, religion, and the press; it also controls the deepest aspects of human relations, most notably sex" (xxxvii). At the same time, Otter argues that the novel demonstrates the way that democratic potential is violated in Philadelphia (166). And so, the spiritual potential of the city and of the nation are both violated through engagement with debased and debasing forms of forced transactional sexuality. Any reading of the nature of capital or democracy in the novel must also contend with the full scope of Lippard’s critiques: politics, economics, liberty ideology, class, and sex are all implicated in the nation’s moral future.

Lippard’s critiques of the sexual exploitation taking place within labyrinths of power such as Philadelphia expand beyond the local or even the national. The sexual exploitation of women, for example, was central to the reproduction of the Atlantic slave economy. Baptist for instance, graphically notes the way that masters seeded and reproduced crops, people, and people as crops, throughout the slave system. He writes, “The white entrepreneur will risk many things, but not the chance that this hybrid kernel’s own seed will fail to run true and leave his production anemic in a year of high prices.” And so the planter “fucks his wife…fucks the sixteen-year-old
light-skinned girl from Maryland, also bought with last year’s crop,” and, through violence “fucks the men too” (215-7). These readings are indisputable, as well as bluntly shocking, frankly confronting readers with the realities of sex as a form of violence and as a tool by which to exert authority. However, to fully understand how and why sexual capitalism gains so much power, readers must see it as Lippard does, as part of a debased moral and spiritual ethos that has come to define the economic and religious culture of the nation and of the Atlantic of which it is part.

As the novel’s various seduction plots remind readers, bodies and the desire surrounding the use of bodies was an essential element of the Atlantic economy and of its dependent societies. Baptist, for instance, writes, “Slavery permitted unchecked dominance and promised unlimited fulfillment of unrestrained desire. That made the behavior of entrepreneurs particularly volatile, risky, profitable, and disastrous. Then, in the 1830s, as white people, especially men, tried to build southwestern empires out of credit and enslaved human beings, they sought out more and more risk. This behavior planted the seeds for a cycle of boom and bust” (234). As the novel establishes the competitive game of sexual exploitation played by Lorrimer and Byrnewood, or when it later turns to the supernatural harem overseen by the decadent priest, Ravoni, it underscores the way that passion created an economic market to be fulfilled and to the fact that bodies provided the sources of fulfillment. In this way, the possession of people—especially women—is a simple matter of supply and demand economics. Nevertheless, it is also a matter of spiritual values, a question of the essential nature of human beings. Are they mere things or are they individuals with souls and minds? The text argues that the Atlantic economy, and its basis in a system of human captivity and transaction, presents only one logical conclusion
to the question. Individuals can only fight, and often fail, to resist the pressure to be commodified.

Sex, like politics or land accumulation, is part of the competitive nature of avaricious capitalism, as well as a vehicle for the transmission of vice. Thus, the body, the soul, and the pocketbook are all equally presented as conflated sites of moral and economic struggle. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse note that the women caught up in these transactional games "begin as wordless objects in an exchange among men, but...evolve into bodiless subjects of writing. In so doing, they distinguish an earlier, apparently more primitive aristocratic culture from one in which every literate individual matters" (25). Just so, the women in this novel are both the commodities over which men vie and the embodiments of a system that uses debt, contract, and duplicity to commodify and victimize all of its captive subjects. They are both embodied commodities and disembodied signifiers of value and wealth. However, Armstrong and Tennenhouse do not address Lippard’s use of conflated material and supernatural logics within the Atlantic economy and culture to sustain this dual state of objectification and abstraction. This is crucial: in The Quaker City, individuals’ bodies may be for sale, but their souls are part of the bargain as well.

Ravoni’s enchanted harem literalizes the mutual coinstantiation of bodily captivity, personal commodification, and spiritual possession. The captivity of Ravoni’s victim’s is total. He possesses their bodies, minds, and souls, all at once. If this were not unsettling enough, Ravoni’s power to capture and kill wayward businessmen, as well as his evident mastery over Devil-Bug, suggest the way in which this sort that supernatural captive experience can cross lines of class, race, and gender. Because society is established upon a foundation of literal commodification and control, it has the potential to extend the logic of dehumanization, violence,
and transaction beyond the confines of race-based chattel slavery. It is this anxiety that Lippard exploits when he shows society transforming into a diabolical and universal economy of supernatural possession.

The ritualism of Ravoni’s acts of mastery also underscores the importance of occlusion to the function of the economic and spirit worlds of the providential capitalist economy. Providence and the market both function in ways that remain hidden or indecipherable to the individuals they affect. In the church of providential capitalism knowledge is a valuable and limited resource and knowledge of the market of God only ever offers flickering glimpses of the divine market’s motivations and ends. Stephen Greenblatt notes the way that these forms of mastery are instantiated through contract language that one party necessarily cannot understand and, therefore, cannot answer to. If they cannot answer, he argues, then they abdicate their right to dispute (60). Greenblatt writes only of the colonial encounter experience, but Lippard’s novel invites readers to see the way that the inscrutability of economy, religion, and economy wedded to religion also perform similar feats of control in the post-revolutionary Atlantic society. Ravoni’s church offers a similar experience to that of Greenblatt’s colonizers and colonized. In fact, readers might keep Greenblatt’s colonialist critique in mind as they consider Lippard’s contention that society was always, from the first moments of Atlantic encounter, through its republican revolutions, and toward its market-driven future, premised upon rituals of mastery designed to entrap without ever being fully understood. Ravoni’s supernatural possessions are the colonialist acts of capture and command being carried out throughout the Atlantic world. Seen through this lens, readers can reconcile the contradictions of Ravoni’s church, to understand how it can appear humanistic even as it thrives on dehumanizing control, or how it can promise paradise while exercising bloody violence.
Ravoni’s universal church is, at least in part, a simulacrum of the urge that energizes the nation and the broader Atlantic society to conquer, dehumanize, command, and claim possession of the bodies, minds, and souls of colonized persons, by way of essentially cloaking its intentions to do so in ritualistic language, including the ritualistic language of humanism or liberty. As Emerson notes, “In spite of the emancipatory rhetoric…Ravoni is more demagogic than democratic, his magnetized followers described as fanatics who blindly follow his bidding” (130). In fact, the “emancipatory rhetoric” might also be read as a failure of the nation’s liberationist impulses to carry through on its promises. Ravoni, for example, invokes “slave” as a term of scorn to indicate and perhaps to instantiate his magical mastery over Devil-Bug, highlighting the master’s power to announce and to enforce his own power and liberty by assigning unfreedom to his subjects and, particularly, to raced and classed others (400).

The indecipherability of this system obviously generates philosophical puzzles for the individuals caught up in it. Struggling to comprehend the deliberately incomprehensible nature of this world, Gus Lorrimer transforms his own doubts into a tense meditation upon the instability of life. He wonders “Life? What is it? As brilliant and as brief as a champagne bubble! To day a jolly carouse in an oyster cellar, to-morrow a nice little pic nic party in a grave-yard. One moment you gather the apple, the next it is ashes. Every thing fleeting and nothing stable, every thing shifting and changing, and nothing substantial!” (Lippard 24). The intentional indecipherability of the market has come to define reality itself. It is not meant to be understood, and so it presents instability to the observer and to the market participant. This indecipherability is so powerful that it bleeds from the market to overtake the processes of nature, reality, and, one might argue, the text as well.
Time, for example, seems both elastic and highly controlled in the novel. The first passages of *The Quaker City* establish a prophetic temporal endpoint, but time appears to stretch and bend. Within Monk Hall, moments last indefinitely, days pass in moments, and Devil-Bug’s dream takes him far into America’s post-democratic future. All of this results from Lippard’s contention that the nation is not a stable community but a porous anti-community, a hall in which the only relations are dishonest ones, and the only connections part of larger games of debt, mastery, and possession. Such a system warps reality itself, in order to produce the outcomes desired by the ordering providential intelligence that orchestrates events. This makes personal, social, national, philosophical, and even narrative structures difficult to discern for the characters in and the readers of the novel, even if it does not make providential economic operations at all random. To live through them is to experience confusion, but these operations suggest an underlying authority working through the market, an authority with such power as to transcend rational boundaries and to produce supernatural experiences.

The Fortune-teller who appears in the earliest sections of the novel similarly draws attention to the hidden orchestration of events in the world of Monk Hall. Heretofore friends, Byrnewood and Lorrimer, seek one out in order to know their own fortunes, as much out of fun as out of a real desire to gain an upper hand in the economy and in their games of seduction and abuse. The fortune-teller informs them that, “This little room has seem them all within its walls, begging from the humble man some knowledge of the future!” (27) She goes on to predict “I tell ye, by the Living God who writes his will, in letters of fire on the wide scroll of the firmament, that in the hand of the dim Future is a Goblet steeped in the bitterness of death, and that the goblet one or the other must drink, within three little days!” (30). Early on, Lorrimer believes he has bested his friend, insisting, “‘you will at least admit, that I have won the wager—’…as he
fixed his gaze upon the death-like countenance of Byrnewood Arlington” (99). Prophecy, in this case, is a game of competitive advantage, not unlike the capitalist world the characters inhabit. However, like all things in the market, prophecy can offer glimpses of providential arrangement, but resists full communication. Events in the world mirror the logic of the market: they are both legible to those with special and advantageous knowledge, and difficult to discern by the ordinary participant in the economy. When the prophecy does finally arrive, it is actually Lorrimer who dies, not Byrnewood (567). This ironically comes after Lorrimer uses the occasion of his seemingly successful destruction of Byrnewood to comment upon the sadistic but remote modes of influence inculcated by the market interactions of their society. He notes, “I employ neither force, nor threats, nor fraud, nor violence! My victim is the instrument of her own ruin without one rude grasp from my hand, without one threatening word, she swims willingly to my arms!” (127). Far from refuting the power of prophecy in the text, the reversal reveals the ineluctability of predestined events, alongside the individual’s meagre abilities to read or predict such events for his own gain. Humans may, for a time, think they’ve mastered a system that was set into motion before their arrival or think they’ve discerned their own elect security, but they will, in the end, fall before the system’s own needs and relentless demands. Nothing, it seems, is more powerful or more confounding than providence and its marketplace.

