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Captivity's Commerce: The Theory and Methodology of Slaving and Capitalism

This article identifies new pathways for integrating African perspectives into debates about the historical relationship between slavery and capitalism. It focuses extensively on the work of African historian Joseph C. Miller (1939–2019), whose concept of “ethno political economics” combined ethnographic and quantitative data and offered a new perspective on Atlantic World history. Building on theorizations of early twentieth-century scholars W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, Eric Williams, and others, Miller’s analysis foregrounded the simultaneously local and global processes of credit expansion, commercialization, and labor exploitation as foundational to the consolidation of early modern capitalism.

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Structuralist and materialist accounts of Atlantic slavery are as old as empiricist approaches to the topic. They are now considered a part of the “new” history of capitalism—a field that incorporates the questions and methods of business history, economic history, and labor history to apprehend the totality of global capitalism’s evolution as a layered and contradictory process. Despite a moniker that connotes a recent origin, historians of capitalism and slavery draw on a long intellectual genealogy grounded in the radical writings of early twentieth-century Black diasporic intellectuals as well as subsequent works in the mid-twentieth century of Latin American dependency theorists and historians (particularly from Cuba and Brazil).¹ This critical historical tradition

¹ Antônio Barros de Castro, “A economia política, o capitalismo e a escravidão” in *Modos de produção e realidade brasileira*, ed. José Roberto do Amaral Lapa (Petrópolis, 1980), 67–107;

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distinguishes itself from late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century economic theory that had carefully partitioned the historical eras of slavery and capitalism from one another. For these theorists, slavery could be industrial capital's counterpoint, or antecedent, but never part of an integrated (or integrating) whole of trans-regional capitalist exchange.

Both neo-classical and Marxist approaches have emphasized the fundamental division between economies based in slave and wage labor but come to very different conclusions about their relationship to one another. While one cohort of Marxist-influenced historians came to see slavery as a vital contributor to mature capitalism, it was the violent transition to wage labor that ultimately gave birth to the capitalist mode of production.² Bondage and conquest of the Americas enabled the accumulation of resources that were then incorporated into the capitalist dynamics of industrializing Western Europe in the late eighteenth century.³ Scholars influenced by the work of Marxist economic historian Maurice Dobbs as well as those who grounded their analyses in the neo-classical economists' emphasis on comparative trade advantages meanwhile have argued that overseas trade, slavery, and colonization remained peripheral to European economic development through the nineteenth century and that colonial slave economies were stagnant and thus incapable of producing surplus values to stimulate growth at home.⁴

Florestan Fernandes, *Circuito fechado: Quatro ensaios sobre o 'poder institucional'*, (São Paulo, 1976); Manuel Moreno Franginals, *The Sugarmill* (New York, 1976); Leonardo Marques, "Slavery and Capitalism," in *The Sage Handbook of Marxism*, Beverley Skeggs, Sara R. Farris, Alberto Toscano and Svenja Bromberg (eds.) (London, 2021), 248–267; Fernando A. Novais, *Portugal e Brasil na crise do antigo Sistema colonial (1777–1808)*, (São Paulo, 1989).

²E. J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire: An Economic History of Britain Since 1750* (London, 1968), 36; Karl Polyani, *Origins of Our Time: The Great Transformation* (London, 1945).

³Blackburn argues that following 1650, "American slavery became an outgrowth and adjunct of the European transition to capitalism," clarifying that "[plantation] slavery was an artificial extension of mercantile and manufacturing capital in the age of capitalist transition, extending their reach at a time when fully capitalist social relations were still struggling into existence." Robin Blackburn, *Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern 1492–1800* (London, 1992), 373–377.

