

“VALUABLE DROPS OF GOLD:” EXPLORING ECONOMICS IN JOHN GABRIEL
STEDMAN’S *NARRATIVE OF A FIVE YEARS EXPEDITION AGAINST
THE REVOLTED NEGROES OF SURINAM*

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ABSTRACT

Though John Gabriel Stedman’s *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* is not completely unfamiliar to literary scholars studying eighteenth-century depictions of African chattel slavery, it has traditionally been used as context for studying other literature. This study aims to elevate Stedman’s *Narrative* from context to text. As such, I first provide a framework for literary study of the *Narrative* and then begin exploring a central theme in the work: economics. Using a conflicted narrator who is troubled by his role as a mercenary soldier, Stedman demonstrates the difficulty of balancing ethics and economics. By juxtaposing the narrator’s multiple and multivalent attempts to assess the value of his lover, I expose the underlying economic structure of their romantic relationship. I then discuss the ways in which the narrator grapples with other aspects of the economics of slavery. Ultimately, I argue that Stedman uses his narrator’s failed attempts at making sense of his positions as a mercenary soldier and a moral agent to recreate the confusion inherent to trying to fully comprehend the repercussions of slavery.