The indecipherable market is not the only manifestation of the supernatural or explicitly Christian-oriented elements of the Atlantic economy to be found in the novel. Far from it. For example, Devil-Bug’s jokes imbricate commodity fetishism and grace in the same value system. “There is one thing cheap—very cheap” says the Reverend Dr. Pyne at one point in the novel. “And that’s mackerel!” responds widow Smolby. Pyne answers, “No, sister, you mistake me. I meant grace, sister, grace. And talking of grace, sister, if you have any small sum about you,
which you would like to invest in a Heavenly Bank, here is an opportunity which should not be slighted” (203). This is, in the world of the novel, one of only two ways to imagine the supernatural sphere: as either a market—such as Ravoni’s—or as a bank. Taken together, Lippard presents a spiritual culture in which providence acts in secret according to the logic of market transaction, and grace is a commodity to be acquired, stored up, or spent.

The novel also reinforces its depiction of providence as a force that intervenes in the world, but that remains indecipherable or unpredictable to the individuals who live in the world, when it engages with a jeremiadic interpretation of social sin creating fearful spiritual, economic, and personal peril. Lorrimer, planning to seduce Byrnewood’s sister and murder Byrnewood by dropping him through a trap-door, muses, “Why man, death surrounds you in a thousand forms and you know it not. You may walk on Death, you may breathe it, you may drink it, you may draw it to you with a fingers-touch, and yet be as unconscious of its presence, as a blind man is of a shadow in the night” (103). Devil-Bug, in his customary role as both dark jester and sharp-eyed critic, uses the common language of “falling” to describe the fates of Byrnewood and his sister. He says to himself, “The brother fell in that ‘are room, and the sister fell in that; about the same time. They fell in different ways though. Strange world, this” (123). This event, which Devil-Bug describes as a “bargain,” unites the concepts of the fallen state—the society of Monk Hall is, undoubtedly, a fallen one—with that of the fallen woman, and channels both events through the fall of a heretofore sinful man, Byrnewood (123). Byrnewood’s fall suggests a metaphor that should be read as, at once, social and spiritual. Otter attends to the social dimensions of this fall when he writes, “a slight gesture or the weight of a heel might result in catastrophe” (176). Otter, however, does not address the, perhaps, more obviously evocative nature of Byrnewood’s fall: social and economic falls can also implement or might, in keeping
with providential theology, constitute evidence of un-election, damnation. All of this is backed and initiated by Devil-Bug and Lorrimer’s financial pact. So, the economy is the vehicle for damnation and, eventually, for Byrnewood’s salvific election. It is a system of rising and falling, debt and credit, vice and virtue, all existing alike in balance on the moral and economic ledger sheet that Devil-Bug keeps and maintains.

In this sense, Devil-Bug, of all people, is the novel’s demonic god, the intelligence operating the gears of the economic and literal machinery of the moral system that is Monk Hall. At one point he insists, “Hur-ray for Monk Hall, say I! It’s the body, I’m its soul!” (299). If Monk Hall is a synecdochic stand-in for the economy at large, then Devil-Bug too is a stand in for the economy’s motivating intelligence. Yet, like whatever providential intellect governs the market, he keeps his own methods and goals hidden, and always seems to fill the stores of his own personal bank, whether his clients do or not. Indeed, Altschuler reads the pit at the bottom of the fall “not merely as a Gothic device and repository of dead bodies, but, quite literally, as the location of Devil-Bug’s repressed memories” with which the character eventually reckons (92). In this way, Monk Hall projects Devil-Bug’s increasingly complex psychology even as he embodies his society’s increasingly debased spiritual culture. The successful figure in this society of captivity and control is not the master or the boss who acts in the open, but the secretive subject who seems to be doing the bidding of others, but only to achieve his own ends. Devil-Bug is hardly the novel’s hero, but he is its central organizing figure and the person who navigates Monk Hall’s economic and architectural corridors with greatest ease and comfort. He is, in Lippard’s view, the man for the modern moment.
Zombies and Bugs: Hybridity and the Prototypical Atlantic Figure

Devil-Bug, along with his underlings, Mosquito, and Glow-Worm, all also embody the dehumanization that follows their subject status, although whether that dehumanization is liberating or destructive remains to be seen. Their very names speak to their non-human aspects. Because they are made to serve, they lose their humanity. David S. Reynolds notes that “The cumulative effect of Lippard’s posthuman images is to summon up a materialist world in which people, animals, and things are put on the same level” (51). He also observes that “Animal comparisons in the novel are often made in a posthuman spirit of stripping humans of anthropocentric specialness” (54). This logic applies as well to the men who do business in Monk Hall, who lose their humanity, their particularity, and their identities, as they exchange their freedom for wealth. Devil-Bug makes these dehumanizing practices explicit as his constant exposure to Monk Hall’s debasing practices seems literally or at least textually to deny his humanity.

And yet, his dehumanization seems to complete the process by which he comes to embody the market itself, in all its sharkishness, its secrecy, and its disruptive Atlantic hybridity.

Devil-Bug is written as a physically hybridized figure, composed of features that suggest the racial, cultural, and even physical syntheses that the Atlantic market inculcates. Lippard describes him as “a strange thickset specimen of flesh and blood, with a short body, marked by immensely broad shoulders, long arms, and thin distorted legs. The head of the creature was ludicrously large in proportion to the body. Long masses of stiff black hair fell tangled and matted over a forehead, protuberant to deformity” (51). According to this description, Devil-Bug is less man than “creature,” an animal with ape-like features that express his inner dehumanization. Lippard takes this description further, calling into question Devil-Bug’s status
as a white man or as a man at all. He describes his “flat nose with wide nostrils shooting out into each cheek like the smaller wings of an insect, an immense mouth whose heavy lips disclosed two long rows of bristling teeth, a pointed chin, blackened by a heavy beard, and massive eyebrows meeting over the nose” (51). Only a few moments later, Lippard will describe Mosquito and Glow-Worm in similar terms with faces “marked by a hideous flat nose, a receding forehead, and a wide mouth with immense lips…two rows of teeth protruding like the tusks of a wild boar…a sharp pointed chin” (52). Nevertheless, it is this very hybrid status that allows Devil-Bug to navigate Monk Hall so effectively. Devil-Bug is both servant to all and servant to none, a liminal figure on the outskirts of a white-supremacist society who embodies white business culture’s mastery and submission all at once. He is in a constant state of conversion, never settling into any mold, racial, human, or otherwise. Devil-Bug is an embodiment of all of the Atlantic system’s most unsettling traits, the Hegelian struggle for mastery incarnate, the racial hybridity and interrelation made flesh, the mobile individual who appears to have come from nowhere and to appear everywhere.

Devil-Bug’s hybridity thus speaks to the racially and culturally mixed nature of Lippard’s metropolis, which is also presented as both a source of anxiety for characters and readers wedded to the Atlantic’s hierarchies of race and class, and as a potential escape from the restrictive limits of those hierarchies. Chad Luck addresses this last point when he writes, “We might just as easily conclude that Lippard’s Urban Gothic form…reflects and refracts the same overarching anxieties about proximity and heterogeneity that animate the narratives themselves. That is, Lippard’s narrative juxtapositions, his shifts of tone and perspective and his omnivorous intertextuality all enact in formal terms the proximity and heterogeneity of city life” (133–4). Even if the nation remains committed to divisions between and hierarchies of gender, class, and
race, the providential divine, the spirit operating the gears of the economy and the society within the walls of the community instantiates a hybrid society when it binds cultures together through capital exchange. Devil-Bug is a kind of vanguard for this experience, and one that is open to interpretation. His hybrid status suggests the connective nature of Atlantic society, and points towards its increasingly interconnected future. Just as Devil-Bug’s dream suggests both the collapse of limiting hierarchies and the destruction of the Republic as a whole, the hybrid figure represents both a source of classed and racial fear and a promise that the borders of class and race might prove open to dismantling.

