Necroeconomics, Primitive Accumulation and the Early Iberian Slave Trade

In 1444, on a field outside the southern port city of Lagos, Portuguese slave raiders divided 235 Idzagen men, women and children into five groups and sold them, reserving one fifth for the Infante Henrique, who had subsidized the expedition. As recounted by the Portuguese royal chronicler Gomes Eanes de Zurara in his *Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea* ([Crónica do Descobrimento e Conquista da Guiné](#)) (1453), this sale has long been understood to have inaugurated the modern slave trade. Whereas the enslavement of prisoners was a common outcome of the fifteenth-century wars between Portuguese and Northern Africans, the slave raids that resulted in the sale at Lagos were coordinated by the Infante himself and carried out on an unprecedented scale. Many of the sub-Saharan Africans from below Cape Bojador were not Muslim and therefore were not identifiable as enemies of the Portuguese in their long-standing religious wars. Zurara considered them distinct enough in color and custom from the peoples that the Portuguese termed “Moors” [mouros] that he often used the term “blackamoors” [mouros negros] to describe them. Throughout his account, moreover, even as he employs terms commonly used for war captivity in Northern African religious wars, Zurara also emphasizes that the slave raids that led to the sale at Lagos were conceived as commercial ventures with the aim of providing labor for Portugal and profit for the traders and the Crown.¹

Zurara’s unique recording of sale at Lagos thus makes clear that at its origin, the slave trade was already marked by the confluence of the racialization and commercialization of human captivity. Beyond this notable confluence, however, it has been harder to the exact relationship between race and capital in the early slave trade. Positions have varied from understanding the slave trade as an extreme form of the financial systems and long-distance trade of an emergent world economy and understanding it as an escalation of a historical racialization of sub-Saharan Africans.² Rather than isolate these historical movements, this article will address the challenge
of articulating their relationship by highlighting the way that race emerged as a language of exception necessary to justify the unprecedented trade. In this sense, the slave trade channelled previous ideas about race, religion and geography into what Cedric Robinson has called “racial capitalism.” For Robinson, racialization pre-dated capital accumulation and thus provided the latter a structure to which it could inhere. Yet although it antecedced the explosion of finance capital that fed long-distance trade and commodity extraction back into European economies, racialization thus became a permanent, if malleable, element of the social structure of capital.3

While Robinson’s concept of “racial capitalism” has been an important reminder of inextricability of processes of racialization and capitalist accumulation that followed European expansion, his own terms are largely drawn from 18th-century language of national identity and race. In his reading of this early period of the slave trade, Herman Bennett has critiqued Robinson’s use of the term “nationalism” to designate the geopolitical particularism that fed into the racialization of Africans. Bennett proposes instead that the we return to the geopolitical language of the period, monarchical sovereignty and Christian mission, to tease out the segregation of enslaved Africans for the world market. As Bennett argues, Europeans did not employ a language of nationalism but approached the political negotiations necessary for trade with Central Africans armed, and limited, by a matrix of theological, legal and cultural understandings and practices. These practices, as he argues, emphasized sovereignty rather than commerce and treated African kings as equals in a global order defined by Christendom (Bennett African Kings loc 256).

In what follows, I will build on Bennett’s rich analysis of the way Roman and canon law, Reconquista historiography and commercial practice framed the early Portuguese encounter with sub-Saharan Africa to effect an ideological “breach” in the language of sovereignty that dominated Christian mission.4 While Bennett focuses on how sovereignty and kingship structured diplomatic interactions with sub-Saharan Africans, however, I am interested in how the slave trade and its market depended upon the sovereign to authorize its unprecedented
practices. Only by reading early authors such as Zurara together with authors from the end of the sixteenth century can we understand the interplay of sovereignty and economics that defined the emergence of racial capitalism. Adapting a term first employed by Warren Montag to describe Adam Smith’s investment in the market, I am calling the interplay between sovereignty and capital accumulation in the slave trade necroeconomics. Montag defines necroeconomics as the justification of death as inherent to economic gain, a justification he argues was first made in the context of the industrialization of labor in eighteenth-century England.

However, writers of the Iberian slave trade show a much earlier and more complex treatment of questions of death and value than that reflected in eighteenth-century liberalism. Because the early writers understood the slave trade to be unprecedented, they exposed and engaged more completely with its legal and practical ramifications that did later authors contemporaries to Smith. Early necroeconomics, as I will argue, employed the language of politics and economics, sovereignty and commerce to delineate a racial exceptionalism that became indissociable from modern slavery. In particular, early necroeconomics demanded a new role for the sovereign as a guarantor of the smooth functioning of the market, despite its anomalous nature. Indeed, as Montag argues, necroeconomic practice creates a state of exception that requires the intervention of the state in various forms (16). The racialization of capital occurred in this crucible of a market-induced state of exception.

By returning to the earliest form of necroeconomics we can best see how this confluence of sovereignty, governance and politics that Montag argues is a necessary component of necroeconomic practice established the simultaneously racialization and commercialization of sub-Saharan Africans. Rather than emerging in the context of 18th-century liberalism, necroeconomics first emerged in the earlier period of capital extraction, which Karl Marx called, ironizing Smith’s own observations, “primitive accumulation” (Chapter 26). Indeed, beginning with Zurara, documents of the early slave trade make clear that death was only the extreme point in an economy of terror. More than a death sentence, the necroeconomics of racial capitalism
was actually a sentence on life, the acceptance of exposure to death as necessary for capital accumulation. The terms of necroeconomics were developed over the course of the sixteenth century by authors who documented and commented upon the practices being negotiated along with the capture, sale and financing of the slave trade. By the end of the sixteenth century, the Jesuit theologian Luis de Molina had synthesized these in a sweeping consideration of the legitimacy of the slave trade. By considering Zurara and Molina as bookends for the development of the earliest theory of necroeconomics, it becomes possible to better understand the terms of the ideological breach in which the racialization of capital occurred, and which by the end of the sixteenth century would pave the way for the global expansion and institutionalization of the slave trade.

