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Comparison of Two Passages: Genealogy and Kinship in Equiano & Hawthorne

*The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's

"My Kinsman, Major Molineux" are both stories of discovery—landing on new shores, finding oneself, and developing new personas. Though the former is based on fact, the latter fiction; the former an involuntary journey, the latter more volitional and vocational; the former an African's transatlantic voyage(s), the latter a white man's interstate travel—the shared preoccupation with genealogy, kinship, and ancestry is essential to the competing identities within and across the texts. As introduced in the title, this theme of defining familial ties is obvious in "My Kinsman;" that is not so much the case in Equiano's account, where it surfaces and resurfaces as some kind of Freudian slip, drowning within the ocean of trauma that lays hidden beneath waves of eloquent verbiage—references to "my countrymen" in Eboe (3,5) and their storied relation to the Jews (30, 32, 38-40). Equiano's bloodline, real and imagined, holds him back—anchoring him to the seabed, preventing him from floating up and even flying away. Perhaps more than Robin, his counterpart in "My Kinsman," Equiano is in need of a companion's advice to unfetter himself, a kind gentleman passing by to inform him that "you may rise in the world without the help of your kinsman" (Hawthorne 14). For Robin and Equiano, origins are doomed to be more harmful than helpful because of their ambiguity and incongruity (bordering irony at times). Unwarranted pride surrounds an unproven, unwitnessed mythology. By the end of "My Kinsman," the reader is left questioning the existence of Major Molineux: "Well, Robin, are you

dreaming” (14)? Equiano wrestles with similar questions, having existed in his own land for only a short time before being taken to America and then England. He is only as Eboan as his memory allows and not quite African American, having both arrived and departed America during his lifetime. “I consider myself an European,” he proclaims (Equiano 2). Caught between nationalities, Equiano clings to whatever semblance of identity he can, even when it proves counterintuitive and counterproductive. At least subconsciously aware of the inconsistencies, Equiano justifies his assertions: “Indeed this is the opinion of Dr. Gill, who . . . deduces the pedigree of the Africans from Afer and Afra, the descendants of Abraham by Keturah his wife and concubine . . . It is also conformable to the sentiments of Dr. John Clarke” (38-39). One almost expects Equiano to continue, outlining more recent theories about African slavery and “the curse of Ham,” justifying the institution in the process. When convenient, Equiano ditches his efforts at understanding lest he learn of his orphan-status: “As to the difference of colour between the Eboan Africans and the modern Jews, I shall not presume to account for it” (40). He would surely benefit from Hawthorne’s aforementioned message. But even then, it is uncertain whether such advice would be applicable in Equiano’s case. How could he begin to erase the effects of the dark mark his forebearers left on his skin (or the lighter marks his owners added after)? How could he ever transcend the mutability of a black body?

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