Dehumanization in the novel is, therefore, a double-edged sword, an operation of control that suggests the overwhelming power of the Atlantic society organized around codes of mastery, as well as a haunting reminder of the human beings caught up in the Atlantic’s commodifying trap. Walter Johnson points out the vexing logical puzzle of dehumanization when he writes, "historians have generally concluded that the writings of [slavery's defenders] 'dehumanize' African-American slaves. This formulation has the virtue of signaling their repudiation of [these] views, and of reasserting a normative account of humanity as the standard of historical ethics: these are not the sort of things that human beings should be allowed to say about one another.” He observes that “a troubling problem remains...countless...slaveholders and racists in the history of the world were fully able to do what they did and say what they did, even as they believed and argued that their victims were human” (207). This is an important point, and one that, perhaps, helps to explain Devil-Bug's hybrid status. He is both subhuman and fully human—subhuman because lack of humanity is the only possible excuse for his treatment as a slave, his exclusion from normal social relations, and his instrumental status within an economy of moral decrepitude, but human because he is a stark reminder that the violence and moral degeneracy of
Green 471

Monk Hall, or of Philadelphia, or of the United States, or, indeed, of the entire Atlantic cultural economy impacted and implicated not things but people. In this light, his narrative arc makes more sense. He can be seen as a villain by those who wish to see him as such, but he performs heroic, or at least semi-heroic actions as the text goes on. He is the humanity denied by slavery and the humanity that haunts slavery, all at once.

Lippard emphasizes the fearful aspects of this hybridity not because he fears interracial or inter-class sociality, but because he knows that it represents a threat to the racist, classist, geographical and constricting codes upon which his society has structured its own national identity. In fact, Devil-Bug’s shifting hybridity also underscore society’s market-modeled, but uneasy balance of seemingly opposed social elements and signifiers. Altschuler argues that “the media history of The Quaker City is inextricable from its history of race” and that transforming the “once-black Devil Bug into his protagonist” required Lippard to move away from a text modeled upon journalistic generic conventions to one that was less realistic but more focused on hybridization and ambiguity. Indeed, Altschuler explains that Devil-Bug’s visage and language also evolve and take on more complexity as his inner-life becomes more multi-dimensional (80). She goes on to note that Devil-Bug’s racial signs transform as the text’s antislavery themes become more pronounced (97). Nevertheless, his hybridity remains. As a result, if the text is read as a whole, the reader is confronted with hybridity that becomes a sign of humanity just as potent as it is a sign of sub-humanity.

Nor is this hybrid signification ever fully resolved. As Altschuler herself notes, “Fitz-Cowles assumes the narrative weight of Devil-Bug’s moral and physical blackness, when the final installment reveals him to be not only dark-skinned but more importantly a tool in the popish plot of his father, “a Mexican Prince!” (100). It is true that Devil-Bug evolves throughout
the text, becoming more complex as well as more central to the plot. However, just as representations of race and media were always central pillars of the serialized text, so too was the concept of hybridization, admixture, and contamination. A reading of the text as a moral and philosophical critique as much as a political broadside will reveal that moral ambivalence, a hybrid morality composed of both vice and virtue in exchangeable balance within a market-oriented social space was always the narrative’s central preoccupation.

Class and racial instability also gestures toward the social heterogeneity that the Atlantic market’s flux produces, and demonstrates the dual allure and anxiety produced by geographical, and ideological links that unite cultures throughout the Atlantic. The racially ambivalent figures that reside within and around Monk Hall embody, for instance, the self-colonization that Jennifer Rae Greeson identifies in narratives set in the American South (250). Here, the Southern gothic other is literally internalized. The other is within, both threatening and instrumental to the workings of society. The geographical, ideological, racial, or hierarchical other is apart from and a part of the social and economic interactions of the nation, carrying out and orchestrating events in occult fashion.

As the text lifts the veil on the secret and often hybridized operators within the market, it also reemphasizes the performative aspects of both racial and class identification in the nation. If Lippard implies that figures like Devil-Bug hold the keys to operations within the American sector of the Atlantic economy and culture, then he also exposes raced, classed, and even gendered presentations of mastery to accusations of a kind of hollow insecurity. Along similar lines, Eric Lott argues that the racial performances of the minstrel stage were deeply ambivalent expressions of both desire and revulsion, sites of repression and recognition of the cultural other, bringing the African American culture into an American mainstream, even through mockery, that
were also central to American class formation throughout the 19th century. Lott writes, “On the one side there is a disdain for ‘mass’-cultural domination, the incorporation of black culture fashioned to racist uses; on the other a celebration of an authentic people’s culture, the dissemination of black arts with potentially liberating results” (17). Devil-Bug comes from an earlier gothic tradition, yet he, in essence, performs minstrelsy in order to simultaneously engage in class formation and to subvert class and race hierarchies. Lippard presents him as a racist caricature in order to exercise a latent desire to shatter the codes of racial distinction. However, such an exchange has a high price: Devil-Bug must become an utterly debased, scarcely human figure, must sink ever further into depravity, to find his own sources of autonomy and to purchase his daughter’s upward mobility. If the white middle class is premised upon its ostensible status above the laboring unfree classes, Devil-Bug’s descent into dehumanization insists that positions of mastery are negotiated and tenuous. They are not innately guaranteed and must be purchased. Devil-Bug essentially turns himself into the figure that must be reduced and made captive in order for another to rise above wage-slavery.

If the text is interested in interrogating racial performance and hybridity, then its presentation of masculinity and femininity should also come under scrutiny as both racial and class-oriented performances. Lott, describing the gendered erotics of black-face minstrelsy notes that, “the construction of masculinity in a capitalist dynamic where power in the body substituted for power in the workplace was obviously only partly transgressive...Cohen has suggested that working-class men live their class subjection by dissociating themselves from the structural position of their labor and assuming ‘imaginary positions of mastery linked to masculine ‘pride of place’” (130). Lippard’s novel does contain elements of racial minstrelsy and burlesque—particularly in the dialect spoken by Devil-Bug and his underlings, Mosquito, and Glow Worm.
However, more than this, it contains masculine figures striving for mastery and feminine figures attempting to escape commodification. That they frequently fail reveals the grim joke of the novel’s other burlesque. The men who use masculine performances of sex and camaraderie to insist upon their own mastery are really someone else’s captives or subordinates, and the women who resist seduction or maintain feminine innocence rarely escape debasement or even involvement in violence for long. The characters in this novel are destined for some form of captive unfree labor. Their attempts to assert mastery through performances of hierarchical identity—men over women, white over black bodies—are, therefore, performances only.

Devil-Bug seems to understand the way that exchange logic makes him subject to indebtedness and unfreedom in a way that the other characters do not. And so, ironically, he approaches his subject status with clearer eyes. He attempts to rescue his daughter from Ravoni’s death cult and offers himself as a slave in exchange for the will and papers that can ensure her financial liberty. Ravoni counters by offering gold in exchange for the girl (458). When Devil-Bug submits to indenture to pay for his daughter’s freedom, he acknowledges that the anxiety that produced minstrelsy has real valence: the white-supremacy that has permitted a white working-class to imagine itself as free is simply laughable in a text in which every character, at some point, must submit to another.

**An Escape from Monk Hall**

In the end, Devil-Bug’s self-destruction might offer the only form of transcendence available in the novel. Paul Gilroy notes that, while Hegel is right to place the master-slave relationship at the center of modernity, “he wrongly assumes the slaves acquiescence to bondage over death when, in fact, the slave experience forces us to consider the slaves’ preferences for death as freedom over any form of unfreedom” (63). Although not specifically figured as a black
racial subject, Devil-Bug’s self-orchestrated demise might suggest a similar kind of resistance displaced. He feels the grip of Monk Hall’s inescapable commodification and enslavement tightening around him, and, essentially, opts out, through a violent and haunted suicide. In fact, Reynolds argues that “Toward the end of the novel, Mosquito and Glow-worm accomplish a kind of metaphorical slave revolt, when Devil-Bug, arranging his own suicide, has them push the boulder that crushes him” (47). Similarly, Altschuler rightly announces Devil-Bug’s suicide as a moment in which he “lays himself open to his own demons and announces himself as the story’s main event” (93). Timothy Helwig explains the stakes of this undertaking when he writes, “In The Quaker City Lippard represents the virtues and hopes of the northern white and free black working-class through the racially ambivalent representation of black characters…the novel’s foremost voice of working-class protest belongs to the sardonically witty Devil-Bug” (105). Devil-Bug’s unresolved hybrid status and his suicidal escape allow him to function as a multivalent vehicle for protest: he clearly challenges the parameters of class in the text and in the city, and also potentially experiments with the limits of resistance to race logic. He even challenges the audience’s expectations of heroism and villainy, good and evil. His violence, his manipulation of other characters, and even the covert but ultimately victorious passing of his daughter into the white middle class are all different forms of race, class, and spiritual rebellion.