Necroeconomics and Primitive Accumulation

According to Warren Montag’s definition, the most explicit expression of the term *necroeconomics* is found in Adam Smith’s eighteenth-century liberalism. In Montag’s reading, Smith’s market has a providential design, distributing life and death according to greater necessity in an “economic theodicy” (15). Thus, dearth and famine are as much a part of its “economy of nature” as surplus and prosperity. The market becomes the expression of human universality, understood as the ability of a society to produce and reproduce, and its distributions reflect the competition and striving that is part of human nature. Through this analogy, Montag argues, Smith moves from the political realm of a social distribution of death, to an economic one: “If societies, by virtue of the oeconomy of nature, must exercise, and not merely possess, the right to kill, the market, understood as the very form of human universality as life, must necessarily, at certain precise moments ‘let die’” (14).

Of course, this necroeconomic function depends on its own naturalization. If the market appears as a natural force, then the death that it produces also appears to be natural, a part of a
greater unseen order. If, on the other hand, those who are destined to die resist, the state must intervene to assure that the providential design be cleansed of political inference. Thus, Montag provides a key insight into the relationship between the liberal market, as a self-regulating system, and state sovereignty and governance:

From this we might conclude that underneath the appearance of a system whose intricate harmony might be appreciated as a kind of austere and awful beauty, a self-regulating system, not the ideal, perhaps, but the best of all possible systems, is the demand that some must allow themselves to die. This, of course, raises the possibility that those so called upon will refuse this demand — that is, that they will refuse to allow themselves to die. It is at this point that the state, which might appear to have no other relation to the market than one of a contemplative acquiescence, is called into action: those who refuse to allow themselves to die must be compelled by force to do so. This force, then, while external to the market, is necessary to its existence and action.

Citing Schmitt’s definition of sovereignty as a decision enacted upon a state of exception, Montag concludes that necroeconomics creates a state of exception that then requires state intervention (16).

Thus, Montag critiques and expands upon Achille Mbembe’s well-known concept of necropolitics. Mbembe proposes necropolitics, or the “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death,” as a form of sovereignty (39). Critiquing Michel Foucault’s concept of biopower, or the state-ordained distribution of life and death, Mbembe attempts to account for wars in which the state “makes the murder of the enemy its primary and absolute objective” (12). Necropolitics, in this sense, is a form of sovereign decision that has multiplied and become fragmented in our contemporary global theater. Rather than a structure of the ancien régime, whose spectacles of discipline Foucault argued were surpassed by eighteenth-century management of populations, necropolitics is “what constitute[s] the nomos of the political space in which we still live” (14). Turning from Foucault to Giorgio Agamben, Mbembe understands
necropolitics as a “figure of sovereignty” built upon “the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations” (14).

In Mbembe’s account, this necropolitics is solely for the accrual of sovereign power as an end in itself. While he mentions forms of capital accumulation, systems of financial control, and the disciplinary structures of forced labor, the instrumental use of death by sovereign agents appears to lift their acts beyond economic systems. To make this argument, Mbembe adopts Georges Bataille’s understanding of sovereignty as “life beyond utility... the very principle of excess—an anti-economy” (Mbembe 15). Necropolitics as an excessive, anti-economic death, permits Mbembe to both attack what he presents as the failure of Marxism to account for this spectacular source of sovereign power and to appeal to a sphere of “human freedom” as that which necropolitics most threatens. If we are to believe that global war, late-modern colonialism and the state management of populations can be explained as necropolitical, the solution that Mbembe offers to this dystopia is the hope of an equally absolute form of freedom through death, albeit this time a chosen and politically imbued death through suicide (38). As Mbembe skips over the institutions, interests and capital accumulation that benefit from violence, his solution is similarly extra-institutional, an escape rather than an engagement, a form of total war that mirrors his definition of necropolitics as a system-destroying display of sovereign power.

For Montag, the isolation of the political from the economic in Mbembe’s approach follows a theoretical division of life into ζωη, as a natural life regulated by οίκος, and βίος, or political life, that is fundamental to the work of Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben (Montag 10). By preserving this theoretical division, Mbembe is unable to consider what classically has been called the “political economy” and even less so, the logic of capital accumulation and financialization that characterizes the period he terms “late-modernity.” Montag proposes necroeconomics as a concept that would undo this dualism by bringing the οίκος, “the site of production and reproduction,” into the realm of the political. In Montag’s argument, this perspective requires us to return to the insights provided by Foucault’s biopower. If biopower is
A. More Necroeconomics

a form of governance that operates by making life and letting die and necropolitics is a form of sovereignty that operates by making die and letting live, then necroeconomics is the market-ordained logic of death, a letting die that demands both biopower and necropolitics to insure smooth functioning (Montag 11).

Montag thus makes clear that necroeconomics is not an alternative to necropolitics, but rather a means to theorize the forms of governance and sovereignty that mask market-induced deaths. By focusing on eighteenth-century liberalism as applied to European wage labor, however, Montag ignores the complex relationship of capitalism to European imperialism, especially the slave trade and slave regimes. In the case of Montag, it is clear that his desire to find a formal theorization for necroeconomics led him to Adam Smith. Oddly, despite his greater attention to race and imperial geopolitics, Mbembe also ignores the slave trade as an inaugural form of “subjugation of life to death.” Following his emphasis on sovereignty, includes slavery only as a regime of governance, “one of the first instances of biopolitical experimentation.” Thus, he focuses exclusively on the plantation as the “emblematic and paradoxical figure of the state of exception,” rule by terror that prohibits any political act outside of suicide and flight (21). Leaving aside whether this is a politically productive account, the focus solely on the plantation regime also reflects Mbembe’s isolation of politics from the economics.\(^5\) As both a form of financial accumulation through seizure and a sale of labor for commodity production, the slave trade, by contrast, was an economic and a political relationship that upended classical notions of economics.