⁴Ralph Davis, *The Industrial Revolution and British Overseas Trade*, (Leicester, 1979), 62–63; Pieter C. Emmer, Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau, and Jessica V. Roitman (eds.), "Introduction: Colonial Trade and the European Economy," in *A Deus ex Machina Revisited: Atlantic Colonial Trade and European Economic Development*, (Leiden, 2006), xiii–xxix; C. P. Kindleberger, *Economic Growth in France and Britain, 1851–1950* (Cambridge, MA, 1964), 264–266; Patrick O'Brian, "European Economic Development: The Contribution of the Periphery," *Economic History Review* 2 no. 35 (1982), 1–18; R. P. Thomas and D. N. McCloskey, "Overseas Trade and Empire, 1700–1860," in *The Economic History of Britain Since 1700*, Vol. 1, ed. Roderick Floud and Donald McCloskey (Cambridge, UK, 1981), 87–102; Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham, 2004), 13–14.

While debates about the genesis of industrial capitalism in Europe have loomed large in the literature, a key question that has animated more recent studies of slavery and capitalism has been how and why capitalism expanded to Africa and the Americas. The former literature focuses on the value, utility, and profitability of distinct types of labor and transformations in national structures of production in Europe, but the second type of scholarly study more closely examines global patterns of capital accumulation, particularly the role of enslaved individuals played as capital.⁵ A dominant thread in the literature in the 1960s and 1970s conceived of slavery as capitalism's antithesis, itself an idea harkening back to the era of abolition.⁶ But by the 1980s, scholars began again to look for complementarity.⁷ Cedric Robinson's *longue durée* account in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983) argues that during the transition from feudalism to capitalism, "the West" appropriated the "means and forces of African reproduction" to great effect to both Africa and Europe.⁸ Robin Blackburn's exhaustive synthesis of Atlantic slavery's role in the transition from medieval to early modern forms of production and consumption emphasizes the "qualitative" transformations in institutions, markets, and mentalities generated by African bondage over the quantitative contributions of production by enslaved laborers in the form of import and export profits. Caribbean plantations, because of the labor flexibility afforded to them by a workforce of deracinated and severely vulnerable enslaved Africans, were able to adopt certain rationalizations in production in the middle of the seventeenth century that would only predominate in Europe by the middle of the eighteenth

⁵ Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis*, 14.

⁶ Dale W. Tomich, *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital, and World Economy* (Lanham, 2004), 56; João Pedro Marques, *The Sounds of Silence: Nineteenth-Century Portugal and the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (Oxford, 2006), 4–5.

⁷ Key works challenging slavery as a profitable capitalist institution include Roger Anstey, "The Volume and Profitability of the British Slave Trade, 1761–1807," in *Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Quantitative Studies*, ed. Stanley L. Engerman and Eugene D. Genovese (Princeton, NJ, 1975), 3–31; Stanley L. Engerman, "The Slave Trade and British Capital Formation in the Eighteenth Century: A Comment on the Williams' Thesis," *Business History Review* 46, no. 4 (Winter 1972), 430–443; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974).

⁸ Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London, 1983). This interpretation has since been taken up by other Africanists and Atlanticists. See John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800* (Cambridge, UK, 1992); Joseph E. Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England: A Study in International Trade and Economic Development* (Cambridge, UK: 2002); Toby Green, *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution* (Chicago, 2019). As Jennifer Morgan notes, Braudel's survey of the emergence of global capitalism leaves the question of slavery to the side. Jennifer Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham, 2021).

century.⁹ Though many other historians of the Global South have similarly argued that slavery and the transatlantic slave trade were key to global capitalism's emergence, it was only in this period that the interpretation began to gain wider acceptance.

Though a range of scholars have embraced interpretations of early modern Atlantic slavery as a profit-driven and even profit-maximizing business, the recent turn in the history of slavery has largely existed under a cloud of methodological and theoretical ambiguities.¹⁰ What defines capitalism and its essential features?¹¹ How does one periodize the emergence and development of capitalism?¹² Did Atlantic slavery make the same leaps in productivity and efficiency as other forms of production in the same era, or was it mired in retrograde practices of resource allocation and thus remained competitive only in the context of mercantilist systems? The lack of a definitional consensus has not prevented historians from exploring how histories of slavery might reframe some core conceits of the nature of capitalism's evolution in the early modern era.