Furthermore, Lippard also uses Devil-Bug to make room for the possibility of self-destruction in exchange for another’s class-transformation. Mabel, Devil-Bug’s hidden daughter who covertly makes her way up the social and economic ladder, suggests the ways that a liminal figure might challenge rigid class structures. The corrupted priest, Parson Pyne, claims to have adopted the wealthy merchant, Livingstone’s, daughter—with the intention, evidently, to abuse her—in order to gain access to Livingstone’s fortune. However, she is, in fact, Devil-Bug’s
daughter. As a result, her inclusion into the business class by means of a will allows Devil-Bug’s legacy to achieve the anti-aristocratic and even potentially anti-racist social mobility before which the businessmen of the novel tremble. Devil-Bug gloats at the prospect of “Old Devil-Bug’s daughter among the grandees o’ th’ Quaker City!” (556). The event allows the low-class Devil-Bug to covertly undermine rigid class structures, even as he enforces them elsewhere in order to control and to manipulate others. By means of violence and duplicity, Devil-Bug finds a way to succeed in the market, to become upwardly mobile, even if that mobility is displaced onto his daughter. Devil-Bug’s trick is, like most of the novel’s depictions of hierarchical ascension, linked to liberty achieved through elevating despotism. Here is a character actively, albeit secretly, attempting to ascend the ladder of class in his society. To do so, he will force others into submission or tear down the pillars of his society for his own gain. In this way, Lippard implicates the mythology of upward mobility within Atlantic capitalism’s deviousness and violence. Devil-Bug’s use of the mechanisms of violent control and his subversive infiltration of hierarchy is not merely an aspect of his singular characterization in the story. Rather it is a natural outgrowth of a society built upon the hypocrisy of freedom gained through slavery, and advancement achieved through trickery and violence.

Mabel’s ascension therefore reinforces the market-oriented form of transcendence in the novel and invites readers to interrogate the theology of election premised upon economic success. Indeed, Devil-Bug’s discovery of his daughter’s survival and rise even pushes him to invoke a more benign divinity than has existed anywhere else in the text to that point. He exclaims “I do believe there is—a God—that’s a fact!” (243). Again, however, it is important to note that, if Devil-Bug is correct, than the divine has presented itself only through market functions and market-oriented supernatural interventions. God acts through dreams, prophecies,
and miracles—yes—but only for the sake of producing a particular market order and of repositioning individuals within that market and its economic ladder. God acts through the market and the hierarchies of the market reflect divine intention.

Although death punishes Devil-Bug’s worst offenses, his sacrificial submission and demise, along with his strategic victory through Mabel over his society’s class boundaries, earn the reader’s conditional sympathy. He is certainly demonic, but he is also the figure through which Lippard most directly expresses his frustrations with society’s and with capital’s various hypocrisies and vices. In his introduction to The Quaker City, Reynolds observes that "Unlike the hypocrites in mainstream society, Devil-Bug does not wear a false face" (Quaker City xl). If this is so, then Devil-Bug’s amorality is partially excused in the text because of his commodification. Moreover, his unclear status as either the master of Monk Hall or the servile facilitator of the Monks’ misdeeds also allows him both to embody and to rebel against his society’s inhibiting structures. Discussing Margaret Garner in the context of Toni Morrison’s Beloved, Avery Gordon notes that “as a slave woman she was legally property or chattel and thus, according to the law, she could not be tried for murder because only a person could have committed such a crime” (160). The same might be said of Devil-Bug here. As a person, he commits murder and is punished with death. As a thing, he cannot commit murder, so he can sell himself in order to purchase his daughter’s class advancement. As a hybrid of person and commodity, he can arrange an ending that is both obliterative and transcendent.

**Conclusion**

The novel closes after a fittingly ambivalent moment, with a personal escape that only portends the ultimate inescapability of the market, and the inevitable victory of commodity logic in the nation and in the Atlantic. After his final defeat, all that is left of Lorrimer is a portrait—a
fetishized object overflowing with significance that haunts Byrnewood and makes the centerpiece of an altar (Lippard 574). Bess, redeemed from her role as Devil-Bug’s assistant, commands Mable, Devil-Bug’s secreted daughter, and Mary, rescued from Lorrimer, to observe the portrait that is all that remains of Mary’s erstwhile seducer. Bess orders the other women to “kneel, and thank your God that after the long night which has darkened your life, the day has dawned at last!” (352). In this moment, communion becomes a recognition of the power of the novel’s debauched transactions, Lorrimer’s purchase of Mary becomes a blessing, and Byrnewood’s violently transactional rescue of his sister makes Lorrimer into a debased idol—fitting for a debased social, national, and spiritual world. At the same time, Lorrimer becomes a lifeless fetish object, while the women remain subordinate captives to his memory and to his influence. Emerson argues that “the revised focus from women’s bodies to more generalized bodies in parts” that occurs as the novel progresses, “indexes the consequences of the predominance of abstracted national politics divested from material bodies.” He continues, “The numerous spectral bodies register a desire to reanimate the more radicalized and contingent form of democracy that was embraced by everyday people in the revolutionary era.” In fact, Emerson argues, “the anxiety of white male patriarchy in the early numbers is rechanneled in the sequel into an alternative vision of materialized democracy that pushes back” (124). This is an intriguingly optimistic reading of the text, and it, in fact, helps to make sense of the potentially liberating obliteration of Devil-Bug in the novel’s final chapters. However, the anxiety that Emerson discusses never fully dissipates. In fact, if the characters achieve renewed materiality, they do so as Lorrimer does, reconstituted as fetish objects that remain locked within a universe of commodification.
In the end, Lorrimer offers a vision of providential capitalism at its most complete. He persists as evidence of a process, both sacred and ordinary, in which the logics of the market and the supernatural become one force of nature that uses commodified individuals to enlarge itself. Moreover, within this market-oriented universe, mobility and captivity have conspired to instantiate community, but at the price of numerous and often violent sacrifices. In fact, Bess, here a moral authority, will not live to reach the ultimate conclusion of the novel, becoming, instead, a sacrifice used to cleanse herself of her own prior sins. And so, even if some characters find their way toward a kind of personal liberty, all remain, to some degree, expendable commodities in the market. All of these processes are given the aegis of a sacred moment. For good or ill, the economic processes into which these characters have been and remain locked are the machinations of an interventionist divinity that acts through the market upon individuals who have only circumscribed power to resist or even to understand its whims and needs.

This final insistence upon the inextricability of unfreedom from freedom is only appropriate, given that *The Quaker City* brings the anxieties of the Atlantic marketplace home to North American shores with particular emphasis upon the fears of the white working and business classes. These classes were, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, engaged in work that either acquired their hierarchal position against the implicit subservience of a black underclass or that actively traded in enslaved bodies or commodities that had been cultivated by unfree men and women. Even in the absence of direct relations with the slaves and slave economies of the Atlantic, the business practices narrated in the novel produce anxieties about the tenuousness and reversibility of freedom.

The rhetorical and ideological conflation of spiritual and economic value systems that Lippard here critiques strategically presented colonial society and national expansion as divine
ordinances. However, even as the logic of covenant and contract united spiritual, political, and capitalist directives, the societies founded upon that union were always less stable than they cared to admit. Meanwhile, the figures that such societies attempted to resign to the margins—figures like Devil-Bug—were, in many ways, more representative of their Atlantic age than the pure white, Christian, colonialist polity that early American historians, politicians, and writers imagined. These were individuals who recognized that the logic of conversion was both spiritual and economic, and used this knowledge to position themselves within an Atlantic world that was polyglot, shifting, and perilous. Despite Devil-Bug’s apocalyptic dream, his daughter’s ascension offers a slim measure of hope that capitalist mobility might allow the progeny of a hybrid figure to ascend. Yet that hope is deeply ironic. Devil-Bug’s family’s victorious smuggled ascent only comes with the promise of Atlantic society’s ultimate destruction.

With all of that in mind, Lippard insists that the logic upon which the edifice of providential capitalist trade and culture was erected deserved the apocalypse that Devil-Bug sees coming. The conversions of identity, the acts of commodification, the procedures of mobility, and the directives to capitalist expansion that mark the business and social life of Atlantic cultures all achieve monumental power when granted the auspices of a universal spiritual culture. They also become inescapable, and the disturbing implications of their logic become frightful potential outcomes for any and all individuals who must interact with the Atlantic market of souls and commodities. The nationalist and providential capitalist society that readers encounter in *The Quaker City* is defined by its imposition of occult intelligence, mobility, and exchange in the Atlantic, but there is no guarantee that these are forces for good. In fact, the novel suggests, the reality of the Atlantic providential capitalist market may be, at best, amoral and, at worst, immoral, dehumanizing, and evil.
The fears of dehumanized labor that Lippard narrates will persist and proliferate as the Jacksonian period moves into the antebellum, postbellum, and globalized future. Even generations later, while discussing zombies in Haiti in the 1930’s, Zora Neale Hurston would, like Lippard, remark upon the prevalence of such fears and would discuss the ways in which the process of zombification turns an educated intelligent person into an unthinking beast of burden (Hurston 181). What she describes is the anxiety of captive labor transformed into religious theology. What she describes is the future that Devil-Bug glimpsed made real.

The globalized future will bring even more economic uncertainty, even more racial anxiety, even more disruptive attacks against the sanctity of the body and the spirit as the market grows ever more powerful and all-consuming. Thus, Lippard proves a kind of herald for a broad Atlantic fear over the personal effects of supernatural providential capitalism. He demonstrates the way that processes of transformation, sacrifice, and captivity will continue to persist, even as nations and cities become more established. He reveals, in fact, that the processes of Atlantic displacement and admixture, the experiences of mastery and submission, and especially the realities of personal and social commodification remain active, even as Atlantic communities attempt to occlude their heterogeneity and embrace a hegemonic myth of a national future.