To consider the transatlantic slave trade under the rubric of necroeconomics we must turn not to the market that distributed labor and wealth in industrial England, but to what Marx called the “so-called primitive accumulation” of capital. Inverting Adam Smith’s account of the pre-condition of capital in a “previous” capital accumulation, Marx makes two major points about the relationship between primitive accumulation and the capitalist mode of production. Firstly, despite the “idyllic” account proffered by Smith, that located primitive accumulation in
the rationalization of human abilities between those who were industrious and intelligent and those who were “lazy rascals” and spendthrifts, Marx finds the first source of capital to be in violence. This violence, as David Harvey has argued, is aimed at disappropriation and dispossession (74), both in the soon-to-be industrialized Europe, with the “freeing” of wage laborers from their communal practices and feudal ties, and on the colonial periphery, where wars, enslavement, and forced labor marked the “dawn of the era of capitalist production” (Marx 915). To understand the relationship between necropolitics and capitalist forms of social reproduction, one must look to the violence of the market at its origins, not only as “dispossession” but as a necroeconomic “subjugation of life to the power of death.”

Throughout its long history, the transatlantic slave regime was characterized not only by its endpoint, that is, forced labor for production but also by its beginning, in the capture, imprisonment, sale and transatlantic crossing before incorporation into American regimes of enslavement. Indeed, this violent conscription to the market was fittingly denounced by Marx as the origin of what would later appear to be a natural, even providential, economic system in Adam Smith’s theorization. If this previous accumulation, the jump-starting of capital, is an earlier and perhapsarker form of necroeconomics, then, it is necessary to ask what role the dual figures of economic and politics played in the creation. The slave trade, as we will see, demanded justifications that could bring together commerce and sovereignty to account for the transition from capture to market. The earliest theorizations of necroeconomics, then, are found in these initial attempts to explain the anomaly of a market built on violent seizure. This initial violence, retroactively naturalized by racialized logics and the smooth functioning of sales and commodity production, was continued throughout the commercial chain in governmental forms of terror. Early commentators of the slave trade who sought to justify this anomaly ended up exposing the interplay of necroeconomics and necropolitics necessary for the construction of racial capitalism.
Gomes Eanes de Zurara: Profit and the Partition

The first record of Portuguese capture, trade and sale of enslaved Africans, Gomes Eanes de Zurara’s *Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea* [Crónica do Descobrimento e Conquista da Guiné] (1453), already accounts for this intricate play between sovereignty and the market. Written at the behest of the Infante Henrique, the *Chronicle* was part of a series of histories that Zurara dedicated to recounting the deeds of a monarchy in expansion. The center of this expansion, according to Zurara, is the Infante himself, responsible for establishing order in Portugal as well as for subjugating North Africa. The *Guinea* history continues where Zurara left off in his *Chronicle of the Fall of Ceuta* [Crónica da Tomada de Ceuta], with the Portuguese expansion down the western African coast (Blackmore xv). In 1441, Zurara recounts, Antão Gonçalves undertakes an expedition to the Rio Ouro region, previously visited by Gil Eanes when he surpassed Cape Bojador. Zurara notes the initial precarity of the expedition, which was small and captained by a youthful, if enthusiastic, member of the Infante’s court. However, he includes Gonçalves’ own exhortation to his crew that despite the paucity of their trading items, they might hope to bring back the “first captives:” “O how fair a thing it would be if we, who have come to this land for a cargo of such petty merchandise, were to meet with the good luck to bring the first captives back before the face of our Prince.”

Gonçalves’ prediction that they will return with the “first captives” underscores the extent to which the Portuguese understood the coast below Cape Bojador to be a new and unexplored territory. While Zurara employs language drawn from the religious wars of Northern Africa, he also introduces racial nomenclature to distinguish sub-Saharan Africans. Thus, he refers to the first captive, a lone man who had been leading a camel along the beach, as a “Moor” [mouro] but to the second captive as a “black Mooress” [moura negra] (Eanes de Zurara 75; Sweet 148-149; Bennett *African Kings* loc 1273). This racial distinction becomes crucial in the events that follow. Continuing to travel down the coast, Gonçalves is met by a ship captained by
Tristão Nunes, sent as reinforcement. Together they raid a village and, after having killed several men, take others captive. Among these, Zurara comments, is one by the name of Adahu, “[who] was said to be a noble; and he shewed in his countenance right well that he held the pre-eminence of nobility over the others” (Eannes de Azurara 48, Eanes de Zurara 82). Zurara calls these captives “Moors” [mouros] and notes that the Portuguese had hoped that he would be able to communicate with them in Arabic [mourisca] but are disappointed to find that they speak only Azenegue, a Berber dialect. Adahu, however, “had been to other lands where he had learned the Moorish tongue; forasmuch as he understood that Arab [alarve]” (Eannes de Azurara 49, Eanes de Zurara 84).

This noble, whom the Portuguese understand to be a Berber with experience among Arabic speakers, will be decisive in the institution of the slave trade in sub-Saharan “black Moors.” As Zurara goes on to comment, Adahu’s nobility made captivity particularly unbearable: “As you know that naturally every prisoner desireth to be free, which desire is all the stronger in a man of higher reason and nobility whom fortune has condemned to live in subjection to another.”7 This identification of nobility paves the way for an offer of an exchange: “so that noble of whom we have already spoken, seeing himself held in captivity, although he was very gently treated, greatly desired to be free, and often asked Antam Gonçalvez to take him back to his country, where he declared he would give for himself five or six Black Moors; and also he said that there were among the other captives two youths for whom a like ransom would be given.”8 It is at this point that Zurara defines the racial distinction between the noble Moor and the “black” Moors offered as ransom by referring to the medieval theory of the “Curse of Ham,” albeit committing the common error of confusing Ham with Cain: “And here you must note that these blacks were Moors like the others, though their slaves, in accordance with ancient custom, which I believe to have been because of the curse which, after the Deluge, Noah laid upon his son Cain, cursing him in this way: —that his descendants [geeraçom] should be subject to the descendants [geerações] of all others of the world.”9 The “Curse of Ham,” a pre-
circulating discourse of blackness and biblical guilt, thus provides a theopolitical basis for an obligation to serve and supports a calculation in which numerous common African slaves may be exchanged for one noble’s freedom.\textsuperscript{10}