Furthermore, outside of the literature focused on the nineteenth-century United States, scholars have attempted to remedy the exclusion of Africa and Africans from narratives of capitalism's emergence. By offering a "deep history" of capitalism's metamorphoses over several hundred years, they have complicated accounts of the evolving relationship between the state and capital by diversifying the types of states and forms of capital analyzed and focusing on capitalism's trans-regionalism rather than on economies as narrowly bound within nation-states.¹³

⁹ Sidney Mintz also emphasized the constitutive nature of slave labor in making metropolitan modernity through the development of new patterns of consumption among the British working classes in *Sweetness and Power*. He also radically de-centered Europe in the narrative of the development of routinized and specialized forms of industrial labor, finding the Caribbean sugar plantation to be the first space to feature such starkly modern working arrangements, not the Lancastrian textile factory. Sidney Wilfred Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York, 1986); Blackburn, *Making of New World Slavery*, 376–379, 382.

¹⁰ For more on the "profit-maximizing" features of the "sugar/slave complex" that conjoined capital, land, and labor see Barbara L. Solow, *The Economic Consequences of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Lanham, 2014), 48.

¹¹ John Clegg, "A Theory of Capitalist Slavery," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 33, no. 1 (2020), 74–79; James Oakes, "Capitalism and Slavery and the Civil War," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 89 (2016): 195–220.

¹² Karl Marx, Karl Polanyi, Fernand Braudel, and Immanuel Wallerstein all periodize capitalism's emergence differently.

¹³ Emmanuel Kwaku Akyeampong, Robert H. Bates, Nathan Nunn, and James A. Robinson, eds., *Africa's Development in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, UK, 2014); George E. Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in Western Africa, 1000–1630* (Boulder, 1993); Green, *Fistful of Shells*; Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830* (Madison, 1988); Jared Staller, *Converging on Cannibals: Terrors of Slaving in Atlantic Africa, 1509–1670*

Another key intervention of this literature has been a reassessment of moments of rapid economic change. The transatlantic slave trade, particularly, offers a privileged case study to understand how African economies grounded in household production confronted the impositions and opportunities of long-distance trade and the expansion of commodity markets.

One historian has focused on the last question in great detail over the course of his long career. Joseph Miller's works span four decades, beginning with his first monograph *Kings and Kinsmen: Early Mbundu States in Angola*, published in 1976, and culminating with a series of retrospective historiographical essays in the 2010s characterizing the changes in the field of Atlantic slavery. As a leading advocate of the incremental approach to the history of capitalism, Miller favored qualitative methodologies. In his most extensive work directly related to the topic, the 1988 monograph *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830*, Miller's concern is the specific historical processes—unfolding simultaneously in Portugal, Brazil, and Angola—which allowed human beings to be financialized. A central conceptual concern of the text is the socially and culturally specific coding of “value” from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century: What determined the value of material goods and people as, at times, interchangeable forms of “capital”?¹⁴

This article argues that *Way of Death* as well as Joseph Miller's subsequent writings provide a methodological and theoretical template for understanding Atlantic slavery and capitalism as historically situated and mutually constituting processes. Drawing on a range of historical materialist historians and anthropologists, Miller's approach to “ethno political economies” attempted to apprehend the historically and culturally specific strategies employed by both Europeans and Africans to gain comparative advantages vis-à-vis local competitors through market exchange. Stretching beyond the quantitative methods of economic history, he attempted to understand how a diverse array of historical actors, including Portuguese merchants, Mbundu headmen, and Luso-African middlemen culturally defined and redefined abstract notions of production and wealth, eschewing normative designations based on liberal economics.

He was particularly interested in “the fundamental values of the African political economy” in which lords and patrons transformed

(Athens, OH, 2019); Joseph E. Inikori, *The Chaining of a Continent: The Export Demand for Captives and the History of Africa South of the Sahara, 1450–1870* (Mona, 1992); Patrick Manning, *Slavery, Colonialism, and Economic Growth in Dahomey, 1640–1960* (Cambridge, UK, 1982).