The future that Lippard predicts reveals the anxiety hidden in projects and narratives of providential Atlantic cultural expansion. Over the altar of Atlantic commerce, providential spirituality and capitalist exchange met and married. As they did, they brought humans into the universal church of a divine market and revealed the mind of God to humanity through economic transactions. But God was manipulative. God demanded sacrifice. God was a ledger book of profit and loss and the hand that recorded the balance. In the Atlantic market, providence and capital clasped one another in the bond that forged modernity, and individuals and communities
were left to navigate the treacherous waters produced by their union. Lippard suggests that perhaps the only way to escape this seemingly inescapable grasp would be to destroy the providential capitalist Atlantic system altogether. That the subjects of his concern persist long after the publication of his novel admits that providential capitalism successfully foreclosed other social possibilities. Providential capitalism would, as time and history wore on, prove more formidable than even Lippard imagined. The engine that drove revolutionary, post-revolutionary, and even early nineteenth-century Atlantic cultural development would also prove the engine, the mind, the ghostly hand to arrange and to conduct the future.
Conclusion
Providential capitalism, the marriage of a guiding divine will to capitalist commerce that empowered, connected, and defined Atlantic societies throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was, at once, productive and destructive, ennobling and humiliating, expansive and limiting, transcendent and dehumanizing. It was, at best, unsteady waters over which to connect the philosophical, ideological, political, and economic edifices of Atlantic cultures. It was a similarly perilous environment in which to establish national polities, or spiritual or local communities. Nevertheless, during the Atlantic’s revolutionary period, and from the late eighteenth and into the early nineteenth centuries, societies attempted to assert fixed national identities, to embrace national inheritances, or to pursue expansive futures through Atlantic providential capitalist philosophy. They used it to justify hegemony, to codify social hierarchies, and to reproduce a specific form of capitalism premised upon a form of economic election. Even so, the people who lived in the societies linked through Atlantic trade and exchange remained ever at risk of being washed away by the same Atlantic currents that brought those societies into being. The national home, the cities and capitols that writers, politicians, and citizens increasingly attempted to grasp, remained elusive, ever-shifting, and precarious. By midcentury, for example, the antebellum period and the Civil War would reveal the fissures that lay at the heart of the supposedly unified national identity that the United States asserted during its revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods. The signs of instability were always there for those who cared to look. Assertions of Yankee settlement and inheritance were always arguments for a specific economic ideology rooted in a concept of imbricated value and success as election. The metropolitan home was always really just a part of the Atlantic’s centerless periphery, and the national identity was always marked more by a latent hybridity and mobility than by racial, national, spiritual, or economic stability.
If Charles Brockden Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn, Or, Memoirs of the Year 1793* taught readers anything, it was to remain suspicious of the national character, even at the moment of the nation’s birth, and to maintain ambivalence about America’s political, economic, and spiritual future. George Lippard’s 1845 novel, *The Quaker City, or the Monks of Monk Hall*, demonstrates where that uncertainty would lead. Shelley Streeby notes that "If Lippard rejected New England Puritanism as the source of an American self, neither did he embrace a middle-class identity. In fact, he was quite hostile to the very idea" (447). Streeby’s reading is valuable, but Lippard’s hostility was not only directed toward middle-class American identity. It builds upon anxieties glimpsed in texts like Brockden Brown’s to attack the value system upon which the Jacksonian middle-class was erected—a system that conflated capitalism and moral virtue, but that was actually debased, and made decadent by the grim logic of capitalism as a spiritual philosophy, and of spirituality and nationalism as capitalist projects. This was a value system developed along Atlantic trade routes and brought back to the Atlantic’s urban ports and national centers as the Atlantic economy expanded and asserted its universal influence. Worse yet, Lippard argues, the nation, founded upon the essential fact of violent demonstrations of power, and enabled by the endless deceptions of market capitalist competition, was rooted in and defined by its worst sins. It was, therefore, destined not for improvement and perfection, but for harsh judgement and damnation. Lippard examines his providential capitalist present, sneers at its supposedly pious past, and looks ahead to its apocalyptic future.

Both *The Quaker City* and *Arthur Mervyn* expose the anxieties of the white working and business classes in ways that illuminate the hierarchical ruptures that would announce a new turn in Atlantic history. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the arrangements of power and liberty that emerged after the revolutionary period and organized the expansion of early
nineteenth-century Atlantic societies could no longer contain the explosive tensions of racial, classed, and national division that operated as the dark mirror of national paeans to expansive providential capitalist liberty. The business relations, the spiritual articulations, even the ideologies of the liberal self established and cultivated through the strict maintenance of the borders of freedom and unfreedom, election and damnation could not hold. And so, societies throughout the Atlantic experienced another period of violent rupture and reorganization.

However, these tensions were always visible to those who cared to look. And so, these narratives revolve around the experience of captivity within a city that acted as a potent symbolic repository for the nation’s claims to liberty and advancement. Lippard, like Brockden Brown, subverts these claims. Despite the mobility that organizes the trade-oriented urban gothic societies that serve as the settings for each of these novels, individuals find themselves bound ever more tightly by debt commitments and manipulations. Eventually the literal dramas of captivity that motivate the plots of these novels allow the abstract experiences of debt captivity to become personalized and frightening experiences of possession, loss of agency and power, submission, and indenture. These texts thus underscore anxiety over the liberty to be found in a society that runs on captivity, domination, violence, and exploitation. This expressive disposition, at full bloom in these urban gothic texts, is the grimmest of all potential outcomes of the post-revolutionary period’s commitment to providential capitalism.

Providential capitalism emerged from the post-revolutionary moment as one of a number of competing ways of seeing, and ways of producing, a modern and interconnected Atlantic world. Critics have long recognized these competing modes of understanding and maintaining political and social power. Hannah Arendt, for example, noted that “Locke discovered that labor is the source of all property…Adam Smith asserted that labor was the source of all wealth…in
Marx’s ‘system of labor’…labor became the source of all productivity and the expression of the very humanity of man” (Hannah Arendt 101). Moreover, Arendt recognized the nonmaterial explanations such theorists offered for the production of economic and political expansion. She writes, “Just as Marx had to introduce a natural force, the ‘labor power’ of the body, to account for labor’s productivity and a progressing process of growing wealth, Locke, albeit less explicitly, had to trace property to a natural origin of appropriation in order to force open those stable, worldly boundaries that ‘enclose’ each person’s privately owned share of the world ‘from the common’” (111). Indeed, she recognizes the seemingly supernatural dimensions of these theories of social organization when she writes, “the Platonic god is but a symbol for the fact that real stories, in distinction from those we invent, have no author; as such, he is the true forerunner of Providence, the ‘invisible hand,’ Nature, the ‘world spirit,’ class interest, and the like, with which Christian and modern philosophers of history tried to solve the perplexing problem that although history owes its existence to men, it is still obviously not ‘made’ by them” (185). Her observations are astute. Providence and the invisible hand are but two names for the invisible forces acting in the marketplace.

However, these are not simply abstract notions of how an economy evidently emerges from the disparate actions of self-interested parties. Rather, for so many individuals, social groups, and authors around the Atlantic, the invisible hand was a force to be taken literally: the guiding mechanism of an interventionist providential god. Arendt never pursues the full conflation of providential theology with capitalist ideology that took place in the post-revolutionary Atlantic. Nor does she pursue either the material productions that arose from that conflation or the many narrative interrogations of that conflation that attest to the personal and social prerogatives and anxieties that persisted in its wake.
Politicians who conflated spiritual and economic value systems did so for selective and strategic reasons. Doing so presented colonial society and colonial expansion as divine ordinances, and allowed writers and politicians to make sense and productive use of the buffets of Atlantic history and trade. Providential capitalism, a true marriage of market-oriented capitalism to providential Christian value systems, thus proved both more productive and more durable than any distinct value system in the Atlantic. However, even as these thinkers used the logic of covenant and contract to unite spiritual and capitalist directives, the societies they attempted to demarcate were always less stable and more syncretic than they cared to admit. The figures that these social architects attempted to keep to the margins, figures from the real Venture Smith, to the fictional Devil-Bug, emerged in writing and revealed themselves as, in many ways, more representative of their Atlantic age than the pure white, Christian, colonialist polity that early nationalist historians, politicians, and writers imagined. These were individuals who recognized that the logic of conversion was both spiritual and economic, and used this knowledge to position themselves within an Atlantic world that was polyglot, shifting, and perilous.

As a result, when writers like Benjamin Franklin used the twinned language of virtue and profit to plant and expand a nationalist identity, his words remained dogged by the heterogeneity he denied. Franklin’s ideal American—clever, self-sufficient, virtuous, and economically ascendant—resembled Franklin and the other American founders less than it did a figure like Olaudah Equiano. Equiano, who saw his status as a commodity as an opportunity to trade for freedom, who saw his economic subordination as a call to personal transcendence, who saw exchange as election, was the true figure of personal Atlantic identity.
Other similarly landless groups, represented by figures like Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, John Marrant, or Briton Hammon, used their mobility to create alternative communities at sea. Like Equiano they looked to the two most important facts of their life—their labor and their spirituality—to attempt to navigate the treacherous waters of freedom and unfreedom. That some succeeded and others failed reveals the reality that even Equiano sought to elide: the economy of commodities and souls was always designed according to the logic of the ledger book. Every gain was matched by a concomitant loss. Every upwardly mobile individual had a downwardly mobile counterpart, plummeting beneath the waves of Atlantic commerce or languishing on the outskirts of spiritual and economic election.

