Andre Ye

Dr. Reagan

TS History

13 October 2020

This week, readings included the first two chapters of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* by Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa), Chapter 16 ("Toward Racism") from *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* by Edmund S. Morgan, and a letter from Elizabeth Sprigs, an English servant, to her father.

In the first two chapters of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, Olaudah Equiano recalls his abduction and enslavement as a domestically traded slave and as a trade in the Americas in a memoir targeted at the British parliament to change the institution of racialized slavery. Equiano draws parallels from his African birthplace to European societies, used to assert that Europeans incorrectly deemed Africans as inferior because they were ignorant. Building upon this, Equiano makes an emotional argument against racialized slavery by positioning Africans as equivalently human to Europeans. The difference between domestic slavery and slavery on the American continent is highlighted; the former is described as undesirable and tragic but at times manageable and even rewarding; the latter is depicted as horrendously cruel and inhumane.

In Chapter 16: "Toward Racism" of *American Slavery American Freedom*, Edmund S. Morgan argues that the racial component of American slavery was developed out of economic profitability. Poor whites and black slaves in the American colonies shared a powerful experience: at the boot of society's prejudice, both groups were subjected to stereotypes on inferiority and hence strict discipline to increase economic output. To prevent these two groups

from sympathizing and potentially conspiring after Bacon's Rebellion, Morgan asserts that racism was used as a convenient social tool to divide the enslaved. Through racial legislation, black slaves were separated from white servants; leveraging race as society's primary identity proved powerful enough to fulfill labor demand.

In a letter written to her father in England from Maryland, Elizabeth Sprigs, an English servant, describes the miserable working conditions as an indentured servant. Sprigs notes that the treatment would not be appropriate even for an animal, and that many "Negroes" were better off, subtly expressing an irony that English, of all people, were living in such treacherous circumstances; this implies that racialized slavery had not fully developed yet at the time the letter was written.

Edmund Morgan argues in *American Slavery American Freedom* that racism was socially constructed by the colonial government to prevent disappointed white freemen – former indentured servants that didn't receive compensation at the end of their contract – and black slaves from conspiring a revolt against the colonial elites. As both the English poor and black slaves were viewed as lazy and brutish people who needed to be strictly disciplined to maximize profit, Morgan asserts that the two victimized groups embraced each other: "It was common, for example, for servants and slaves to run away together, steal hogs together, get drunk together… make love together."[1] Because of this companionship in sharing the same bleak predicament, Bacon's Rebellion, which sought to revolt against the Virginian aristocracy and to open up land access to indigenous territories, consisted of a diverse cohort of white indentured servants, white

[1] Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery American Freedom* (Norton, 1975), 327.

freemen, former black slaves, and black slaves[2]. Hence, Morgan writes, legislation was passed to artificially insert a barrier of detestation between the white and black lower (or enslaved) class. For example, Morgan brings up a 1680 law that punished any black person or slave from "lift[ing] up his hand in opposition against *any* Christian", to which he writes that the law was "…a particularly effective provision in that it allowed servants to bully slaves without fear of retaliation."[3] However, questions arise in this portrayal of legislation – if the colonial elites passed racist legislation to protect their economic power, meaning that white freemen did not gain any land from supporting the elites, and white freemen and indentured servants had developed a bond with black slaves so strong that they were willing to have children and die in rebellion together, why would white indentured servants and freemen naively accept instructions from the very enslavers that treated them so illy and often refused to pay out for years of hard labor? White indentured servants had more success joining hands with black slaves – if Bacon's Rebellion had gone successfully, which it was very close to being, they would have had more land and plenty of indigenous slaves; the first assembly following the rebellion ordered soldiers who captured indigenous people to "reteyene and keepe all such Indian slaves or other Indian goods."[4] Was a feeling of power – if it makes sense to feel power when a fellow laborer is discriminated – enough to convince them? This explanation is lacking.

Morgan neglects to provide convincing answers because his thesis in the chapter is incomplete; the formulation of racism in economic defense is as much the separation of white indentured servants and black slaves as it is the joining of white indentured servants and white colonial elites to form single white and black identities, from which status and superiority (or

[2] Reagan, Michael. "Race and Unfree Labor." TS History: American History to 1877. Class lecture at Online UW, Seattle, Washington, October 15, 2020.

[3] Morgan, *American Slavery American Freedom*, 331.

[4] Morgan, *American Slavery American Freedom*, 329.

inferiority) is derived. The two components are interrelated but not symmetric complements. Given the increasing number of black slaves, the aristocrats replaced their disdain for poor white servants with further disdain for black slaves out of economic conveniency; they chose, because it was economically advantageous, to replace identity by class with identity by race – white indentured servants are not to think of themselves primarily as indentured servants, but as white. Legislatively, this formed two goals – to separate white indentured servants and black slaves, but also to bring the former closer to the white aristocrats through trust and allegiance. For instance, in 1705, an assembly ruling on disorderly slaves specifically forbade masters to "whip a Christian white servant naked"[5] – nakedness being only fit for the brutish, a title that had only been recently removed from the white indentured servant. In the same act, all land and property that were occasionally rewarded to slaves that worked hard enough for it was given to white indentured servants to bring them closer to the colonial elite[6], at none of the elite's expense – their primary motivation for racism in the first place. Through both subtle and explicit legislation, the poor white servant not only was distanced from the black slave, but grew to accept his enslaver – the white colonial elite – as his friend. This more complete view of racism as a social tool answers questions pertaining to white indentured servants that would have otherwise been left unaddressed.

[5] Morgan, *American Slavery American Freedom*, 331.
[6] Morgan, *American Slavery American Freedom*, 333.