¹⁴ Miller, *Way of Death*, 46.

access to foreign commodities—guns, liquors, textiles—into ever proliferating ties of debt and dependency for uprooted individuals—or capital in early modern African terms.¹⁵ Slavery did not exist for slavery's sake; it was a means to an end for both sides. The tragedy of such a calculation would reveal itself in both intimate and large scales, with a trail of broken families, intercommunal violence, and displacement ultimately afflicting millions of individuals. The resulting “social and political stratification” in Angola manifested itself through the rapid proliferation of enslavement on a massive scale with dramatic macro-structural implications.¹⁶ Markets and the goods they provided “accelerated the rates at which the powerful dislocated the weak.”¹⁷ Financial credit greased the wheels of wider social and political transformations. Atlantic commerce underwritten by slaving enabled previously powerless patrons to form new groups of followers over which they could exercise more absolute authority than kin, making them more formidable than established lineage heads. His explanation of historical change emphasizes this very dynamic. As he states, “commercial capital provided the initial impetus beyond changes that then gained momentum from the force of deep-running currents in African political systems.”¹⁸

European merchants similarly understood the transactional benefits of slavery as a way to surmount their global commercial marginality in relation to wealthier regions in Asia. As he argues, “African slaves became the medium through which merchants peripheral to the main commercial flows of their time were able, at high risk, to convert goods that were of relatively low currency value in Europe into currency credits and ultimately into specie.”¹⁹ In their own ethnic contexts, Portuguese creditors entered Angolan markets to ultimately gain access to coin and bullion, their preferred standard of wealth in the eighteenth century, not slaves.

In *Way of Death*, Miller also linked the modern scholarship on the transatlantic slave trade to an alternative genealogy of slavery and capitalism literature born of the early twentieth century. Unmoved by the cliometric approach that reigned in the 1970s and 1980s, Miller instead drew particular inspiration from the heterodox interpretations

¹⁵ Miller, *Way of Death*, 94.

¹⁶ Miller, 94.

¹⁷ Walter Rodney's analysis of the Upper Guinea Coast had previously emphasized the accelerating economic and social stratification produced by transatlantic slaving and the class of commercial agents it produced. Miller, *Way of Death*, 94; Walter Rodney, *History of the Upper Guinea Coast: 1545–1800* (New York, 1970), 215–235.

¹⁸ Miller, *Way of Death*, 187.

¹⁹ Miller, 685.

of what he termed the “isolated” and “visionary” historicism of W.E.B. Du Bois, Eric Williams, and C.L.R. James.²⁰ These forerunners to today's debates provide strong corrective to the framing of studies of capitalism as a recent development. Though principally remembered for decentering master narratives of capitalist modernity's emergence, these interpretations injected political analyses into the core of their account of capitalism's development, focusing on how the prerogatives of the state were steered by capitalist slaving interests.²¹

Though *Way of Death* did not explicitly synthesize the characteristics that defined slavery as capitalism, in an introduction to a 2009 special issue of *The William and Mary Quarterly* on abolition, Miller identified four key dynamics that defined slavery as a necessary precursor to capitalism and American plantation slavery as a “prototype” of European industrialization.²² One key process unleashed by African slaving was the depersonalization of labor, especially as it existed on sugar plantations, typified by the regimes of quantification and abstraction that figured enslaved individuals as fungible “pieces” or “heads” easily traded on the market by merchants and plantation owners.²³ The enslaved were the “commodity that died with such ease,” in the words of one Portuguese administrator, whom Portuguese and Brazilian merchants purchased in lots at a predetermined price—another indication of the decimation of their individual human rather than abstract exchange value.²⁴

The second development wrought by the sugar, tobacco, and rice revolutions in the Americas was the creation of mass consumer

²⁰ Joseph C. Miller, “Epilogue,” *Journal of Global Slavery* 2, no. 3 (2017): 337–377; Eric Hilt, “Revisiting *Time on the Cross* After 45 Years: The Slavery Debates and the New Economic History,” *Capitalism: A Journal of History and Economics* 1, no. 2 (2020): 456–483; Stanley L. Engerman and Robert William Fogel, *Time on The Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (New York, 1974).