As white writers, like Royall Tyler and Richard Henry Dana, observed their own positions in the Atlantic economy, they recognized this reality too. They recognized that the nationalist and racial supremacy proclaimed by national compacts or implied by writers like Franklin was a rickety ladder upon which to hope to climb. When they fell, they fell hard, and discovered the harsh realities of subjugation, abuse, and commodification that had always been present in Atlantic providential capitalist society. They found that anyone—Christian, “pagan,” white, black—was subject to mastery by someone else. They found too that the spiritual election promised by the most optimistic providential capitalist writers really meant ownership within the market. If they belonged at all, they belonged to the mass of suffering laborers so frequently rendered invisible by proclamations of grace, predestination, and transcendence. They found that their bodies and their souls had value in the marketplace, but only as much as could be traded at any time and for any thing.

Writers like Poe and Melville also observed this fact and constructed confounding metaphorical dramas to match the confusion and disturbance that attended the reality of their
commodity status. People were things, they discovered, things to be traded, converted, consumed, and sacrificed at the altar of the market. In the destruction of the body or the soul, these writers discovered not that there was no God, but that God addressed the world with cold, even cruel calculation. As they observed their subjection in the market, these writers and their characters looked for signs that their souls had value and discovered, to their horror, that the answer was yes. Yes, human souls have value, just as meat and rum have value. In this world of Atlantic commerce, the communion and the sacrifice of the body was repeated again and again in profane concessions to the all-consuming power of the market itself.

With all of that in mind, writers like Brockden Brown and Lippard insist that the logic upon which the edifice of providential capitalist trade and culture was erected would become something of a trap. The conversions of identity, the contracts, the performances of mobility, and the directives to capitalist expansion that mark the business and social life of Atlantic cultures all achieve monumental power when granted the auspices of a universal spiritual culture. They also become inescapable, and the disturbing implications of their logic become frightful potential outcomes for any and all individuals who must interact with the Atlantic market of souls and commodities. If, by divine right, one individual may or must profit or rise, another may or must fall. Similarly, if conversion promises election, it can also threaten captive damnation. Finally, if the essential basis of social obligation and nationalist identification is the covenant-oriented contract, it may not be wholly clear whether an individual will profit from the contract or itself victimized by it. The nationalist and providential capitalist society that readers encounter in texts like *Arthur Mervyn* and *The Quaker City* is defined by its imposition of occult interventionist intelligence, mobility, and exchange in the Atlantic, but there is no guarantee that these are forces that work for the good of the individual.
These possibilities are critically important, because they represent the way one arrangement of power, one philosophical engine came to dominate thinking, politics, and strategies and approaches to expression in the post-revolutionary Atlantic. The marriage of a specifically providential mode of religious theology to a specifically exchange-oriented mode of capitalist ideology overpowered other potential arrangements of power and community. It erected the social and economic frames that defined race, class, gender, and community constructions, as well as dictated the course of individual human lives. At the same time, it offered individuals and communities the expressive means to understand their positions within an economic and philosophical culture that was emergent in the post-revolutionary period and that would only become more powerful in the future.

Far more than any distinct political, expressive, theological, or literary force, providential capitalism generated the post-revolutionary self. Providential capitalism operated behind Benjamin Franklin’s plucky but socially embedded citizen. It offered Olaudah Equiano material rewards as well as the means by which to understand his place in society and in history. At the same time, it delimited the borders of community for scores of diasporic black Atlantic writers, as well as for maritime white writers. When writers like Herman Melville and Edgar Allan Poe examined the situation of the individual within society, they did so in the context of a society that was adamantly exchange-oriented and not only spiritually motivated but providentially inclined. When urban gothic writers considered the individual’s relationship to the larger Atlantic economy or interrogated the future that that relationship might generate, they interrogated the often sinister implications of providence and capital acting in tandem upon the individual.

At the same time, this philosophy was the key driver in the production of post-revolutionary Atlantic culture. Just as it situated the individual and allowed the individual to
examine and, perhaps, to comprehend its position in an Atlantic society, it allowed local, colonial, and national polities to arise, to expand, and to assert identities in and around the Atlantic. Hegemonic expansion, nationalism, social hierarchies, even colonial experiments were all premised upon the logic of a divinely ordered marketplace and of a market-oriented divine will. Post-revolutionary society simply would not have taken the form that it did without the simultaneously generative and constraining logic of providential capitalism.

Modern readers must recall that these ideas emerged from a moment of profound instability. The post-revolutionary moment both upended and codified political and social organizations. It both revealed the assumptions upon which prior social arrangements were premised and set the stage for future social structures. The colonial age gave way to the revolutionary period, and the age of nationalism and then of global hegemony emerged from the post-revolutionary era. As Enlightenment thinkers competed over political philosophy, Atlantic societies promoted and were sustained by an economy that they argued was divinely ordered and directed. At the same time, theologians reckoned with a definition of providential divinity that was economically active. This was more than capitalism. It was capitalism enmeshed with and directed by a providential hand. Autobiographies and fictions return humanism to this experience. They show modern readers the personal, local, and social experiences of life lived in a society structured by this ideological-theological marriage.

And so, providential capitalism also underwrote the evolution of Atlantic expressive genres, as well as the material links of literary cultures in the Atlantic. The autobiographical self came into existence in the context of an economic and divinely instructed cosmology of meaning. The market offered signs and symbols, and writers read them through the lens of both providential theology and market capital. Questions of freedom, race, and nationality that
appeared in texts that took white captivity or national expansion as their themes were posed in the face of sometimes inscrutable divine will operating through the market. Writers explored the supernatural or uncanny experiences of life in a system in which individuals were transformed into commodities, allegories, exchangeable elements in a market-oriented universe they could hardly hope to comprehend. They developed the urban gothic form in direct response to and using the language of a society that blended economic participation with a theology of an interventionist but inchoate spirit-world.

It is important to recognize the scope and evolution of this experience, for it truly was an evolving social force in the Atlantic. Just as Atlantic cultures transformed through transaction, so too did theology, economy, and individuals within societies. Nor was this event limited to the post-revolutionary era. Certainly the disruptions of the post-revolutionary Atlantic empowered or even necessitated the development of this philosophical and expressive disposition, but it would also go on to instruct later nineteenth-century political, economic, and expressive movements as well. In fact, it would go on to inform the twentieth century and to underwrite the individual and transnational experiences of our modern era. The mythology of a divinely ordered economy justifies the capitalist economy’s existence and persistence. It helps to sustain nationalities and social modes of identification. It is the inescapable context with which the present individual must contend.

It was also the context that led up to the intense periods of national redefinition of the mid-nineteenth century, from North America, through the Atlantic, and in Europe, as well. The Fugitive Slave Act, for example, was no more or less than an insecure attempt to reassert unfreedom and dehumanization in the face of ongoing and increasingly undeniable efforts to reclaim the humanity that a supposedly free society denied to so many of its subjects. The
American Civil War was the inevitable apocalypse at the end of a period of national expansion driven by assertions of a divinely ordered economy that offered individual opportunities at the price of terrifying personal obliteration, and extended freedom to some at the price of unfreedom for others.

And yet, after this violent contention with the meaning of freedom, Atlantic providential capitalism appeared stronger than ever. In fact, providential capitalism appeared to have emerged from this trial with renewed urgency, capable not only of reasserting nationalist claims to divine spiritual and economic right, but also of expanding beyond even the borders of Atlantic exchange. If the clashes of the mid-nineteenth century were the necessary reckoning with post-revolutionary forms of providential capitalism, the outcome was a new and even more powerful network of power relations and hegemonic adventures that brought the ideology of divine capital and capitalist divinity to the world.