The exchange proposed by Adahu, then, provides a new structure of profit by which ransom produces more enslaved Africans.\textsuperscript{11} This language of profit serves equally the religious and the commercial motives present in Zurara’s account. Indeed, he insists that Gonçalves’ interest in the exchange is to augment Christianity rather than pecuniary: “The will of Antam Gonçalves to return to that land, for desire of the ransom and profit he would get, was not so great as to serve the Infant his lord.”\textsuperscript{12} The Infante, as Zurara has previously established written, is most interested in saving souls and only secondarily in the labor gained from slaves. Following this, Gonçalves argues that profit can be made in salvation as well: “as the Moor told him, the least they would give for them would be ten Moors, and it was better to save ten souls than three—for though they were black, yet they had souls like the others, and all the more as they blacks were not of the lineage of the Moors but were Gentiles, and so the better to bring into the path of salvation.”\textsuperscript{13} Thus, Adahu’s promise of exchange is doubly profitable: not only are the “blacks” destined to servitude by the “Curse of Ham” but, as Gonçalves suggests here, as non-Muslims “gentiles” [gentis] they would also be easier to add to the Christian ledger.

This double profit appears to have convinced the Infante, as he permits Gonçalves to return to the region with the noble and two others of his retinue. Upon arriving at their destination, Gonçalves frees the noble, first commenting that the Infante has outfitted Adahu in garments he sees befitting of a noble status in the interest of obligating him through benefits (Eannes de Azurara 56, Eanes de Zurara 96). In releasing him, Zurara says, Gonçalves expects that Adahu’s nobility would serve as guarantor of his word. Instead of returning with the promised slaves for exchange, however, Adahu disappears and Gonçalves is forced to be content with exchanging the other two youth whom, he notes, must also have been held in high esteem as they were met by over a hundred of their polity who exchange them for slaves from diverse
regions. Adahu’s deception, however, has shattered the illusion of a shared code of honor with sub-Saharan nobles. As Zurara comments, Adahu never returns and Gonçalves learns his lesson: “but the Moorish noble never returned to fulfill his promise, neither did he remember the benefits he received. And thus by losing him, Antam Gonçalves learnt to be more cautious where before he was not.”

The profitable exchange at the origin of the Portuguese slave trade is thus justified through two stories of guilt: the Curse of Ham by which Zurara assigns and ancient theological guilt to the numerous enslaved who are exchanged for the nobles and the deceit of the noble Adahu, who has taken advantage of the Portuguese identification with his noble status to renege on his promised exchange for more enslaved. The idea of guilt adds a new racial language to that of religious captivity: the Africans are “blacks” [negros] if “Moors” [mouros], “gentiles” [gentiis] if “enemies” [inimigos]. They are “captives” [cativos] that are subject to ransom negotiations [resgate]. However, rather than ransom for a fungible currency, such as gold, the noble proposes an exchange for other captives who can then be sold for profit. This is an exchange of an enslaved noble life, itself justified as a putative captivity after war, for the enslavement of many who have not even the pretense of having been captured in war, or at least not one in which the Portuguese have participated. If before the exchange for the noble Africans, however, this profit had been one-to-one, the number of slaves depending on how many could be captured in war, the ransom of one life for more expendable lives institutes value gained through exchange rather than captivity. Zurara offers a justification for the differential values for human lives by suggesting that a theopolitical guilt marks some lives as destined for servitude and hence for the market in the same.

This exchange of noble youth for those enslaved by the Idzagen themselves is the necessary background for Zurara’s well-known description of the sale at Lagos. Not only does it establish a category of previously enslaved, thus muting the juridical question of just war, but it also transforms individual captivity into a market. Zurara recounts that with the arrival of the
first sub-Saharan captives, the Portuguese began to see the benefits of an investment in the expeditions: “captured in so short a time, and with so little trouble… and their covetousness now began to wax greater as they saw the houses of others full to overflowing of male and female slaves, and their property increasing.” From the Algarve, the Infante decides to send a well-outfitted fleet, manned by Lançarote de Freitas, a customs official. It is this fleet that will return with the 235 Idzagen for the first large-scale sale of enslaved Africans in Portugal.

Zurara himself registers the importance of this sale through a detailed description of the spectacle. His emotive identification with families separated during the “partition” [partilha] of the Idzagen into five equal groups to determine the fifth owed to the sovereign underscores the novelty of the sale:

But what heart could be so hard as not to be pierced with piteous feeling to see that company? For some kept their heads low and their faces bathed in tears, looking one upon another; others stood groaning very dolorously, looking up to the heights of heaven, fixing their eyes upon it, crying out loudly, as if asking help of the Father of Nature; others struck their faces with the palms of their hands, throwing themselves at full length upon the ground; others made their lamentations in the manner of a dirge, after the custom of their country. And though we could not understand the words of their language, the sound of it right well accorded with the measure of their sadness. But to increase their sufferings still more, there now arrived those who had charge of the division of the captives, and who began to separate one from another, in order to make an equal partition of the fifths; and then was it needful to part fathers from sons, husbands from wives, brothers from brothers. No respect was shown either to friends or relations, but each fell where his lot took him.