²¹ Drawing from writings of the primary mercantilist intellectuals of the seventeenth century, Williams also theorized the transatlantic slave trade as fundamentally an instrument of financialization of British institutions. In securing the coveted *Asiento* (monopoly contract to provide enslaved Africans to American markets), slavers gained access to Spanish bullion, even if diverting a portion of enslaved individuals to Spanish territories undercut the interests of British planters in the Caribbean. For Williams, monopoly (to a greater extent than even capitalism) formed the key analytic. The evolving politics of monopoly as a site of transformation and contestation formed the core of his analysis of capitalism's and slavery's unified development. Just as the Glorious Revolution had eroded mercantilist controls on a number of global trades, including the transatlantic slave trade, early nineteenth-century British industrialists' clamoring for an end to Caribbean planters' sugar monopoly spelled the end of slavery across the British Empire. Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, rev. ed. (1944; repr., Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 33.

²² Joseph C. Miller, “Introduction: Atlantic Ambiguities of British and American Abolition,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (2009): 677–704.

²³ Miller, *Way of Death*, 474–475, 681.

²⁴ Miller, 681.

markets in Europe—markets that would become the cornerstone of growing industrial dynamism. The third dynamic, following several Marxist interpretations, was slavery as a mode of primitive accumulation. Unlike other neo-Marxist interpretations, *Way of Death* is relatively circumspect in its claims about Atlantic slavery as a necessary antecedent to industrial capitalism, as it is primarily concerned with economic change in Africa, not the origins of industrialization in Europe. However, Miller highlights Britain's success in siphoning off slave-produced Brazilian gold through smuggling trades in both the Americas and Angola, specie that would then be reinvested in Britain's increasingly complex financial and industrial sectors.²⁵ The windfall represented by slavery meant "multiplied financial strength" on the continent that "hastened Europe's conversion to wage-labor relations" not by way of quantitative contributions but by the growing generation of gold, silver, slaves, and commodities absent a corresponding investment in wages.²⁶ These inexpensive currency infusions were an unmatched benefit considering the shortage of merchant capital in the Portuguese metropole.²⁷ The inter-regional economic network grounded in trade and the advance of European credit to non-capitalist regions produced an expanding pool of liquid wealth that "infus[ed] the entire economy" of Britain, its American colonies, and portions of Europe.²⁸ Slavery, as a strategy to exchange illiquid goods for bondspeople who could be converted to specie in the Americas reveals Miller's final characteristic of early modern capitalism, in which slavery became a potent force for financial integration in the Atlantic World.

Radical Intellectual Genealogies

Much of the materialist literature on slavery, including the interventions of *Way of Death*, can be traced back to Marx's ambiguous stance on the relationship between the wealth produced from American colonialism and African slavery and industrialization in late eighteenth century Northern Europe. A wellspring of critical analyses of the history of capitalist development, largely from global peripheries, have emerged, partially inspired by the vague implications of Marx's theorization of slavery as an important predecessor to industrial capitalism in

²⁵ Miller, 681.

²⁶ Miller, 684.

²⁷ In order to procure enslaved individuals, merchants sold commodities that were relatively valueless in European metropolises; through a chain of long-distance commercial transactions, merchants were eventually able to convert these less desirable goods into specie by way of plantation commodity production. Miller, 678–680.

²⁸ Miller, 684–785.

Europe. Marx's conceptualization of the nature of domination through economic processes, the capitalist imperative to expropriate labor-value, and an emphasis on economic production as the basis of social organization have continued to animate narratives of African bondage.