If readers, critics, historians, or individuals are to understand Atlantic cultures and their place within it, if they are to comprehend the significance of the spread of Atlantic economic and theological logic to the globalized era, they must grapple with its historical emergence. They must recognize the cultural uncertainty from which it emerged, and the disruptive moment of revolution that gave it so much power. Post-revolutionary Atlantic social movements went on to dictate so many of the terms of their globalized predecessors. Given this fact, the newly global individual must admit the instructive and constructive power of providential capitalism that continues to reign. Commodification, exchange, election through economic success or failure, mobilization within a fixed market kingdom—all of these signs remain and all retain their valence in political, ideological, theological, and expressive pursuits. At the time of its emergence, providential capitalism foreclosed other potential political and philosophical
orientations. Our modern moment admits its final victory over society, over space, over theology, philosophy, and ideology, and, finally, over the self.
i Even early nineteenth-century Americanist critics like Walter Channing and sermonizers like his brother, William Ellery Channing, leaned on the tropes of providential capitalism in order to promote their own visions for what capitalist, industrialized American cultural polity should look like. Whether discussing the need for spiritual renewal or literary originality, both writers employed the New England puritan jeremiad form, despite the fact that they rejected Calvinist religious dogma. In their view, the nation is benighted or backsliding and must take up the vocation of reformation in order to seize its proper place in history as a cultural, military and economic world power. The Channings transform the vocation of colonial New England into that of the nation as it expands westward and southward. Thus they propose that the logic, the style and the reformative goals of puritan New England become the basis for national culture, against the southern, non-Anglophone, and racially heterogeneous, alternatives they dismiss. They insist that the conversion, both economic and spiritual, which proved so effective in their native New England, be enacted on a national scale.

ii Fuller also provides an important analysis of Miller’s use of both *The New England Mind* and “From Edwards to Emerson” as responses to the “groupthink” in both the anti-interventionist left and the fascist right. Fuller also observes that “Miller’s preoccupation with Emerson during the 1950s and early 1960s suggests his increasing belief that the scholar was one of the most subversive forces in American society” (118)

iii Fuller observes “For Bercovitch’s analysis of America’s rhetoric and ideology seemed to portend that all efforts to critique the United States were already prefigured and inscribed by
that power—that opposition was inevitably absorbed into a larger, seemingly inexhaustible and airtight consensus in the manifestly exceptional destiny of the nation. Within this context, Bercovitch’s work might be seen not only as a sustained involvement with the legacies of Mathiessen and Miller but also, at times, as the sorrowful requiem for those legacies experienced as no longer available” (125).

iv Contracted liberty permits individuals to pursue their destiny, within the bounds of their social contract. Unfettered freedom, on the other hand, suggests a shapeless course, a society infinitely porous because infinitely determined by aggression, enmity, and implicit accessibility. Although this latter definition promises all individuals the possibility for rising, it also offers the peril of falling. And so, the new capitalist classes who structure the colonial societies establish contract as much to secure their own positions as to establish a model for how to grow the community as a legal entity. Later, this ideology will become essential for the founding of the Atlantic’s constellated polities, such as the one in the post-revolutionary United States. Thomas Jefferson, for one, will use the distinction between liberty and freedom articulated in Locke Second Treatise on Civil Government, Chapters 3-4 to argue for a national liberty that includes, un-ironically, an enormous population of unfree persons. Yes, the later American patriots will argue for the liberty to pursue their independent course, but they will do so within the structure of a presumed and even written contract that guarantees their own status, by denying it to others. Even in this secular cloak, the logic of selective election underpins revolutionary notions of liberty, national foundation, and economic expansion. This reflexive need to create documentary proof and to engage in official speech acts in the course of colonization by no means originates
Stephen Greenblatt, for example, notes the number of early American explorers who issued “reassuring signs of administrative order—bureaucratic formulas already well established” (54). Greenblatt reads these orders as, perhaps, tacit acknowledgments of the moral impropriety of the colonial exercises they perform. Given the absurdity of attempting to use text to communicate across differences of language and cultural practices, Greenblatt asks whether figures like Columbus or, in this case, William Bradford, truly felt themselves in the right, or whether they simply attempted to use legal language to give the tenuousness of their claims to power more legal weight. Without explicitly saying so, Greenblatt here gets at the central point: in order to justify the mercenary goals that they clearly pursued, Christian imperialists of many different stripes converted mercenary action into Christian action, and made both one and the same. This was even more easily done in a philosophical world in which God was considered a partner in a capitalist enterprise. However, the Mayflower Compact of 1620 and Massachusetts Oath of a Freeman, written in 1631 and revised in 1634, distinguish themselves from the other similar colonialist texts that Greenblatt describes by tacitly admitting the extent to which this rhetorical formulation will—indeed, must—fundamentally alter the signers’ conception of and relationship to a supernatural divine. God is a tool to wield over non-Christian subaltern subjects, but, in the hands of the practitioners of providential capitalism, God is also a business partner in a market that includes the transaction of the unfree.

To see an early example of the intersections of race, economics, and Christianity at work in a colonial context see William Bradford narration of the native translator, Squanto’s, deathbed conversion. Bradford tells readers that Squanto “begged the Governor to pray for him,
that he might go to the Englishmen’s God in heaven, and bequeathed several of his things to some of his English friends, as remembrances, His death was a great loss” (72). As Anna Brickhouse points out, Squanto was educated in Catholicism by the Spanish. She, therefore, reads the deathbed conversion that Bradford narrates as a self-conscious attempt by Squanto to bring himself closer to the English and to ensure the proper dispersal of his goods after his death (44). Readers might, however, expand upon this to consider too how Bradford's narration uses Squanto's dying body to reenact the orginary process of conversion undergone by the English Protestants. Bradford’s Squanto turns away from Catholicism and embraces reformation providential Christianity, becoming a full member of the elect at this last moment. In this instant too, he disperses his possessions, now blessed because of his act of conversion, into the market where they can be traded, according to law and divine order, by his puritan Christian brethren. Is this evidence of Squanto navigating the expectations of Plymouth or of Bradford justifying Squanto’s enhanced role in both the community and in his narrative by having him undergo a similar conversion experience to that of the pilgrims? It is unclear, but Brickhouse, looking to the story of Don Luis de Velasco, the Algonquin slave who converted to Christianity, returned to his home and, by most accounts, killed the missionaries who brought him, suggests that there is sufficient evidence for the former. In fact, Brickhouse reads a number of similar instances of conversion, return, and resistance as asserting the successful comprehension and navigation of European expectations by displaced Native Americans. Many of these figures, she argues, request baptism because they understand the “legal consequences of conversion” (51). Similarly, Don Luis presents the Jesuits who will return him to North America with a “negocio,” a plan for
expedition to Ajacan (59). While this “negocio” is not explicitly an economic contract, it still
demonstrates the speed and efficacy with which aboriginal individuals utilized contracts with
Europeans for their own personal gain or security, even if Europeans used those contracts to
exploit and annihilate native cultures. As with Don Luis and others, Squanto’s prior acquisition
of English allows him to make productive use of his successful navigation of the routes of
Atlantic commerce in which he was traded and now engages again in North America. Squanto's
deathbed conversion thus asserts the extent to which dominated and commodified persons could
selectively and for their own benefit employ the Europeans’ language and engage in the
Europeans’ economic and Christian relations to achieve their own ends.

vi For more, see also Alfred Cave, who demonstrates that Chesapeake settlers struggled to
find the right way to navigate the tense interrelation of commerce, religion, and cultural contact.
Relations between North American natives and European settlers not only established the
guiding ideological ethos of colonization, conversion, and economic collaboration, but also
helped to establish both class and racial borders. As Cave points out “no mestizo class emerged
in Virginia. In 1705, the wealthy Virginia planter and amateur historian Robert Beverly, in his
History and Present State of Virginia, declared that much of the interracial bloodshed that
marred the colony’s first century could be attributed to settlers’ failure to take Indian wives”
(98). In its ignorance to the bloodshed and forced conquest inherent to the development of a
mestizo class to the south, this reading is short-sighted. Nevertheless, it remains true that, as
Cave says, “To the English, intermarriage was acceptable only if the Indian marriage partner
renounced Indian identity and embraced Christianity and civilization” (98). Religious conversion
and the establishment of “civilized” economic relations were, therefore, essential for the formation of colonial racial identity. Increasingly, colonial society came to be defined as capitalist, Christian, and white, all categories that required constant surveillance.

vii For a full example of this, see the debate overseen by Brycchan Carey in Special Feature: Olaudah Equiano African or American.

viii In Intimacies of Four Continents, Lisa Lowe quotes Vincent Carretta who notes that Equiano “commodified himself through his successful narrative autobiography; he retained copyright and kept most of the profits of the nine editions published between 1789 and 1974, earning an amount of British sterling equivalent to $120,000” (Lowe 61).

ix John Marrant’s 1785 Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant...also explains the way literacy allows an individual to master his own fate and that of others. He meets an “Indian Hunter” and, later, becomes captive of the Cherokee nation, his faith in and constant conversation with a Lord they cannot see, works to convert his captors. After explaining—somewhat luridly and even delightedly—the tortures he should face as a captive of the Cherokee, Marrant describes how his prayer in English, translated into Cherokee, and accompanied by the “talking book,” converts his executioner, the daughter of the King and, ultimately, the King himself. He writes, “The Lord appeared most lovely and glorious; the king himself was awakened and the others set at liberty. A great change took place among the people; the king’s house became God’s house.” He then visits a number of other affiliated tribes, under the protection of his Cherokee friends and with their recommendation. Marrant’s narrative reinforces Equiano’s belief in literacy as a powerful tool by which to interact intelligibly and
profitably with the diverse cultures of the Atlantic, at the same time that it allows the elect individual to communicate with an unseen God and receive the rewards of grace. It also expands upon Equiano’s supernatural streak quite considerably. God fills Marrant with powers, described at times as a renewed and, frankly, strange understanding of nature. He announces that he “got across [a] tree without my feet or hands touching the ground… bit [grass] off like a horse, and prayed the Lord to bless it to me.” Yet, in this narrative, such behavior is evidence of Marrant’s ecstatic relationship to an interventionist and protective divinity.

x See Baucom on the equivalence of money to commodity and back to money again in *Specters of the Atlantic* (25-29).

xi David Brion Davis frames the question of slavery among revolutionaries like Jefferson around the central paradox of modern slavery. Hegel’s conception of slavery rests upon the struggle for mastery between two parties, in which one party is willing to die for mastery and the other, unwilling, submits to mastery. However, having done so, the submissive party becomes essential to the self-conception of the master. The master needs the slave to see him as a master in order to retain identity. This makes the master dependent upon the slave. The autonomous modern individual, therefore, is enslaved to the slave. For more on this, see Davis’ *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution: 1770 – 1828* (40).

xii Sir James Steuart’s 1767 treatise, *An Inquiry into the Principles of Political Economy*, places the routes of community mobility within the market squarely in the realm of divine logic. For more on this, see Ostrowski’s “Fated to Perish by Consumption: The Political Economy of *Arthur Mervyn*” in *Studies in American Fiction*. Vol. 32, No. 1 2004
As Waldstreicher notes “Franklin criticized slavery, only to compensate by empowering slaveholders by letting them be overrepresented” in the new national government (214).

