Soiled Gods:
Disciplinarity and the African-European Encounter in the Fifteenth Century

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In present-day Ghana, Elmina to be exact, long before Asante ascendancy or the earlier Anlo-Ewe arrival, an African lord approached a group of strangers who had recently landed. At that moment—which the Portuguese associate with 1481 but whose reckoning for local Africans remains obscured in distinct cultural configurations of the past—the lord encountered the largest contingent of Europeans to set foot in the ‘land of Guinea.’ As he greeted the strangers, the Caramança made clear that he held their lives in his hands enacting his omnipotence over locals including the inhabitants of Elmina—the name the Portuguese ascribed to the land jutting into the Atlantic where they hoped to erect a fort so as secure access to the inland gold trade, hence elmina (literally: the mine). Hours earlier the Portuguese commander, Diego de Azambuja, instructed his factor to secure landing rights and an audience with the reigning lord, whose title
was *Caramança* though the Portuguese initially mistook this as his name. Now, the Portuguese arrivals stood in formation awaiting the Caramança. Even if de Azambuja extended the request as a routine formality, his gesture—especially in view of the larger contingent of Christians present—acknowledged the Caramança’s dominion. After decades of fleeting contact, sovereigns from Mina and those whose dominion extended to the West African and West Central African coast still exacted respect for their position as lords and landlords—respect that the Portuguese accorded in ceremonial form. Diplomacy enacted through discernible gestures and motions facilitated trade and implicated the Portuguese in local kingship rituals directed at them and local subjects. As one contemporary noted, the Portuguese “carried on their business in peace and friendliness, without those warlike incursions, assaults and robberies which happened at the beginning.”

As the Portuguese awaited the Caramança’s arrival, the cacophony “of bugles, bells and horns, which are their instruments” announced the lord’s procession. Surrounded by an armed escort and accompanied by nobles, each trailed by two naked pages carrying their ruler’s stools and weapons, the Caramança approached with measured poised, naked yet bedecked in gold. The Portuguese chronicler, Rui de Pina (1440-1521), recounted how “the king came naked, and his arms and legs were covered with chains and trinkets of gold in many shapes, and countless bells and large beads of gold were hanging from the hair of his beard and his head.”

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1References from *The Asia of João de Barros* come from the version included in *The Voyages of Cadamosto*, [hereafter cited as Barros, *Asia*, and then according to Decade, Book, and Chapter], Barros, *Asia*, 1st Decade, Book Two, Chapter Two, 107.

Portuguese chronicler, João de Barros (1496-1570), personally acquainted with many of the Portuguese nobles present at the scene, described the procession in even greater detail.

“[Caramança] came with many people in war-like manner, with a great hub-bub of kettle-drums, trumpets, bells, and other instruments, more deafening than pleasing to the ear. Their dress was their own flesh, anointed and very shining, which made their skins still blacker, a custom which they affected as elegancy. Their privy parts only were covered with the skins of monkeys or woven palm leaves—the chiefs with patterned cloth, which they had from our ships. All, in general, were armed after their manner, some with spears and bucklers, others with bows and quivers of arrows; and many, in place of helmets, wore monkey skins studded with the teeth of animals…Those who were considered noblemen were followed by two pages; one of whom carried a round wooded stool so that they might sit down and rest when they wished; the other a war buckler. These noblemen wore rings and golden jewels on their heads and beards. Their king, Caramança, came in their midst, his legs and arms covered with golden bracelets and rings, a collar round his neck, from which hung some small bells, and in his plaited beard golden bars, which weighed down its untrimmed hairs, so that instead of being twisted it was smooth. To impress his dignity, he walked with very slow and light steps, never turning his face to either side.”

As the king reached the center of the Portuguese formation, Diogo de Azambuja descended from a makeshift platform. He reverently approached the Caramança who took his hand only to release it so as to “touch his fingers and then snap the one with the other, saying in his language ‘Bere, bere,’ which in ours means ‘Peace, peace.’” After de Azambuja responded with a gesture of his own, the nobles who accompanied the king repeated the hand-finger ritual. “But,” Rui de Pina, recalled “the manner in which they snapped their fingers differed from that of the king: wetting their fingers in their mouths and wiping them on their chests, they cracked them from the little finger to the index finger, a kind of salute here given to princes; for they say that fingers can carry poison, if they are not cleaned in this manner.” Following this series of gestures principals on both sides extolled rhetoric of goodwill and friendship but also warnings. If the Portuguese

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acted contrary to his will proclaimed the king “they would cause more harm to themselves than him.” With this stern warning, the Caramança conveyed what the rituals and his presence dramatized: as sovereign authority, he wielded power over life and death.

In a magical landscape inhabited by gods, royalty, the living, and the dead, the majesty of form engendered through coronations, processions, and sacred rituals constituted far more than a minor affair.\(^5\) As sources of authority, spectacles conveyed the mystery of power embedded in lordship.\(^6\) Trivializing symbolic enactments, if not overlooking them altogether as scholars of Atlantic history have done in relation to Africa, results in a distorted geography of power.\(^7\)

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\(^6\) The Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben introduced his most recent work by noting that “the inquiry into the genealogy—or, as one used to say, the nature—of power in the West, which I began more than ten years ago with *Homo Sacer*, reaches a point that is in every sense decisive. The double structure of the governmental machine, which in *State of Exception* (2003) appeared in the correlation between auctoritas and potestas, here takes the form of the articulation between Kingdom and Government and, ultimately, interrogates the very relation—which initially was not considered—between oikonomia and Glory, between power as government and effective management, and power as ceremonial and liturgical regality, *two aspects that have been curiously neglected by both political philosophers and political scientists*. Even historical studies of the insignia and liturgies of power from Peterson to Kantorowicz, Alföldi to Schramm, have failed to question this relation, precisely leaving aside a number of rather obvious questions: Why does power need glory? If it is essentially force and capacity for action and government, why does it assume the rigid, cumbersome, and ‘glorious’ form of ceremonies, acclamations, and protocols? What is the relation between economy and Glory?” Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, translated by Lorenzo Chiesa (with Matteo Mandarini) (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2011), xi-xii. In the acknowledged shift from an examination into “the nature” to “the inquiry into the genealogy…of power in the West,” Agamben signifies a conceptual shift toward a more robust engagement with context.