The German economist's deep influence on the field persists despite his relatively muted discussion of the subject of slavery itself. As Walter Johnson has argued in a critique, "slavery serves as an un-theorized historical backdrop to the history of capitalism, an un-thought (even when present) past to the inevitable emergence of the present."²⁹ Marx's contention that "the veiled slavery of the wage-workers in Europe needed, for its pedestal, slavery pure and simple in the new world" offered a diachronic narrative of global capitalist development.³⁰ Slavery in the Americas was a key part of the *early* stage of primitive accumulation, but not a dynamic part of mature, industrial capitalism that required the abstract logics of the market—not the forms of interpersonal domination characteristic of slavery—to discipline laborers and assure the extraction of surplus value.³¹ Orthodox Marxist thought, principally concerned with the profound social, political, and economic ruptures created by industrial capitalism's emergence, has conventionally ignored slavery as a distinct stage of economic development.

In Marx's framing of the political and economic as inseparable, however, scholars of colonial societies have found his formulations relevant to the simultaneous imposition of political sovereignty and regimes of commodity production and monopoly trade relations by European empires in the Americas and Africa. Marx himself made these links explicitly, arguing that "the discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement, and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production."³² But as other scholars have noted, the chronology implied in

²⁹ Walter Johnson, "The Pedestal and the Veil: Rethinking the Capitalism/Slavery Question," *Journal of the Early Republic* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 299–308, 300.

³⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London, reprint, 1990), 925.

³¹ Steve J. Stern "Feudalism, Capitalism, and the World-System in the Perspective of Latin America and the Caribbean," *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 4 (1988): 829–872, 841.

³² Miller defines his method thusly: "The approach here is economic to the extent that it studies material goods and strategies of utilizing them efficiently to achieve specified social ends. It is also political in the degree that it traces contests among people rendered unequal by maximizing actions of the successful that also deprive the less efficient or less fortunate of a proportional share of the limited material goods available in the short run." Miller, *Way of Death*, 41; Karl Marx, cited in William David Hart, "Constellations: Capitalism, Antiracism, Afro-Pessimism, and Black Optimism," *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 39, no. 1 (2018): 5–33.

this formulation indicates that colonialism fell outside of the temporal boundaries of industrialization, as Marx used slavery as a counterpoint to the capitalist mode of production.³³

Marx was not the first political economist to categorize enslaved labor as categorically distinct from industrial wage labor. While Marx focused on the mechanism of market exchange in the making of the capitalist mode of production, classical economic interpretations have emphasized the dichotomy between “productive” and “unproductive” labor. Adam Smith introduced the emphasis on disparate modes of labor as the key distinction between slave and industrial societies, arguing that enslaved laborers, lacking in the intrinsic forms of motivation of industrial wage laborers, particularly the desire for self-improvement, were inherently less productive.³⁴ Labor productivity was one of the keys to economic growth for Smith, and the enslaved in their inherent dependency could never generate the profits of wage laborers, despite the broader context in which they toiled. Smith’s ahistorical equivalence between the two would later be critiqued by Eric Williams, who pointed out that wage labor was not always available, even if productivity-maximizing sugar and tobacco plantation owners had ideally wished to employ it. In a historical context of labor scarcity and constrained migration, enslaved labor had made the British Caribbean productive without the inducements of a wage.³⁵ For Williams then, what divided enslaved and wage labor was not so much productivity as mobility and availability.

The new history of capitalism signals, in part, a belated return to mid-twentieth-century analyses. Interventions in the field of the history of slavery offered profound revisions for their time, ushered in by a series of works by W.E.B. Du Bois, particularly *Black Reconstruction*, published in 1935; C.L.R. James, *Black Jacobins*, released in the same year; and Eric Williams, *Slavery and Capitalism*, published nearly a decade later. As challenges to characterizations of slavery as the antithesis of capitalist modernity, they diverged in their temporal, geographic, and thematic foci, but were all framed by a fundamental rejection of the use of classical economic theory to explain the emergence of the modern global economy.³⁶ Though indebted to Marxism, these

³³ Leonardo Marques, “Slavery and Capitalism,” 252.

³⁴ Germain Garnier, Adam Smith, and Dugald Stewart, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London, 1835), 355–362, 375–376.

³⁵ Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 23–29.