Perry Miller also claims they relied upon puritan texts for inspiration. He writes “leaders were prepared to organize their commonwealths and furthermore to acknowledge by force of logic several of the deductions which were later to furnish the political wisdom of a Locke or a Jefferson…these principles were declared no less emphatically in Puritan theory than in the Declaration of Independence.” See The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century (409).

Hall expands upon the degree to which “London Merchants and finance capitalists were intimately connected with West Indian planters.” See pages 69-83.

See also Rediker and Linebaugh on the relative lack of religion among sailors.


For more on this, consult also Byrd.

Ian Baucom discusses this as well in Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History.

Hester Blum offers a history of the publication of Dana’s Two Years Before the Mast in The View from the Masthead: Maritime Imagination and Antebellum American Sea Narratives. See Blum, page 174.

xxii This appears in *The Many-headed Hydra*. For more examples in Melville, see also “The Final Stitch,” from *White Jacket*.

xxiii The auction of a dead man’s personal store was, as Rediker notes, commonplace (Rediker 197).

xxiv Michael Taussig discusses the haunted dollar in *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*.

xxv According to Reynolds, Pym seems “a caricature of the 1830s sensation lover [and, awkwardly]...a scrupulous observer who records factual information” (242).

xxvi If, as Reynolds explains reform literature was largely premised upon the idea of the witness who would “lift the veil” on hidden vice for society to see, Melville, for example, draws upon and subverts this trope in the White whale—the white pasteboard mask is the veil to be lifted, but behind it is nothing (158).

xxvii Shalini Puri also addresses these issues in *The Caribbean Postcolonial: Social Equality, Post/Nationalism, and Cultural Hybridity*.

xxviii Michael Taussig notes “Maori reciprocity based on the belief that produced items contain life force of their producer—here though, commodity takes that life force and gains its own autonomy (28). Moreover, metaphors reinforce the sense of the market and commodities as alive (31).
xxxix Taussig suggests that societies that develop capitalism naturally describe it in pre-capitalist terms because these terms offer the only basis for understanding and describing everything new the society encounters (11).

xxx Taussig writes “The social basis of capitalism works to obscure itself as nature, physical and biological and the animate character of things reveals their social basis but also the thingness of people and society” (8).

xxxi Reynolds notes the way Poe uses tropes of religious literature in order to undermine the genre in *Beneath the American Renaissance*.

xxxii As Marcus Rediker puts it in *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, “by the middle of the eighteenth century, the language of contract had in many ways supplanted the language of custom at sea” (150). Seamen, therefore took the contract very seriously, and would strike for any violation and highly prized the few among them with literacy (158).

xxxiii Rediker describes this as “a system to calculate the direction and magnitude of social and economic forces, and to plot a course for the accumulation of capital and the extension of national power in a turbulent, expanding economic universe” (14).

xxxiv According to Marcus Rediker the international Atlantic trading market was controlled by the whims—explicit or implicit—of an international free market. The seaman’s labor became a ‘thing’ a commodity, to be calculated into an equation with other things: capital, land, markets, other commodities” (75).

xxxv Rediker writes, “Free-market and demographic forces did not produce free wage laborers at a pace fast enough to meet the challenges of an expanding capitalist system as defined
by English rulers, who therefore resorted to impressment to stock the maritime labor market with mind and muscle” (289).

xxxvi Rediker writes, “Anglo-American seamen died in roughly the same horrendous proportions, and occasionally in even greater ones, as did the slaves themselves” (47).

xxxvii For more on this theme, see Saidyia Hartman Scenes of Subjection (53).

xxxviii Melville offers a similarly sexualized scene of food and consumption in Omoo, this time regarding the consumption of fish with a group willing and indulgent women.

xxxix Here readers will recall Baucom’s discussion of the Zong massacre and its centrality to eighteenth and nineteenth-century structures of power and sociality.

xl By contrast, in the second half of the novel, Redburn twice remarks upon “improvidence,” in a way that signifies human stupidity in the face of a natural universe that either does not care or actively conspires against human beings. First, considering his poor choice of clothing for the voyage, Redburn chastises himself for his own “Improvidence and heedlessness, in going to sea so ill provided…to make my situation at all comfortable, or even tolerable” (130). Then, reflecting upon the deaths of sick passengers, he explains that “the improvidence and shortsightedness of the passengers in the steerage, with regard to their outfits for the voyage, began to be followed by the inevitable results” (370). In both instances improvidence stands in for foolish human volition, whereas providence merely connotes human faith in a deity which may or may not exist, but certainly has no evident desire to deliver the individual from the worst the market has to offer.
xli As Rediker notes, because the seaman’s lifestyle was not overtly religious, it permitted “coexistence” and sailors remained tolerant and heterodox, and had little Biblical education (173). Indeed, rigid religion could become a dangerous problem in times of trouble when individuals had to rely upon one another (175).

xlii Rediker reminds readers that sailors “shared the belief, present in high culture and low, that it was possible to predict the future from the signs of the present” this made “almighty nature seem more comprehensible and hence controllable” (181).

xliii Rediker explains that “the seaman’s worldview combined Christian and pre-Christian beliefs, referents, and orientations” (184). For example, when crossing the equator for the first time, all passengers were required to participate in an initiation either of dunking (a baptism) or paying (a monetary form of tribute) (186). Rediker describes this in *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, noting that “true to their tradition of irreligion, seamen stripped baptism of its religious meanings and used it to serve the ends of occupational solidarity” (189).

xliv Readers should not, of course, collapse the distance between the forms of captivity practiced upon white women in Brockden Brown’s novel and those practiced upon chattel slaves as described by Baucom. These experiences are not commensurate in scope or in kind. However, Brockden Brown’s use of the white female subject as victim invites readers to consider the experience of captivity and captive violence from within the relatively safe confines of whiteness, while also challenging them to look out beyond themselves and to consider their own role in the whole system of chattel captivity.
Michael Taussig discusses beliefs in the potentially sacred or demonic nature of dollar bills for society undergoing the transition from precapitalism to capitalism. This may be the result: bills that contain the power potentially to rescue or to condemn. Here the experience is rendered in explicitly capitalist and allegorical terms, but the connection should not be lost. For more see, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*. University of North Carolina Press, 1980.

The novel is suggestive, rather than speculative. It offers the implications of the system it describes, but does not depict them. For more vivid, and more spectaculatively conjectural renderings, readers should look elsewhere, to George Lippard’s 1845 novel, *The Quaker City, Or, The Monks of Monk Hall: A Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery, and Crime*, for example. This will be the subject of the following chapter.

This is not to dismiss other readings—particularly readings that situate Atlantic modernity in oceanic realms. In fact, although they are not explicitly named here, the sailors who populate and perpetuate the Atlantic markets are implicitly evidenced. What connects the cotton fields of the American South to its sites of westward expansion, to the economic engines of the Caribbean, if not Atlantic maritime commerce and trade? Lippard focuses his reader’s attention upon the urban elements of this system, but the world of Monk Hall remains linked to the Atlantic maritime. Philadelphia is a port city, after all. For more discussion of the ways in which the Atlantic maritime markets and their ideological assumptions crept inland, especially in light of Fitz-Cowles’ expansionist designs, see Walter Johnson’s *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom*. Harvard University Press, 2013.

Interestingly, as much as it is presented as exotic and fearful, this moment might also represent the absorption of syncretic spirit practices from throughout the Atlantic world. For an example of the ways in which such practices were mobilized in occult fashion, see Toni Wall Jaudon and Kelly Wisecup. “On Knowing and Not Knowing About Obeah” *Atlantic Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2015. Here, Lippard presents the specter of spiritual syncretism as grotesquerie, but the possible critical resonance remains apposite: capital brings spirit practices together in seemingly magical fashion, generating both possibilities and perils for individuals and communities.

These tropes are offered to readers both salaciously and critically, intended both to satisfy a desire for lurid scenes and to challenge Atlantic socio-political power structures. Reynolds discusses this maneuver in *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*. Harvard University Press, 1989.


This also demonstrates the fact that terms like precapitalist, capitalist, and postcapitalist are probably misleading. In *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*, Michael Taussig discusses transitional societies in terms of their encounters with capitalism. He addresses the fact that these societies frequently address capitalist practices in the “precapitalist” language of animism, supernaturalism, and the occult. Lippard’s book, and even these much later
depictions of capitalist societies reveal the fact that these views persist. They are not incidental to the onset of capitalism, but endemic to its design and practice, altogether.
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