\(^7\) Why is the ‘simulacral regime’ (to quote a term employed by the political scientist Achille Mbembe, 2001) seen as lacking in substance when post-colonial authoritarians ‘remained in power throughout…through a mix of cunning, ruthlessness and election fraud’? “It was,” writes the anthropologist Charles Piot (citing Mbembe), “a state that has been little more than a simulacral regime,” subsisting on performance (Jean and John Comaroff 2006a, 2006b) and the staging of dramatic events—false coup attempts, hyperbolic celebrations of national holidays—as much as anything substantial.” In viewing performance as a stand in for something real as if to suggest that the state requires substance and structure privileges a rather narrow definition of the state and reduces it to Max Weber’s ‘monopoly over violence.’ Charles Piot, *Nostalgia for the Future: West Africa after the Cold War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 3.
neither Atlantic studies nor the history of the African diaspora, do symbolic enactments in Africa figure as sites for theorizing about the evolving history of sovereign power. The spectacles enacted along Africa’s Atlantic coast during the fifteenth century and beyond suggest that the region constituted a crucial site of lordship and sovereignty. Spectacles and ceremonies—ceremonies of encounters along with ceremonies of possession—repeatedly dramatized sovereignty while displaying authority over sacred knowledge, occasionally territory but mostly people. In the fifteenth-century, an African lord’s loci of power invariably centered on the ability to marshal vassals and retainers whose fortune, status, debts, ties or lack thereof triggered a political calculus transforming subjects into slaves—the charter beings of the early modern African diaspora. Focusing on the earliest spectacles and ceremonies re-calibrates the locus of Atlantic encounters while bringing forth new domains for examining the history of sovereignty.

At one level then, this book highlights the performances of lordship, the ceremonies and pomp expressive of early modern practices of sovereignty, in which Africans figured. Here the mystery of power, authority, and rule resided in rituals and rites. Generally overlooked in secular conceptions of power, (the force, coercion, violence emanating from an alleged savage

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8 In the acclaimed Ceremonies of Possession in Europe’s Conquest of the New World: 1492-1640 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), the historian Patricia Seed implicitly disavowed the relationship between the symbolic, Africa, and sovereignty. In so doing, she builds on a more explicitly framed genealogy associated with such modern classics as Arthur S. Keller, Oliver J. Lissitzyn, and Frederick J. Mann, Creation of Rights of Sovereignty through Symbolic Acts 1400-1800 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938). As the political scientist Siba N’Zatioula Grovogui observed in Sovereigns, Quasi Sovereigns, and Africans (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) political science alongside international law and international relations initially configured Africans as the antithesis of sovereigns.

9 Jan Vansina, Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa (Madison, The University of Wisconsin, 1990), 69, 73-77; Rosalind Shaw, Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

despotism), that since the eighteenth century have framed representations of the African-European encounter, the scholars that do focus on these expressions generally reduce them to cultural traditions.\(^1\) Flourishing at the moment of contact, these spectacles, even in the fifteenth century, drew on hybrid forms composed of novel terminology, pidgin languages, currencies, sacred knowledge, and rituals that have long invited considerable scholarly attention but largely as cultural affects rather than as instruments of power.\(^2\) It is fitting to view these forms and practices simultaneously as novel cultural effects and trappings of power intent on harnessing the

\(^1\)As religion emerged as a category of social abstraction leading to the decline of magic, the power once associated with rites and rituals became encased in the concept of tradition. Keith Thomas, *Religion & the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971); and Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). Despite this metamorphosis, one might legitimately ask if and when did magic cease to inform the ‘political’? Post-colonial states in Africa, for instance, have thrived on the magical. While scholars equate state magic with the simulacrum, as in ‘simulacural regime,’ (Mbembe 2001) the question of its efficacy, if not potency, at least for its citizens can not be in doubt. Rather than ascribe this to the primitiveness of Africans, we should recall how well into the twentieth century Europeans perpetuated the belief surrounding the mystery of the African ruler or the ‘magical state’ since they imprisoned and then exiled erstwhile sovereigns like Prempeh I (Asante’s ruler) and Agaja (Dahomey’s ruler) but also their relatives including among others Dahomey’s sovereign King Guezo’s mother. By sending Prempeh I to Elmina and Agaja to Martinique, European were not simply disciplining and punishing recalcitrant rulers but actually removing a competing source of authority; taking hostage, containing, or removing the magic of the ruling dynasty. In doing so, Europeans were not just punishing defeated armies and native subjects, they were securing their own right to rule at a moment when their own polities were still engaged in the politics of magic even though nation-states, republics, and constitutional monarchies were on the horizon. In other words, Europeans—though disavowing the belief in state magic were enraptured enough to remove the existing authorities and potential challengers to the new (colonial) order. They were not simply acting on the basis of a secularized political rationality. See Richard Burton, *A Mission to Gelele (the king’s son)* King of Dahomey (1864); Jan Vansina, *Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 239; Annie E. Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture & Popular Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Suzanne Preston Blier, *The Royal Arts of Africa: The Majesty of Form* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998).

presence of strangers. The spectacles were, in fact, staged for European consumption but also the subjects of an African lord intent on asserting autonomy in the juridical and economic periphery. In this respect, the opening performance constituted a multi-dimensional ceremony: First, the Portuguese directed it at themselves and other Christians at a distance. The African lord, in turn, focused the Europeans’ gaze on his authority. By these actions, the lord marshaled the attention of his subjects on the assertion of dominion thereby charting a new locus of sovereignty from that wielded by established lords situated inland. We, therefore, need to see the encounter engendering a spatial reconfiguration of power that eventually led to the emergence of new (breakaway) social formations whose very origins and cultural logic resided principally in the expanding Atlantic complex. For this reason, the earliest encounters between Africans and Europeans embodied more than an aberrant yet overlooked moment in the long


14 In framing the earliest moment of contact between Africans and Europeans, the anthropologist Rosalind Shaw observes how “[w]hen Europeans arrived on this coast, then, they did not suddenly propel untouched and isolated African localities into the wide, cosmopolitan world: a translocal sphere of commercial relations was already in place, and it intersected with a trans-Saharan trade that linked three different continents. Instead, the growth of European trade brought about the integration of the upper Guinea coast’s existing commercial system with new kinds of transregional circulations. This new integration was, however, to transform the region in unprecedented ways.” While I concur with Shaw’s framing, I would suggest that the exclusive focus on the commercial circuit and networks at the expense of the political process, while germane to her project, warrants reconsideration given the vibrant and residual nature of the political process in the process of memorizing. In other words, memory of the political seems much more commonplace than memory of commodification and other economic processes. Rituals often derive from a political process or phenomenon that result in dislocation disruption, including conquest, slavery, and colonialism. While the objectives and the result have economic implications they are often experienced and represented as a political (cultural) phenomena. Rosalind Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade*, 27. Barbara W. Blackmun, “Iwebo and the White Men in Benin,” *Through African Eyes: The European in African Art, 1500 to Present*, edited by Nii O. Quarcoopome (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Art, 2010), 29-37; John K. Thornton, *The Kongoese Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684-1706* (Cambridge University Press, 1998). On the new locus of authority see Walter Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545-1800* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969); Robin Law, *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving Port* (London: James Currey, 2004); Kristin Mann, *Slavery and the Birth of an African City: Lagos, 1760-1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

history of contact and trade. Diplomacy—a term rarely invoked in African-European interaction—may best characterize such encounters.16

Soiled Gods analyzes how traditions of sovereignty shaped African-European diplomacy over the course of the fifteenth century. In an age marked by discoveries, encounters, and conquests, the performative, discursive, and material foundations of power—the collective locus of sovereignty—structured the ways that lords and subjects, Africans and Europeans, interacted. Expansion in the form of discoveries, encounters, and conquests, brought distinct manifestations of power and, by implication, various forms of sovereignty into relief. These diverse traditions of sovereignty surfaced during encounters when those who embodied sovereign power (in their relationship to the occult, in their regulation of legitimate violence, in their dominion over people, or in their control over territory) insisted on being understood on their respective terms. The resulting dynamic—acts of translation—configures the way in which power both comprised and suffused the social landscape.