³⁶ Though C.L.R. James and Eric Williams were based in Britain (at least during the writing of *Black Jacobins* and *Capitalism and Slavery*, respectively), and Du Bois mostly in the United States, the authors read and admired each other’s works—identifying resonances between their interpretations. James retrospectively signaled his particular admiration of *Black Reconstruction* for its emphasis on macro-structural economic processes ahead of the historical agency of

influential interpretations departed from the nineteenth-century thinker's formulations in myriad ways. Writing under the shadow of an enslaved past that still very much lingered in living memory, W.E.B. Du Bois initiated the field of study with a series of works published between 1902 and 1935. Each study examined slavery from a distinct angle, exploring the merchant capitalism of slave traders, the labor of Black artisans during and after slavery, and the "general strike" of enslaved African Americans that led to emancipation.³⁷ His last work on the subject, *Black Reconstruction*, was inspired by his many years of grappling with Marxist class analysis in an attempt to apply it to the volatile politics of the US Civil War and post-war periods. Slavery in the antebellum United States, as a "slave-labor large farming system" with accelerating productivity in the nineteenth century, was foundational not only to Southern agriculture but also to northern industry and commerce.³⁸ Du Bois insisted that slavery was far from a parochial institution. Instead, he argued that it functionally integrated the national and, indeed, global economy.³⁹ An intervention that was followed by a number of interpretations that not only centered slavery in their analyses but also argued that "free" labor economies could not be understood without acknowledging their articulation to production in slaveholding colonies.

Eric Williams, writing at Oxford University in the heart of the British Empire, further emphasized slaveholding colonies' integration into the

"great men" to make history, favoring an explanation of Reconstruction as the product of the democratic aspirations of the masses of formerly enslaved people and their strivings. C.L.R. James, "Lectures on The Black Jacobins," *Small Axe* 8 (Sep. 2000), 65–112, 83–98.

³⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638–1870* (New York, 1904); W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Negro Artisan: Report of a Social Study Made Under the Direction of Atlanta University; Together with the Proceedings of the seventh Conference for the Study of the Negro Problems, Held at Atlanta University, on May 27th, 1902* (Atlanta, 1902); W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* (New York, 1935).

³⁸ According to Du Bois, "Black labor became the foundation stone not only of the Southern social structure, but of Northern manufacture and commerce, of the English factory system, of European commerce, of buying and selling on a world-wide scale; new cities were built on the results of black labor, and a new labor problem, involving all white labor, arose both in Europe and America." Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 5; Du Bois, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America* rev. ed. (1896; repr., Oxford University Press, 2014), 107–108.

³⁹ Du Bois's theorization of slavery's relationship to capitalism continued to evolve and expand in geographic scope. For instance, his 1915 text, *The Negro*, established a causal relationship between Atlantic slavery and global capitalism, arguing: "The Negro slave trade was the first step in modern world commerce, followed by the modern theory of colonial expansion." Robin Kelley argues that the radical interpretations of Du Bois, James, and Williams on colonial economic history can be understood in part as their response to and critique of rising European fascism. Quoted in Robin D. G. Kelley, "'But a Local Phase of a World Problem': Black History's Global Vision, 1883–1950," *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (1999): 1045–1077, 1054, 1067.

economies of the metropole. Williams particularly focused on the primacy of labor in fostering economic development, while downplaying the presumed exceptionality of slavery as a profit-producing form of work. In analyzing the heterogenous laboring landscape of the early seventeenth-century British Atlantic, Williams critiqued the liberal economic position that enslaved labor was costlier and less productive than wage labor, arguing that in economies of scale, the production of staple crops by enslaved laborers remained more economical than that of free laborers so long as population densities were low and estates were large.⁴⁰ All of these factors made enslaved men, women, and children “cheaper” and thus more desirable for profit-maximizing colonists. The rationale for preferring African slavery was thoroughly economic, not racial for Williams, largely premised on a practical expectation of elevated economic return. For him, the plantation was “an economic institution of the first importance,” and its development relied on securing a reliable supply of labor.⁴¹ Slavery, colonialism, and capitalism were co-extensive in his account.⁴²