Zurara’s expression of pathos for those subject to the partition and sale has often been seen as a register of his ambivalence (Russell-Wood 30, Blackmore 28, Blackburn 105-106). The scene, however, might rather be understood as inaugurating the spectacle of the slave market, in which,
as Saidiya Hartman has argued, the white observer’s sentiment reifies racial difference by underscoring the anomaly of enslavement (17-23). Indeed, Zurara’s description mixes the language of humanity with bestiality: he positions himself as an observer moved by the scene of the pain of those whom he insists are “humans,” noting that if beasts lament their own, how much more do humans, when all are “sons of Adam” [filhos de Adam] (Eannes de Azurara 81, Eanes de Zurara 132). The statement is poignantly reinforced by his description of the laments emitted by the enslaved Idzagen which, he claims, follow their customs. These allow the Portuguese to understand their distress: “And though we could not understand the words of their language, the sound of it right well accorded with the measure of their sadness.”17

The striking passage, however, registers the observer’s sentiment only to justify the partition which, as Zurara notes, augments the pain of captivity. Indeed, the partition introduces a novelty into the traditional practice of war captivity. It is, as Zurara says, “fate” [sorte] that determines where each will go (Eannes de Azurara 82, Eanes de Zurara 134). In the following paragraph he will implore that the captives be consoled by a premonition of future events, a preview of what will eventually be Zurara’s figure of compensation for the enslaved: salvation through Christianization. The partition, then, inaugurates a necroeconomics which justifies the suspension of natural law necessary for the partition of families. Rather than a separation of the household from the public sphere, which Montag argues is the basis for a necropolitical reading, it is the necroeconomic appropriation of the household, as a site of reproduction, that becomes the very basis for a racialized political economy.

Indeed, while registering the dehumanizing effects of the slave market on those sold, Zurara offsets his sentimental identification with a promise of future repayment through Christian salvation. The basis of profit, the spectacle of suffering provoked by the partition cannot, thus, be immediately compensated without risking the profit envisioned by the expedition. Indeed, just as in the later “scenes of subjection” analyzed by Hartman, the spectacle itself serves to justify the suffering of the enslaved as it segregates those sold from those who
would profit from the sale (22). Zurara recounts that the laments of the enslaved are met by a gathering of local onlookers who stop their work to watch the sale: “for besides the toil they had with the captives, the field was quite full of people, both from the town and from the surrounding villages and districts, who for that day gave rest to their hands (in which lay their power to get their living) for the sole purpose of beholding this novelty.” The presence of Portuguese families also emphasizes the distinction between free laborers who gather as family and the enslaved whose partition undoes the law of kinship. As many readers have noted, Zurara marvels at the diversity of color and phenotype among the enslaved. Yet as he also labels the Idzagen as “black,” this distinction between Portuguese and African families and their fates suggests that the market also institutes a binary racial logic (Sweet 160, Bennett “Sons of Adam” 28-29, African Kings loc 1317). As much as it designates those subject to sale as “black,” it also defines those who will profit from the sale as Portuguese, Christian and non-black.

The market, then, institutes a new necroeconomic law manifested in a racial distinction but masked as a “fate” that decides the lots of the families separated. Given the anomaly of the sale, which requires the suspension of natural law, it is not surprising that Zuarara immediately brings into the picture the Infante Henrique, who has met the successful return of the caravels he outfitted in time to receive his due fifth of the slaves: “The Infant was there, mounted upon a powerful steed, and accompanied by his retinue, making distribution of his favours, as a man who sought to gain but small treasure from his share; for of the forty-six souls that fell to him as his fifth, he made a very speedy partition of these; for his chief riches lay in his purpose; for he reflected with great pleasure upon the salvation of those souls that before were lost.” The Infante, of course, has been present throughout the Royal Chronicler’s account, as he who institutes order in Portugal that allows for expeditions to be sent to Africa; he whom the authors of these expeditions seek to recompense with captives; and he who has provided the six caravels to bring the 235 slaves to the field in Lagos. But his appearance at this moment in the account gives the sovereign an additional task: to authorize a new necroeconomic law.
While Montag argues that necroeconomics demands that the state intervene when those who are to be sacrificed to the market resist their fate, the presence of the sovereign in Zurara’s account occurs together with the inauguration of the market in enslaved Africans. The state of emergency, in this case, reflects the fundamental conflict between natural law and the unnatural law of partition. If the sovereign authorizes this new law, Zurara also flirts enough with the bestialization of the Idzagen to provide a place for Christianity as a compensatory payment to offset the necreconomics of the slave market. As he will go on to say, despite the pain the captives experienced at that moment, they soon realized the benefits of living among Christians and, as he himself had witnessed, the sons and daughters of those sold on the field had become themselves indistinguishable from native Christians. The well-known scene in Zurara’s account, in other words, is one that authorizes *post facto* a new law in which justice becomes tied to calculation and distribution, especially through debt and future payment, rather than to natural law. In Zurara’s account, this suspension of natural law, the bedrock of theology and jurisprudence, demanded the appearance of the sovereign for authorization. In the following century, the Iberian theologians of the second scholastic took up the consequences of this necroeconomic model, this time favoring a new regime in which the market itself would be sufficient to authorize the suspension of natural law.

Necroeconomics and the Second Scholastic

Following these initial slaving expeditions, the Portuguese sought and received papal authorization for their activities through a series of bulls, beginning with the 1452 *Dum Diversas* granting the perpetual enslavement of “saracens” in the context of religious wars (Sweet 157). This continued justification of enslavement as captivity in war, however, contradicted the actual process of the slave trade as it developed over the next century through commercial exchanges between Portuguese and West Africans (Saunders 12-31, Klein 50-52, Caldeira 73-84). Given
this contradiction, a number of authors writing in the scholastic tradition of economics, a branch of moral theology, re-examined the justification of the anomalous market in human beings. Tellingly, the first theologians to question the legitimacy of the slave trade approached the topic from the perspective of distributive and commutative justice, the basis of Neoscholastic economic theory. The problem they addressed was precisely whether, if the capture and enslavement of Africans were deemed illegitimate because it occurred outside of the doctrine of just war, the secondary trade in slaves should likewise be made illicit.