The anatomy of power has occupied a vast array of thinkers but philosophically and historically its form and formation have almost been almost exclusively framed in a manner privileging the Western experience. Even the language for discerning power in non-Western and culturally hybrid contexts draws narrowly on the decidedly modern Western experience.17 Here we might note that the modern classical expression of power, which the German social theorist Max Weber saw as the state embodying a monopoly of violence, continues to wield hegemonic influence over our theoretical imaginary. Admittedly formulated as a general definition of the

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state and its role in framing the modern experience, subsequent writers have had few philosophical qualms about projecting Weber’s analytics of power into the past. Rather than take issue here with the anachronism of projecting a modern entity as the universal embodiment of the state form, I wish to direct our attention to the claims concerning the state’s purported monopoly over power. Weber’s definition, though mindful of a contested terrain, contends that the viability of a state rests on its ability to exercise hegemony over competing fonts of power. The state, we are told, exerts force exclusively in its domain. Being that the case, one must still ask what are the analytical implications for sites of encounters where distinct authorities and lords stood face to face? Are we to assume that such sites lacked a monopoly over violence? Posed differently, how should we configure power at moments and sites of encounters? By insisting on the coevalness and mutually constitutive nature of sovereign authority in early modern Africa and Iberian imperial absolutism—one of the book’s principle claims—I argue for a wider, Atlantic African, terrain and theorization of power that brings into relief the way writers have naturalized histories of political practice in Africa and Europe as mutually exclusive phenomena. My insistence on the mutually constituent nature of power and statecraft in the early African-European encounter does not deny either African or European forms a primordial

18Most recently, the anthropologist Irene Silverblatt drew on Weber’s configuration of the state in making the case that the sixteenth-century Spanish experience in the Americas inaugurated the modern era. “From the sixteenth century through the mid-seventeenth century,” observed Silverblatt “Spain was in the vanguard of the modern world…” Building on Weber’s idea that the state was instrumental in ushering forth the modern experience, Silverblatt writes that “we trace our modern beginnings to the effort of European monarchs to extend their power (and?) consolidate their victories—the initial moments of state-making.” Irene Silverblatt, Modern Inquisitions: Peru and the Colonial Origins of the Civilized World (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

19In a recent work on post-colonial social formations, the anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff have pointed to the limits of Western theorizations of power but inadvertently also make a case for its universality. In postcolonies one struggles to locate a theorists, concept, or phenomenon that invites comparison with Weber’s alleged universalism though the Comaroffs note “the modernist states put in place with ‘decolonization’” represented “the Weberian ideal type always more idealized than typical, always more the object of aspiration than accomplished fact.” Law and Disorder in the Postcolony, edited by Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), vii.
existence but questions theorization that excludes Africa as a site in the formation of sovereignty while emphasizing that the still definitive expression of power—the monopoly over violence—constitutes only one modality for discerning sovereign might. The histories of power in Africa and Europe have steadily evolved but in the earliest phase of the African-European encounter they played a crucial role in shaping the nature of sovereign authority in the emerging Atlantic complex. As a constituent element of a cataclysmic era, early African-European diplomacy engendered novel social forms throughout the Atlantic littoral. To ignore these diplomatic enactments as we have results in a static, ahistorical but also over-determined understanding of European power, which scholars of African Studies, the African diaspora, and Atlantic history still rely on to represent the story of Europe and the legacy of the encounter. For this reason, we see new political orientations and politics arising, which would also require the deployment of new ideologies and practices of legitimacy.

Political theatre, an embodiment of politics, clearly played an important role in the early history of the Atlantic but so did the prevailing registers of political thought which, along with the complex European legal regimes (Roman [civil] and canon law) in tandem with the will and authority of African lords, brought into relief the practices and discourses of dominium that acknowledged African sovereignty. Dominium, by shaping the earliest interaction between Europeans and Africans, engendered a far more complicated history than the still prevailing trope of African alterity whereby perceptions of savage difference resulted in African enslavement and colonial domination. To be sure, the occasional Christian Prince heralded conquest, forced conversion, and enslavement for pagan foes, but a more complicated social reality, as we shall see in Chapter One, tempered the rhetoric mediated through Roman law. Intent on bringing this fifteenth century social reality into relief in the European encounter with
Africa, this book delineates a far more layered intellectual and cultural landscape than we are accustomed to imagining for early African-European encounters.

As manifestations of political thought, the principle forms of the early modern African-European encounter—the slave trade and slavery—remain remarkably under-examined.\(^{20}\) In view of how contemporary political theorists frame the early-modern African presence this lacuna should not surprise. In his pioneering discussion of New World encounters, the historian of political thought, Anthony Pagden, devotes considerable energy to discussing Aristotle’s theory of natural slavery. But in stark contrast to the ways in which he conveys the layered Spanish perception of Indians, Pagden simply notes that African enslavement did not represent a matter of concern—theological or otherwise.\(^{21}\) As a commentary on nascent imperial governance and *policia* (order), the slave trade and slavery invited theological scrutiny in the sixteenth century; this scrutiny was explicitly configured around slavery in Spain, a wide-spread institution which only in the late fifteenth century became an increasingly Africanized social

\(^{20}\)In describing the intellectual rationale of his recent study of Nigerian oral traditions, the writer and folklorist Isidore Okpewho directs attention to the marginalization that indigenous narratives of subordination experience in relation to the Nigerian pantheon of ‘national’ narration and inadvertently delineates the chasm that distances the African diaspora and its cultural memories from Nigeria’s past—arguably a manifestation of political thought. “I think,” writes Okpewho, “it is about time we broke the monotony of our glorification of great ‘emperors’ and ‘warrior kings’ of the romantic past and looked at the other side of the equation. What about the peoples they destroyed in pursuit of their greatness: have they no stories of their own to tell?...If we continue to sing the praises of successful warmongers and usurpers of other people’s lands and wealth, what right do we have to chastise European colonizers who did exactly the same? And do we not see a disturbing resemblance between some of these figures from the ‘heroic’ past and the ignoble villains who continue to lead their nations to ruin in the Africa of our own day? *Once Upon A Kingdom: Myth, Hegemony, and Identity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), xi. As a theorization of culture rooted in natal alienation, the scholarship on the African diaspora rarely directs its critique at contemporary African narration of the past. Though natal alienation frames her critique, Saidiya Hartman brings scrutiny to elite state formation and its narrative form. See, *In To Lose Your Mother* (New York: Farrar & Strauss, 2007).