One of the earliest considerations of the slave trade in these terms occurs in the Dominican friar Tomás Mercado’s treatise on contracts, *Suma de tratos y contratos*, published first in 1569 and then in a revised 1571 edition (Blackburn 153, García Añoveros 308-309). Writing from Seville, home to a growing slave market, Mercado dedicates one chapter near the end of the second book of his treatise to the question of the slave trade. After opening the chapter by calling the slave trade a business that is among the most “doubtful and even scandalous” he proceeds to posit a contradiction: while the king of Portugal has “lordship, dominion and authority” over areas of trade in Africa, “two thousand forms of deceit, one thousand thieveries and another thousand forms of violence are used to capture and carry away blacks from their lands and introduce them into the Indies or here.” Thus, while Mercado can list the titles by which it would be legitimate to enslave a person, he also notes that these titles account for only a part of the slave trade and that many slaves “are brought through deception, violence, force and theft.” Later in the chapter he will specify that the trade is now motored by “the great interest and money given for these blacks, for which reason it has commonly and widely been said that of the two parts that are brought, one is deceptively or tyrannically captured and forced.” For Mercado, when sold, these unjustly captured slaves upset the balance of a just economy. For, as he argues, if it is illicit to trade in clothes or other objects that have been robbed, it is even more so in the case of enslaved humans “since they lose their liberty, which cannot be reduced to a price or value.” Those who buy Africans under these circumstances are required to return

**A. More Necroeconomics**
them, but, he admits, this is practically impossible once Africans are separated from their origins (110v).

Mercado was the first to publicly argue, then, that the slave trade risked reducing a free life, which “cannot be reduced to a price,” to value established through trade. Furthermore, whereas Zurara had included the sovereign in his depiction of the first slave sale in Lagos, Mercado emphasizes that while the Portuguese king holds nominal jurisdiction, he is unable control the the slave trade, which is characterized by “two thousand forms of deceit.” The conundrum that Scholastic moral theology faced, then, was how to judge a market that was operating at the edge of sovereign control and most likely trading in lives captured outside of the restrictions that legitimated enslavement in Christian theology and jurisprudence. Acknowledging the limited role of the sovereign, the authors of the second Scholastic considered the case from the perspective of the individual traders who must decide whether to participate in what is likely, even from Christian jurisprudence, a traffic in captured lives.

After Mercado’s initial examination, the most influential consideration of this question is found in the late sixteenth-century Jesuit Luis de Molina’s treatise on economics, De Iustitia et Iure, published between 1593 and 1609. Molina’s treatise is an extended commentary on justice, in a tradition whose most recent predecessor was the Dominican Domingo de Soto (Alonso-Lashera 31-34). Central to the area of commutative justice, the only section of the treatise that Molina completed before his death, was the question of just price, a cornerstone of economics in the classical tradition. In his recent analysis of De Iustitia et Iure, Diego Alonso-Lasheras argues that Molina follows the Dominican account of just price. As opposed to the Franciscans, who argued that price should be based on the production value of the commodity, Dominicans argued that price was to be determined by community consensus, or communis estimatio. The Dominican account was more adaptable to the explosive world economy of the sixteenth century in which it was clear that price was too variable to be set by inherent value. The moral requirement of determining just price and the realities of doing business in long-distance trade
and multiple currencies required fine-tuning the basic Aristotelian notion of economic justice to account for exchanges between diverse systems of value. Given this context, the demand for just price ended up serving as a *post facto* justification of trading norms: rather than using just price to judge transactions, the transactions were understood to establish communal consensus (Alonso-Lasheras 149-154).

This issue of just price became a crucial notion in Molina’s consideration of the slave trade as it provided a basis for justice where natural law and positive law could not be aligned. In Disputations 32-40 of Book I, dedicated to commutative justice, Molina considers the ethics of the slave market. After a careful consideration of Roman jurisprudence and Christian theology as bases for justifying enslavement, Molina turns to the Portuguese slave trade in Africa. Citing his own interviews with slave traders in Lisbon, he concludes that the majority of enslaved Africans had been purchased through intermediaries rather than directly captured in just wars. Moreover, African wars themselves, he asserts, were almost never just wars and thus it is likely that most of the enslaved had been unjustly enslaved.\(^{24}\) Of course, since the Portuguese were not responsible for this original act of capture, the question became whether they should refuse to engage in this trade. Molina ultimately decides that each trader has a moral responsibility to ascertain whether the enslaved he sells had been justly enslaved (100). He admits, however, that this original capture becomes practically impossible to ascertain, as the intermediaries might not be forthcoming with the information. Thus, he decides, those that sell second-hand must assume in the act of the sale that the goods they are selling are legitimate and act only in the case in which “they are absolutely persuaded that the slaves that they possess in particular have not been reduced to slavery by legitimate title, something which will occur only rarely.”\(^{25}\)

Given the doubts over the original act of capture, therefore, Molina opts to favor the act of exchange itself as a guarantor of good faith. Even if the slave had been “stolen,” once traded in the market it becomes practically impossible to return the stolen life. Like Mercado, Molina acknowledges the moral gravity of trade in captured lives. If these lives are found to have been
unjustly enslaved, he argues, the owner must immediately make full reparations, including returning any profit he has made from the enslavement (106). Unlike Mercado, however, Molina assigns the market the role of arbiter. Because of his investment in just price as a measure of community consensus, Molina assumes that the transaction itself occurs in good faith. This is the case even for the cross-cultural transactions of the slave trade where profit was often made on exchanges between systems of widely divergent values. Citing the scarcity of European objects in Africa, the relative value assigned them and the cost of transport as well as the risk of death of the enslaved and slavers alike on the journey, Molina rejects the common criticism that the Portuguese purchased enslaved Africans for the price of trinkets: “And this issue should not attend to the value of the man as such, nor as one who has been redeemed by the blood of Christ, as has been objected by those who have marveled at this commerce, and for this sole reason deemed it suspicious, but rather the utility that the merchant obtains from the exported slave.”26 Through the theory of just price, then, the market becomes a self-sufficient mechanism for justice, whitewashing practically any basis for questioning the legitimacy of the slave trade.