\(^{21}\) The absence of ‘concern’ represents a constituent feature of the ‘American dilemma.’ As the Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal observed in relation to the modern American dilemma: “The result is an astonishing ignorance about the Negro on the part of the white public in the North. While Southerners, too, are ignorant of many phases of the Negro’s life, but their ignorance has not such a simple and unemotional character as that in the North.” Cited in Gene Robert and Hank Klibaroff, *The Race Beat: the Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 3-23.
phenomenon when by 1550 enslaved Africans totaled more than ten percent of the population. By constricting the African presence in Spanish thought to the sixteenth-century New World, Pagden understandably equates Africans with slaves but in doing so he forecloses a more ample perspective—rooted in the fifteenth-century Atlantic encounters among Africans and Europeans—that brought the issue of dominion to the fore along with long-standing debates about the legitimacy of conquest, territorial dispossession, and enslavement. As the medievalist Steven A. Epstein noted “the European background to New World slavery matters.” By situating slavery and the slave trade on a wider and earlier intellectual canvas we are afforded a distinct perspective on the African-European encounter—a perspective that complicates the teleology that still frames the history of slavery. In doing so, would see as the medievalist James Muldoon observed how “medieval ideas and institutions continued to shape the way in which Europeans operated long after the supposed end of the Middle Ages somewhere in the fifteenth century.”

Western writers and intellectuals have always addressed themselves to the issue of slavery. Among the various terms that defined the lexicon of early-modern European political thought, slavery figures prominently. Long before Scottish political economists and French Physiocrats linked bondage to despotism and inefficiency, scholastics and humanists employed slavery to mediate on the human condition, status, and the nature of an existing social order.

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Greek philosophers, Roman jurists, Christian theologians, and Renaissance humanists, drawing on their respective authorities, legal statures, and the Old Testament, invoked slavery as the modality of subjection. Slavery framed lordship, in so doing configured mastery and liberty alongside tyranny and despotism, but also brought into relief the relative status of others. In many parts of Christendom during the High Middle Ages, slavery steadily ceded ground to serfdom but its institutional legacy was still manifest in treatises concerning the social order.\textsuperscript{25} As the subjects of Christian polities encountered diverse gens (people) and a plethora of nations, slavery figured prominently in the ethnographic imagination as a trope for expounding on such social phenomena as honor, virtue, shame, violence, hierarchy, authority, dominion, sovereignty, life and death. Indeed it was the rare discussion of power that did not reference slavery as its antithesis and the analogue of liberty. But as New World slavery was framed in opposition to liberty—personal liberty—the term’s more expansive meaning contracted. Though slavery came to represent the antithesis of personal liberty, the association of bondage with Indians but particularly Africans resulted in an embodied difference whereby slavery became synonymous with black and freedom with whiteness. In this transformation, slavery exemplified personal status—the status of the individual—thereby diminishing the term’s more complicated relationship to power. Here then we can delineate the ways slavery was semantically transformed into a racially charged form of dominion severed from the political formation.\textsuperscript{26}

Though still associated with terms that carry political valence—despotism and tyranny—writers employ this nomenclature to reference the masters authority or comment on the coercion.


required to insure the institution’s productivity. Slavery, in effect, became synonymous with individual dominance or its productive capacity. This transformation embodies a neglected history as does the era that precedes it. For this reason, slavery remains remarkably under-examined as a social relation in the extreme but in particular in histories of political thought.27

Such claims are even more pronounced in relation to the slave trade.

In the western imaginary, the slave trade—both the act of enslavement and the middle passage—has not occupied an analogous role to slavery. As an exemplar of extreme horror writers generally have let the phenomenon speak for itself.28 Perceiving enslavement as the spoils of war and conquest, they implicitly distinguished the slave trade from slavery. In the formative years of the Atlantic slave trade, several Popes and the occasional theologian questioned the morality of enslavement but their concerns, as we shall see in Chapter Four, were largely driven by apprehension toward the new commercial ethos to which human trafficking was linked. The Atlantic slave trade thus avoided scrutiny until the late eighteenth century when British abolitionists prompted by their cause, conducted empirical research on mortality rates among the traffickers and their human cargo. To this day, the abolitionists’ thematic concerns, temporal delimitations, and moral critique configured the intellectual approach to the slave trade. “Because,” as the intellectual historian Christopher Brown noted “we have inherited the world that the abolitionists and their allies helped to make.”29 In short, the fact findings of British


29 Christopher Leslie Brown, Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 3. In view of “the abolitionist and postabolitionist view that chattel slavery is fundamentally unjust,” Mary Nyquist writes that “[t]empted as some may be to understand political slavery as expressive of identification on the part of those who happened to be ‘free’ with those who were not, the genealogical analysis undertaken here will critique this assumption as an anachronistic projection form later liberalism(s).” Arbitrary Rule, 1-3, 20.
abolitionists still provide the foundational perspective on the slave trade and by implication the history of African-European diplomacy. For this reason, the abolitionist imaginary—moral reform forged in the crucible of liberalism and empire—also delineated the epistemological terrain that supplanted an earlier Iberian history of African-European diplomacy.\textsuperscript{30} Interestingly enough, the dominant configurations of the Iberian past in the Atlantic, a story that we are told begins with Columbus, have abetted English narration in supplanting the earlier Iberian experience with Africa and Africans.

Here it is fitting to note that I come to this project as a historian of the African experience in Latin America who has long been intrigued by the anomalous location of both the African and blackness in Latin American history. I am convinced that this is related to how scholars of Spain, Spanish America, and now the Spanish Atlantic have been able to conceive of a Spanish imperial formation that eschews Spain’s initial involvement in Africa as if these practices had no bearing on the history of the Indies beyond the story of chattel slavery. Historians of colonial Latin America, if they acknowledge Spain’s conflict with Portugal in the early Atlantic, largely treat that experience as an aside and confine it to the conflict over the Canary Islands, Portugal’s detaining of Columbus following his initial landfall in the Indies, and the events leading up to the Treaty of Tordesilla (1494), a Papal administered accord that parcelled trade routes into Portuguese and Spanish spheres of influence. With the conflict of the Canaries a notable exception, scholars limit this narrative to the period 1492-1494 thereby obscuring nearly a century of Iberian imperial practices in which both the Castilian and Portuguese monarchy along with theologians gave considerable thought to Africa and their subjects’ encounter with Africans.

\textsuperscript{30}In relation to the Indies (the New World), the genealogy of this act of displacement can be tackled in Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra \textit{How to Write the History of the New World: Histories, Epistemologies, and Identities in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World} (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2001).
In rendering this history, beginning with the Conquest of Ceuta, as an aside in the formation of the West, the fabrication of imperial Spain, and the history of the Indies, or confined at best to being a Portuguese story, scholars have configured Spanish interaction with Africa as the history of slavery in which just war legitimized the process of enslavement and Roman law governed master-slave relations.\(^{31}\) But much, as we shall see, is lost by this circumscribed perspective. Over the course of the fifteenth century, Europeans—both the Portuguese and Spaniards—manifested a shifting political rationale in relation to Africans and the African Atlantic that belies the conventional representation that culminates in the slave trade. In their conflict with each other—in which the competing legal regimes and political (social) thought played a significant role—alongside the diverse practices that Africans rulers extracted from Iberians on the ground, a far more complicated historical experience and story of power emerges than the claim that perceived or embodied differences—racial alterity—configured the experience leading to enslavement. If, however, our teleos configures Africans as slaves who solely represented property, we, in turn, lose sight of how competing legal regimes shaped Iberian imperial expansion.

Scholars of Spanish America and the Spanish Atlantic rarely relate slavery to empire. The study of slavery, largely limited to a category of possession and labor but by implication also dominance, stands in stark contrast to imperial histories. Empire defined slavery but also the Iberian Atlantic slave trades. Both also conspired in the formation imperial absolutism. New World slavery materialized in the wake of European expansion, which corresponded with western absolutism’s emergence. While scholars of nineteenth-century Latin America have begun to explore the relationship between slavery and empire, this has not been the case for early

modernists or social theorists.\textsuperscript{32} Indeed, the centrality accorded to early modern capitalism in studies of slavery has overshadowed absolutism’s formative relationship with human bondage in both Guinea and the Indies. Even as the extant pockets of merchant capitalism sustained Christian expansion and colonization, it also required the sanction from absolutist rulers, in the form of charters. In return for real and symbolic obeisance, royal subjects requested and received approval to contract trade, discover new territories, and even extend the Christian presence. Such endeavors, in the absolutist era, almost always necessitated royal authorization. In the Iberian Atlantic—where absolutism initially took hold—the sovereign’s authority reigned ascendant over all domains until the end of the Baroque era.\textsuperscript{33} As an early embodiment of absolutism, the Castilian Monarchy assumed prominence in ruling; a marked a contrast to the subsequent English experience where the crown assumed a more limited role and an individual’s authority over private property gradually reigned supreme. In this respect, the Spanish colonies represented an anomaly—or a route not taken. Out of a desire to regulate, a feature of absolutism’s rationale, Castile’s sovereigns subjected trade, discovery, and settlement to their authority in hopes of extending royal dominion and benefiting materially.\textsuperscript{34} Their governance also assumed knowledge about places, commodities, and populations. The institutional structures that sustained absolutism, which included the Christian Church, thus served as an instrument of ethnographic production—an instrument designed to gather information about the populace and thereby control the King’s various vassals including slaves. For these reasons, the absolutist monarchs manifested intense interest in regulating the slave trade and slavery


\textsuperscript{34}Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert, \textit{A Nation Upon the Ocean Sea: Portugal’s Atlantic Diaspora and the Crisis of the Spanish Empire, 1492-1640} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
ostensibly since those institutional formations touched on more than property. Slaves represented both property and people. Scholars have long been sensitive to the ambiguity that the enslaved embodied. But modern studies of slavery, by projecting liberal historicism on to an earlier era, conflated the ascendancy of property with sovereign power. From this perspective, power in the form of ownership, dominance, and work shaped the slave experience. But in early modern Spanish America masters were not the only ones defining the nature of slavery or even the most powerful authorities manifesting dominion over the enslaved. Masters competed with royal and ecclesiastical officials as they attempted to extend their dominion over persons simultaneously defined as chattel, vassals, and Christians.

In early modern Spanish America absolute authority did not accompany slave ownership. As Spain’s rulers extended their dominion throughout the unfolding Atlantic world they consistently encroached on the domain of private property, which occupied a privileged place in the mercantile economy. While Roman law, in theory, accorded masters complete authority over slaves, Spain’s Monarchs frequently violated the owner’s dominion while expecting their slave vassals to adhere to existing laws. Intent on upholding imperial rule, Castile’s sovereigns often transgressed the masters’ domain. Yet in intervening on the sanctity of the master-slave relationship, the Catholic Monarchs eschewed doing so in an arbitrary manner. Instead they relied on existing laws—natural law, canon law, civil law and customary law—that constituted slaves as vassals and Christian subjects. Jurisdictional conflicts surfaced, of course, with their attended consequences for empire and slavery. These conflicts and their consequences insinuated politics into the African-European encounter.

In conceding that ‘politics’ were present in the early modern African-European encounter, the formative century of the slave trade and its resulting diasporas are restored to an
imperial past that historians generally do not configure as the domain of Africans or slaves. As a
discursive entity, early modern Africa initially emerged through the Portuguese and Spanish
imperial encounters that simultaneously engendered the African diaspora. In the making of early
modern Africa and the African diaspora, empire played a foundational role. As the imperial
encounter bestowed the foundational grammar that brought these abstractions into existence,
they transformed the imperial formation. Indeed, in the half century prior to Christopher
Columbus’s monumental voyage, sailors, merchants and the occasional missionary in the service
of Iberian royal households brought novel representations of Africa and Africans into relief. As
referents of early modern Africa and some of the earliest contributions to the Africanist archive,
these accounts, chronicles, and hagiographies were simultaneously constitutive of Europe and
the European encounter with Africa and Africans.

Restoring the African experience to its imperial origins represents far more than a
historiographical intervention. This act requires both an acknowledgement that beyond the
instrumentality of chattel slavery African history occupies an underdeveloped status in Iberian
and Latin American studies and a recognition that historical reconstruction needs to be
configured in tension with the temporal specificity of an evolving imperial formation. At first
glance, it may seem counterintuitive to formulate the problem of the African past by situating it
in relation to Iberian or Latin American colonial studies. But if we begin with the supposition
that each analytical field (i.e. Latin American History, American History, and Black Studies)

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35In offering a critique of Mexican nationalism and the ways in which historians of Mexico engage and reproduce
the violence of exclusion, I have long privileged the colonial as social field for framing the past, the period before
the emergence of the Mexican Republic which Mexican nationalist framed as the proto-nation thereby rendering
what I now understand to be a much more narrow configuring of the Spanish imperial that in all of its expansiveness
always already incorporated forms of difference. To acknowledge this, the distinction between the colonial and
imperial state is not simply a matter of semantics but is to acknowledge the larger heuristic and epistemological
terrain in which the African and black figured well beyond a abstracted demographic presence.
engenders specific demands and pasts, then this focus seems appropriate. Interestingly enough, Latin American post-colonial scholars have been particularly attuned to this dynamic.