In Molina’s market-oriented account of justice, the role of the sovereign is reduced to the assurance that all parties proceed according to good faith. Thus, he concludes that:

all those here considered who from the beginning possessed their slaves in good faith and were followed in their rights by those who came to possess them in good faith at some moment; and as we have said at the end of the preceding disputation, all who begin to possess in good faith, or who succeed him by rights, are not obligated to make any restitution until it has been shown absolutely that the possessed object does not pertain to him, since in doubt the condition of possession is greater. Furthermore, it is not the responsibility of subjects to examine whether or not the merchandise exported from this Kingdom or which is sold in it is legitimately exported and sold by this Kingdom’s subjects, but rather this is the responsibility of the Prince and his ministers. The subjects must turn themselves over to the providence and governance of their superiors, by
which reason it is evident that all those who sell slaves here to these merchants or to others must be considered to possess them in good faith. Even when they are persuaded, by virtue of the reasons we have presented in the preceding disputations, that many slaves exported from those places are unjustly reduced to slavery, this is not sufficient to prove it for each and every one, and for this reason, for none in particular.27

If Zurara requires the presence of the Infante to authorize a trade that defies natural law, Molina understands market transactions to be governed by a bureaucracy that guarantees their justice. The sovereign, in this late sixteenth-century account, fades to the background as the figurehead who maintains a smoothly functioning market, in turn a guarantor of a just community.

Thus, two centuries before Adam Smith extolled the benefits of the “invisible hand” of the market, Molina turned to the market to solve concerns over violence created by its own design. The market, which led to a racialized suspension of natural law, also converts death into financial risk and violence into a necessary pre-condition for its own existence. This violence then becomes sanitized by transactions that in turn guarantee a communal consensus. If necroeconomics can be defined as an economic system that lets a population die to guarantee its system of profit, its origins must be found in the theory and practice of the Iberian slave trade. As a theory of just price increasingly empowered the market, the exception to natural law became displaced from the act of sale, in which families were partitioned, to race and geography. In both cases, when the illusion of the self-regulating market broke down and doubts or resistance occurred, necroeconomics relied on theopolitical notions of guilt, sovereign power and governmental notions of order to suppress, justify, or whitewash its violence.

As Montag himself asserts, necroeconomics and necropolitics cannot be fully separated. The history of this interplay, however, does not begin with industrial capitalism or even with the pre-history of dispossession and enclosure in Europe. Rather, as Marx himself understood, the capital necessary to jump-start industrialization in Europe was derived from imperial wars in the
Americas and Africa. As one of the most extreme configurations of war, dispossession and the market, the slave trade is the earliest and most complex example of necrooeconomics. Early commentators were fully aware of the anomalies of human enslavement for profit. But by the end of the sixteenth century, the slave trade had established itself firmly within an expanding global economy. Molina’s justification of the secondary market in enslaved Africans, a decision which effectively became hegemonic, provided cover for the explosive expansion of the trade in the final years of the sixteenth century, in what has been called the first “great wave” that fed an expanding American market for enslaved labor (Wheat 4). In this decision, the simple fact of capture in Africa was sufficient to guarantee the justice of enslavement and the profits gained from sale and labor. The anomaly that required, in Zurara, the authorization of the sovereign thus became incorporated into the market itself. As just price came to be understood as a reflection of consensus, the pre-histories of racial guilt opened the door for the argument that geographical origin itself justified enslavement. Not only did the Iberian slave trade thus inaugurate necrooeconomics well before Adam Smith’s liberal theodicy, but it also confirms Robinson’s hypothesis that all capitalism is racial capitalism. While acknowledging this previous form of racial accumulation, we must also recognize that we are still living in the wake of both of these forms and their deep and intertwined histories must be further considered to understand the way that race, death and profit still collude.

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1 The scene of the first large-scale sale of enslaved Africans at Lagos is described in Eanes de Zurara 132-135. All further references to this work will cite the English translation and the Portuguese original. For a detailed consideration of the context of the sale, especially its racial dimensions, I have found particularly useful Bennett *African Kings,* particularly Chapter 3; Russell-Wood, especially 30-31; Sweet, especially 160-61; Blackmore 27-32. Other recent readings may be found in Blackburn 102-106 and Caldeira 66-68.

2 Historians of the early slave trade have generally emphasized one of these elements over the other, viewing the trade in enslaved Africans either as a part of the global financial transformations or as an escalation of a long-standing racialization of sub-Saharan Africans. For two excellent examples of these tendencies, see Blackburn and Sweet, respectively.
“Racism, I maintain, was not simply a convention for ordering the relations of European to non-European peoples but has its genesis in the ‘internal’ relations of European peoples…. As a material force, then, it could be expected that racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism. I have used the term ‘racial capitalism’ to refer to this development and to the subsequent structure as a historical agency.” Robinson 2. David Kazanjian has made another important point about Cedric Robinson’s Black Marxism by noting that “Capitalism helped make racism and racialism helped make capitalism, but raced subjects also at times sought to unmake both capitalism and racism in the name of race—all on scales at once extensively global and intricately local, in which the past both conditioned the present and burst forth from it to articulate unseen futures” 23. Indeed, Robinson’s book is as much a recuperative history of those who diagnosed and sought to undo the structural dynamics of racial capitalism, a lineage that he has termed “Black Marxism.” While it is not my project here to find these “new ‘historical’ agents,” it is important to note that neither institutions nor ideology are impervious to politics. Even as capitalistic institutions became hegemonic, defining social forms and their own self-reproduction in racist terms, they also spawned radical projects of critique.

4 “In the juridical breach that Christian thought, along with the conflict that the coexistence of Roman, canon, and ‘feudal’ law, engendered, African sovereignty came into relief, eventually pressing Christians to distinguish between sovereign and enslaved Africans.” Bennett African Kings loc. 1103

For an insightful critique of histories of slavery that follow Orlando Patterson’s theory of “social death,” itself represented by plantation regimes rather than the trade that fed them, see Brown 1233-1234.