In *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico*, the historian María Elena Martínez states that her priorities are “to highlight some of the specifications of Spanish colonialism.” “Although there are continuities and similarities between different colonial projects,” Martínez writes “colonialism cannot be reduced to a single model; it has multiple historicities. The Spanish colonial project, the earliest in the Americas was driven by historically and culturally specific forces, and its course was determined by early modern dynamics on both sides of the Atlantic. It differed most from modern imperial projects.” In making this claim, Martínez adds her voice to an illustrious group of Latin Americanists, including Fernando Coronil, Jorge Klor de Alva, Walter Mignolo, and Jose Rabasa intent on redirecting current conceptions of colonialism. In an exchange that has been stylized as the

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36Historical representations of the African past cannot simply mimic the demands and conceptual requirements of colonial British America or for that matter those of the United States. Since different cultural logics shaped the engagement with the Africa and Africans, the pioneering work on African cultural formation that currently frames eighteenth-century (British) Atlantic studies cannot stand in for the African history of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Latin America. In making this claim, I am mindful of the peculiar historical moment in British American history and the ideological formation through which the authors framed their questions and answers. The context that, for example, animated the historian Michael Gomez’s study of slavery and ethnicity in *Exchanging their Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998) is peculiar to a historical moment in American history and the specificity of U.S. black cultural formation in the late twentieth century. For this reason, the dynamics that constitute the political and economic context in which the European-African encounters took place shaped the slave trade and defined the basis for understanding of slavery, the formation of ethnicity and community has to acknowledge the centrality of capitalism and its social logic. A distinct social logic characterized the early modern period and the various categories that we treat as universals the African, the slave, the slave trade, ethnicity, culture, etc. African history in the U.S. for instance, reflects the specificity of its historical-political formation that simply cannot be imposed universally or seen as relevant in different national/cultural contexts—(one might note that terms even such framings as ‘Middle Passage’ or ‘African diaspora’ reference a specific intellectual formation that is constitutive of American Studies). Yet in acknowledging as much we need also to contend with a nationalist denial: the elite configuration of Latin American history in which the black and therefore the African is not validated or valorized. How then does one engage in conceiving of an African history in and for such a context? Asked differently, what then are the configurations or dominant representations of the African past required for the polities of Latin America?

‘post-colonial debate’ these aforementioned scholars of Latin America displayed a rigorous
historicist sensibility. Yet whereas we are now constantly reminded of the need to historicize our
understanding of the colonial experience, thinking through what this might mean for slave, black,
or African experiences which were constitutive of the Iberian colonial experience has yet to
emerge as a subject of inquiry.

My insistence that we historicize the African-European encounter, notably the slave trade
and by implication slavery in the Americas, is analogous to Latin American post-colonialists’
efforts to configure the history of Latin America in relation to Iberian temporalities thereby
disavowing the English and French experience as the normative incarnation of the colonial.38 In
fact, the Latin American post-colonial critique of Anglo- and Franco-phone post-colonial studies
anticipate my concerns directed at late 18th and early 19th representations of the slave trade—
rooted in Anglophone moral judgments that have rendered the slave trade into a transcendent

38 “I agree with all of those insisting that colonialism is not homogenous, that we should pay more attention to the
diversity of colonial discourses,” writes the literary historian Walter Mignolo insisting “that postcolony...
historical phenomenon. The slave trade in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries embodied distinct forms from subsequent incarnations of the trade; still scholars generally project backwards without engaging the distinct temporality and its implication for the very categories and meanings that have become constitutive of the slave trade. What this calls for among other things is the reconstruction of African history (for Latin America) that does not circumscribe the story to the history of numbers and abstracted cultures that privilege a formulation of the slave trade and slavery anchored in a triumphant narrative of capitalism. 39

By conveying both the routine and the exotic, travelers produced representations of Africa that built on but eventually broke from classical depictions of the African continent. Early modern images of Africa were also distinct from subsequent perceptions of Africa that legitimized the European partition of the African continent in the nineteenth century. To perceive the image of Africa as singular—invariably configured as the embodiment of alterity, radical difference, or the ‘other’—trivializes a distinct historical moment in which rituals, spectacles, and symbols but also laws and African lordship were instrumental in configuring sovereignty and power. Consequently, our histories but also contemporary criticism, as Chapter Two illustrates, have lost sight of the complex calculus of power shaping the early interaction among Africans and Europeans, engendering an early modern Africa and producing the African diaspora. Clearly, fifteenth and sixteenth-century accounts, chronicles, and hagiographies reflected the ways in which early modern European travelers perceived the encounter with Africa

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39 Since the publication of Philip Curtin’s monumental study *The Atlantic Slave Trade* numbers, but not the logic of numeracy, animate the dominant historiographical trend in the study of the slave trade. Curtin, building on the mytho-numerical claims of earlier writers, focused ostensibly on trading demographics. In doing so, he charted the trade’s shifting nature through time and space. Subsequent scholars have extended and refined Curtin’s considerable findings but few have ventured beyond the parameters established by his study. Scholars that did exceed Curtin’s conceptual scope, usually other Africanists, tended to analysis the structure of the trade thereby expanding our knowledge of the African past. Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave: A Census* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).
and Africans but these same sources also convey much about the enactment of power, lordship, and sovereignty in Atlantic Africa. In essence, the Africanist archive offers far more than a glimpse of its discursive content. Rather, it displays the very effects shaping the European-African diplomacy.  

A century before priests, theologians, civilians and canonists debated the relative merits of Spanish dominion in the Indies, an array of individuals voiced analogous concerns about Spanish and Portuguese expansion into the Atlantic littoral. The novelty of the Indies and their inhabitants overshadowed the earlier, fifteenth-century, discoveries but not before theologians, civilians and canonists concluded, on the basis of both natural and canon law, that the newly encountered peoples, though viewed as barbarians, wielded sovereignty and legitimate property rights. As lords in their own right, African sovereigns manifested an acknowledged *dominium* which precluded Christian invaders from encroaching on their lands and making off with their possession. Even a cursory glance at the language and terminology of the extant chronicles and travel literature conveys the pervasiveness of *dominium* in the earliest history of the African-European encounter. Novel discoveries along with dramatic conquests in the Americas have cast a shadow over this idiom in relationship to the African past while confining fifteenth-century texts and commentaries to obscurity. Africanists have complicated this process by rendering, at best, a gloss of the extant sources thereby offering an anachronistic and de-contextual reading of Papal bulls, the fifteenth-century treaties, and the extant travelogues, while historians of slavery and scholars of racial formation largely neglect this vibrant intellectual history in favor of a perspective privileging trade and the social implications of the chattel principle. As a result, far more than just a vibrant intellectual history has been lost; the *episteme* through which a discourse of *dominium* and the ritualized practices associated with the landlord-stranger reciprocity

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40 Gabrielle Spiegel
mediated the earliest encounter among Africans and Europeans have been exorcised from the past. In its stead, a history predicated on difference, rupture, and apotheosis defines Europe’s encounter with Africans.

Dare we conceive of a history of African-European interaction beyond the inherited conceptual legacies framing popular and scholarly depictions of that past? By recasting the initial century of sustained African-European interaction, the study that follows takes up this challenge but also some of the myriad of theoretical concerns that arise in doing so. In the long history of the African-European encounter that preceded nineteenth-century colonial rule, writers have confined the slave trade and slavery to the history of racial formation or the story of capital. Variations of this theme have resulted in narratives of difference constituted around culture, ethnicity, and now the subtlety of commodification. Still, the salience of difference—variously rendered as culture, race, and civilization—and capital stand steadfastly at the expense of alternative forms of historical emplotment. Viewed from the perspective of Europe’s history with Muslims and Jews in and beyond Christendom alongside first contact with diverse peoples and polities throughout the age of exploration, the monolithic depiction of European interaction with Africans stands out as an anomaly. At the precise moment that Christians wielded various strategies for engaging the diverse peoples they fought, lived, and contracted trade with, the portrayal of the African-European encounter still retains a uniformly flattened form. Stated succinctly, a “savage to slave” trajectory frames the narrative of the early modern African experience. By questioning this narrative convention, initially formulated around the principle of difference or capitalism, the present study stresses the need for more robust engagement with the prevailing fifteenth-century traditions and practices so as to undo the stasis informing our perspective on the earliest phase of the European-African encounter.
Attention to a more layered historical process, in this case diplomacy between Africans and Europeans, underscores the manner through which cultural effects linked to ‘economic’ practices inaugurated a transition in and against the very cultural order that comprised social life. In questioning the imposition of this modern logic of historical representation on to the inaugural century of African-European interaction, I insist on circumventing the practice of modern scholarship and the collective memories of various publics that configure the histories of the encounter leading to the slave trade as a timeless and self-evident social phenomenon. As a challenge to the existing historical practice Soiled Gods calls for a consideration of the ‘political’ in the narration of African-European interaction in the form of political thought, the evolution of the early modern Atlantic legal regimes, and the prevailing contests over dominion. Attention to these early modern manifestations of the ‘political’ underscores much more than the naturalized state of economic or racial hegemony in historical perceptions of African-European interaction and in the formation of the New World, it positions the African Atlantic as a constituent element in the narrative of modernity.

Building on the discursive tradition of Renaissance humanists, theologians, and imperial polemicists, contemporary philosophers and theorists now readily acknowledge 1492’s centrality in the formation of the modern. As the moment that inaugurated a new epoch thereby severing the present and its futures from the preceding ‘traditional’ era, as a structurally constituted process associated with novel institutional forms, or as a collective sensibility, modernity defines the analytical contours of a contemporaneity that dates from 1492. As the French philosopher Tzvetan Todorov noted “none is more suitable, in order to mark the beginning of the modern era, than the year 1492, the year Columbus crosses the Atlantic Ocean. We are all the direct
descendants of Columbus, it is with him that our genealogy begins, insofar as the word
*beginning* has a meaning."\(^{41}\) To frame modernity in relation to 1492 is also to recognize the
importance that discoveries, encounters, and conquests played in its formation. Occasionally
acknowledged in the past but now more frequently asserted, documenting how imperial
expansion engendered Europe’s modernity still remains an elusive endeavor.\(^{42}\) Elusive, in part,
because archives and their sources rarely—in a single record—identify decisive breaks,
momentous ruptures, cataclysmic transformations thus privileging philosophical intuition and
scholarly argument over empirically rendered proof. Philosophical intuition, however, offers
little by way of a corrective to the ideological dominance that 1492 wields over our collective
imaginary as modernity’s inaugural moment.\(^{43}\) Yet what if we took issue with the idea that 1492
constituted a defining moment offering in its stead, the entire fifteenth century or the fifty years
preceding 1492? In other words, what historical process comes into relief when our inquiry into
the relationship between Iberian imperial expansion and Europe’s modernity begins circa 1450?

In conventional Atlantic historiography, the sixteenth century constitutes a transitional
epoch; a period characterized by a series of condensed antecedents in which the hallmarks of our
political modernity (the absolutist state, capitalism, and embodied difference) staged inaugural

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\(^{42}\) Writers have long and largely confined this intellectual genealogy to the eighteenth century and the intellectual
tradition associated with political economy. See, Cañizares-Esguerra *How to Write the History of the New World*. By no means, however, do most writers attribute Europe’s modernity to imperial expansion. In Michael McKeon’s
magisterial examination of how the private and public domains gradually emerged in the wake of absolutism
“devolution” in early modern England, the reader is hard pressed to discern an opening or insights as to how the
imperial configured in the cultural formation of the modern. *The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private, and
the Division of Knowledge* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005). In offering his critique of the
culturally exclusive framing of European modernity in general and its English variety in particular, Paul Gilroy
rightly questioned such restrictive hermeneutics. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double

\(^{43}\) We may need to be reminded that invocation of 1492 served as a corrective to the framings of commentators of
various intellectual traditions (the Enlightenment, Liberalism, etc.) that collectively exorcised an earlier history of
imperial expansion associated with Portugal and Spain from the narrative of modernity.
yet shallow appearances. Constitutive of modernity, though rarely theorized as such, the slave trade conjoined capital, statecraft, and race. Unlike modernity’s other institutional expressions, scholars manifest an indifference to historicizing the slave trade permitting it to acquire the status of an epiphenomena—a universal tragedy oblivious, with the exception of its volume, to historical specificity. But can we legitimately assume that the cultural logic informing the early modern slave trade remained intact over the course of four centuries? Obviously, the answer is no. What then would it mean to configure the early modern Atlantic slave trade historically? At first glance, this question seems oxymoronic given that the early modern slave trade belongs to a distant era, having been conceived, transpired, and brought to conclusion finite span of time. To speak of the Atlantic slave trade is to reference the past. Yet, its vast temporal span—inaugurated in the fifteenth century and concluded in the late nineteenth century—underscores that the slave trade traversed multiple eras embodying distinct contingencies of time and being. Philosophers, intellectual historians, and anthropologists have long perceived how temporality imbues reality, including history, with specific meaning. In view of the shifting dialectic between temporality and meaning, it seems reasonable to ponder how one might configure the slave trade historically. To insist that the nineteenth-century Portuguese slavers conceived of the time-being nexus in a manner that distinguished them and their activities from the Portuguese who inaugurated the trade in the fifteenth century seems anything but far-fetched. Surely the chattel principle of nineteenth-century capitalism carried a different, if not radical distinct, valence from the trading ethos of the fifteenth century. In suggesting as much, my intent resides in discerning how one might engender a more nuanced history of the early modern Atlantic slave

trade; a history that transcends the liberal triumphalism of the nineteenth century which to this day frames the African-European encounter as a singular event—the slave trade—and defines the African diaspora both as an economic effect—capitalism and the quantification of reality—and a cultural tragedy—modern slavery and the apotheosis of race.