6 Eanes de Azurara 40. “O que fremoso aquecimento seria, nos que viemos a terra por levar carrega de tam fraca mercadorya, acertarmos agora em nossa dita de levar os primeiros cativos ante a presença do nosso príncipe!” Eanes de Zurara 71.

7 Eanes de Azurara 54. “Como sabees que naturalmente todo preso desejá seer livre, o qual desejo tanto he mayor quanto a rezom ou nobreza mais abasta naquelle que por fortuna se acertou de viver em sogeïçom alhea” Eanes de Zurara 93.

8 Eanes de Azurara 54. “E assy aquelle cavalleiro de que ja fallamos, veendosse posto em cavateiro, no qual como quer que fosse docemente tratado, desejava ser livre, pollo qual muitas vezes requeyra a Antam Gilz que o levasse a sua terra onde lhe afirmava que darya por sy cinquo e moraz de semelhante rendiçom” Eanes de Zurara 93.

9 Eanes de Azurara 54, translation modified (see following footnote). “E aqui aves de notar que estes negros postoque sejam Mouros como os outros, som porem servos daquelles, poer antigo costume, o qual creo que seja por causa da maldicçom, que despois do deluvyyo lançou Noe sobre seu filho Caym, pella qual o maldisse, que a sua geïçom fosse sogeta a todallas outras geïções do mundo” Eanes de Zurara 93.

10 For a careful reading of Zurara’s reference to the Curse of Ham, including an analysis of his sources and confusion between Ham and Cain, see Braude 127-129. See also Sweet 148-149, 159 and Bennett African Kings loc 1306. The latter two authors cite the 1841 English translation which inaccurately translates “gerações” as “race” rather than the more historically accurate “descendants.”

11 Bennett has offered the most careful reading of this passage to date in which he emphasizes Adahu’s negotiation as political and diplomatic. See Bennett African Kings loc 1295-1306.

12 Eanes de Azurara 54-55. “A voontade de Antam Gonçalves nom era tam grande de tornar aquella terra por cobiça do resgate, ainda que proveto fosse, quanto avia desejo de servir ao Infante seu senhor” Eanes de Zurara 94.

13 “segundo lhe o mouro afirmava, o menos que por sy daryam seryam dez Mouros, e que milhor era salvar dez almas que tres, ca pego negros fossem, assy tinham almas como os outros, quanto mais que estes negros nam vinham da linagem de Mouros, mas de gentyos, pello qual seryam melhores, de trazer ao caminho da salvacao” Eanes de Azurara 57. “Mas o Mouro cavalleiro nunca tornou a satisfazer a sua meagem, nem tam pouco se nembróu do benefício; pello qual Antam Gilz perdendo, aprende a seer cautellosy onde o ante nom era” Eanes de Zurara 97-98.

15 Eanes de Azurara 61, translation modified. “Cobrada em tam breve tempo, e com tam pequeno trabalho… a cobiça começavelles de crecer, veendo as casos dos outros cheas de servos e servas, e suas fazendas acrescentadas” Eanes de Zurara 104.

16 Eanes de Azurara 81-82. “Mas qual sery a coarçam, por duro que seer podesse, que nom fosse fungido de piedoso sentimento, veendo assy aquella companha; ca huus tinham as caras baixas, e os rostro lavados com lagrimas, olhando huus contra os outros; outros estavam gemendo muy doarosamente, esgurdando a altura dos cecus, firmando os olhos em elles, braddando altamente, como se pedissem acorpo ao padre da natureza; outros feriam seu rostro com suas palmas, lançando-se tendidos em meo do chaão; outros fazima suas lemantações em maneira de canto, segundo o costume de sua terra, nasquaes postoque as pallavras da linguagem aos nosso nom podesse seer entendida, bem correspondya ao graao de sua tristeza. Mas pera seu door seer mais acrescentado, sobrevenerom aquelles que tinham carrego da partilh, e começaram de os apartarem huus dos outros; afim de poerem seus quinhoes em igualheza; onde convinha de necessitye de se apartarem os filhos dos padres, e as molheres dos maridos, e os huus irmaos dos outros. A amigos nem a parentes nom se guaradava nhu ley, somente cada huu caya onde o a sorte levava!” Eanes de Zurara 133-134.
Eannes de Azurara 81. “Postoque as palavras da linguagem aos nosso nom podesse seer entendida, bem correspondya ao graao de sua tristeza” Eanes de Zurara 133.

Eannes de Azurara 82. “Os quaaes leixavam em aquelle dya folgar suas maãos, em que estava a força de seu guaanho, soomen te por veer aquella novidade.” Eanes de Zurara 134.

Eannes de Azurara 82-83. “O Iffante era ally encima de huu poderoso cavallo, acompanhad0 de suas gentes, repartindo suas mercees, come homem que de sua parte querya fazer pequeno thesouro, ca de Rvj. almas que acontecerom no seu quinto, muy breve fez delles sua partilha, ca toda a sua principal riqueza stava em sua voontade, considerando com grande prazer na salvaçom daquellas almas que ante eram perdidas” Eanes de Zurara 135.

Eannes de Azurara 82-83. “O Iffante era Ally encima de huu poderoso cavallo, acompanhando de suas gentes, repartindo suas mercees, como homem que de sua parte queria fazer pequeno tesouro, da de Rv., almas que aconteceram no seu quintal, muito breve fez delas sua partilha, toda a sua principal riqueza estava em sua vontade, considerando com grande prazer sua salvação de aquelas almas que antes eram perdidas.” Eanes de Zurara 135.

Eannes de Azurara 82-83. “O Iffante era ally encima de huu poderoso cavallo, acompanhando de suas gentes, repartindo suas mercees, como homem que de sua parte queria fazer pequeno tesouro. Da de Rv., almas que aconteceram no seu quintal, muito breve fez delas sua partilha, toda a sua principal riqueza estava em sua vontade, considerando com grande prazer sua salvação de aquelas almas que antes eram perdidas.” Eanes de Zurara 135.

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