In April 1569, months after a Spanish armada commanded by New Spain’s (Mexico) newly appointed Viceroy, Martin Enriquez, destroyed a small English squadron anchored in the harbor of Veracruz, the English captain, John Hawkins, filed a civil claim in her Majesty’s High Court of Admiralty against Spain’s Philip II. Barely escaping with his life Captain Hawkins, accompanied by a handful of English survivors, registered a complaint against Spain’s sovereign for the forfeit of life and liberty “eyther slayne in the fight of Vera Crux or taken by the spaniardes.” Having lost the bulk of his fleet and hundreds of lives, to Spanish forces and the sea, John Hawkins sought restitution. Yet this court favorite did not express concern about the loss of English lives or the plight of his surviving countrymen who as Lutheran heretics now stood accused before the Holy Office of the Inquisition. Instead, Hawkins confined his claim to the lost cargo; in the process he implicitly distinguished between English bodies and those “negros of goodlie stature, shape and personage, and yonge of yeres beinge the choise and principall of all the negros w’ch wer gotten and purchased in this last voyage at Guiney.” As a claimant before the Admiralty Court, Hawkins knew that the loss of the Africans represented a civil proceeding in which human life, transformed into a commodity, acquired a specific value.

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In framing the claim against Christendom’s mightiest sovereign, Hawkins and his associates did not evoke nationalist rhetoric or manifest a Protestant lament. He simply tallied the losses by conveying value through a convertible currency and a near universal commodity—gold. “[T]he said lvii (57) negroes,” Hawkins told the High Court “might have ben soulde at Vera Crux for iiiii e Pesos of Goulde everie negro.”47 By acknowledging the conditionality of value—“negroes…might have ben soulde”—Hawkins displayed his strategic awareness of the Spanish imperial landscape, including the geographic distribution of buyers which, in turn, influenced market conditions. Far from being restricted to him or other English traders, Hawkins declared that “Englishmen, frenchemen and portugalls doe bringe meny Negros to the…West Indias…but none…to the haven of Vera Crux, being aboute vi leages sailing beyond these hether places.” For this reason, concluded Hawkins “the Negroes and all other wares must be derer bought and soulde there.”48 (71) The factor William Clarke, a Hawkins associate, concurred speculating that “as towchinge ther value…they might be worthe a pece at the haven of Vera Cruz….cccL pesos of goulde.”49 (69) As Hawkins and the other litigants ascribed value to the African cargo, they quantified distance traveled and the risk that a specific port posed thereby enhancing the value of their loss. In the alchemy of calculation, the Atlantic passage entailed numerous quantifiable factors that added value to the cost of procurement—value that furthered the transformation of Africans into slaves. At this historic moment when the English represented interlopers in the New World the African cargo’s worth resided in its exchange value as opposed to its use value, a form of valuation that would increase once the English began to settle permanently in the Americas. For this reason, Hawkins and the other


Ibid.

European traders demanded ‘rialls of plate spanishe money’ and, of course, gold in exchange for their cargo. As commodities, Africans enabled the English to trade for convertible of currencies—specie and bullion.

Claims, value, commodities, risk, market price, and currency, of course, constituted the sinews of merchant capitalism, which in the sixteenth century still resided in its formative phase. In the wake of European expansion, distinct practices of mercantile activity converged resulting in new social forms but also the replacement of existing ones. Defined as momentous, this dynamic has since the sixteenth century attracted the attention of contemporaries and historians who discern in this era the origins of the modern. By means of this logic, Hawkins voyage, ostensibly configured around transporting African slaves to the Americas, characterized the modern zeitgeist. Far from fantastical, a scholarly consensus surrounds this claim. Still, it could be argued that scholars do not sufficiently stress the novelty of Hawkins and similar voyages which from the moment he set sail to filing his claim symbolized the emergence of a new era—also a new era in the history of the slave trade which played a significant role in mediating European interaction with Africans. The novelty does not reside in the trade of sub-Saharan Africans which as a serial practice, in fact, preceded Colombus’s voyage by a half century but in the commercial ascendance in defining African-European interaction. As a social practice commercialization has a history still in need of a narrative yet the century of African-European interaction that preceded Hawkins’s voyage, which is the focus of this book, also requires a representational form that engages a complex past too often condensed and flattened by the monolithic depiction of a thoroughly commercialized slave trade.

Within the moment and register that we now inhabit, economic life constitutes a distinct realm from other forms of social life. In short, the economy and its constituent elements—the
market and commodities, trade and trading relations, property and private life—appear as historical givens. But the representation of a discrete entity identified as ‘the economic’ belies the historical dynamic whereby this phenomenon was distinguished from and eventually triumphed over other realms of social life. The German philosopher Karl Marx drew attention to this historical process often overlooked in discussions of the earliest encounter between Africans and Europeans. Toward the end of the first volume of Das Kapital Marx sought to explicate the origins of capitalism. Having detailed and analyzed the workings of modern capitalism, Marx confined himself to documenting its historical genealogy. By discerning capitalism’s historical trajectory, Marx delimited the process as “so-called primitive accumulation,” noting that it “is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production.”50 In contrast to “bourgeois historians” who identified the process as a form of freedom, Marx was less than sanguine about the stakes involved. “Hence the historical movement which changes the producers into wage-labourers appears,” observed Marx, “on the one hand, as their emancipation from serfdom and from the fetters of the guilds…But, on the other hand, these newly freed men became sellers of themselves only after they had been robbed of all their own means of production, and all the guarantees of existence afforded by the old feudal arrangements. And this history, the history of their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.”51 In grounding the genesis of capitalism in primitive capital accumulation Marx identified a relentless process of expropriation. By describing the mechanism—legal and extra-legal—whereby producers were detached from their land thereby transforming peasants and serfs into a rural workforce, Marx illustrated how capitalist farmers


51 Ibid, 875.
and the landed gentry engendered the capitalist transition in the countryside and the social landscape in general. Though scrupulously attentive to the economic process informing primitive capital accumulation, Marx insisted that expropriation was above all else a political event. The political nature of this process—embodied in state craft—underscores a phenomenon that remains under analyzed in the history of the slave trade. Though the history of violence and existing social structures are acknowledged, political theater, including rites and rituals, diplomacy and laws, which collectively embodied statecraft have been studiously ignored. But manifestations of sovereignty, as Marx illustrated in the case of Europe, accompanied the economic effects of primitive capital accumulation. In responding to popular sentiments that ideological factors—racism—fostered the origins and early history of the slave trade, scholars have relegated political developments and social relations among sovereigns and merchants and individual actors to the analytical margins. Consequently, cultural representations of the initial contacts between Europeans and Africans in the fifteenth century along with the origins and early history of the slave trade tend to privilege trade and trading mechanics, type and volume of goods, and the transformation of humans into commodities. By means of this economic perspective, designed as a corrective to the popular perception that racism engendered the slave trade and slavery, we have lost sight of a significant political dimension of first contact.52

52In acknowledging how primitive capital accumulation entails both an economic and political practice Marx underscores the symbiosis between the two. Moreover, he points to the social process resulting from this structural transition thereby reducing the peasant but giving rise to other social entities that occupy specific niches in the transitory economy that existed prior to the ascendance of capitalism. I am keen on stressing two matters: the acknowledgement of the political process (in the form of an alliance between the absolutist sovereign and the landed gentry, legislation, etc.) and how in thinking through the genealogy of capitalism we often lose site of the existence of previous states of economic and political practice which existed for substantial periods of time and representing far more than transitory moments, instances and expressions, in the triumphant narrative of capitalism.