Key to these scholars’ approach was a reimagining of imperial geographies as well as the scope and integration of capitalism. Both authors posited the essential integration of African-Atlantic slavery into the national and global economies, a central theme that would later be picked up by Seth Rockman and Sven Beckert, and the broader new history of capitalism literature.⁴³ Rather than conceiving of slavery as a deviation from modern development, an antecedent to it, or too geographically distant, they positioned it at the core of nineteenth-century industrialization.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Furthermore, according to Williams, free but indentured white laborers posed a potential political obstacle for Britain’s imperial designs, as their “aspirations to independence” made them more litigious, with a greater likelihood to escape and expectant acquisition of land at the end of their indenture than enslaved workers. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 6–7, 18–19.

⁴¹ Williams, 29.

⁴² Williams’ text, for instance, begins with a critique of Adam Smith’s contention that land was the only “economic factor” that had made British colonies productive, arguing labor was more decisive in generating profit. Williams, 5.

⁴³ *Slavery’s Capitalism’s* key argument: “During the eighty years between the American Revolution and the Civil War, slavery was indispensable to the economic development of the United States.” Beckert and Rockman explicitly build on a “scholarly revolution over the past two decades” that has drawn Black studies insights into the mainstream, recognizing slavery as “foundational [to] American institutions, organizing the nation’s politics, legal structures and cultural practices with remarkable power to determine the life changes of those moving through society as black or white.” Furthermore, the authors claim that “slavery’s capitalism” made way “for the more recognizable iterations of industrial and financial capitalism of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.” Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, *Slavery’s Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (Philadelphia, 2016), 1–6.

⁴⁴ As a sign of the synergy between the two approaches, both Williams—in *Capitalism and Slavery*—and Du Bois—in *The Suppression of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, quoted a 1663

Theory and Method in Joseph Miller's *Way of Death*

Way of Death would not have been possible without these early reframings of global economic history. Nor could Miller have apprehended the simultaneous creation of new relations of production in Africa and Europe without the methods developed by the Annales

School and world-systems theory. The former looked to the totality of material and social relations to understand political change while the latter emphasized the global division of labor that characterized mature capitalism. The monograph begins with an overview of the "structures of everyday life" for Lunda, Ngangela, Mbundu, Chokwe, Ovimbundu, and other peoples, very much in the vein of Fernand Braudel.⁴⁵ It was these very structures of kinship, agro-pastoralist production, lordship, tribute, and *ngola* (leader) rulership that would be transformed by the merchant capitalism forged by transatlantic slave trading in eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Portuguese Angola. While influenced by social scientists, Miller diverged from economic and sociological attempts to define capitalism and provide a normative account of its temporal trajectory. Rather than thinking in teleological terms of static, internally homogenous stages of development of capitalism, a more fruitful methodology for the historian, he argued, was to follow the spasmodic, contradictory, uneven, and at times fragmentary evolution of market relations—especially as two or more distinctive economic systems come into contact with one another.

In this vein, transatlantic slaving and the commodities introduced via Atlantic markets, and the insinuation of "market" norms and European credit, fostered a rupture in African concepts of value. An emphasis on the practical use-value of material and people and continuous localized forms of exchange was supplanted with a reliance on foreign currencies and goods, particularly textiles, firearms, and spirits. Brazilian, and Asian goods advanced on commercial credit enabled the widening footprint of slaving through vast networks of distribution stretching from coastal Luanda, inland to Kasanje, up the Zambezi, to Kwango, and the Kwanza. As Miller argues, "credit lurked near the core of the complex forces that fueled the transport and distribution sectors of West Central Africa's eighteenth century political economy."⁴⁶ A disjuncture in notions of debt set the terms of battle within these economic and

correspondence between mercantilist royal ministers extolling enslaved Africans as the "strength and sinews of this western world." Du Bois, *The Suppression of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 2; Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 30.

⁴⁵ Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century*, vol. 1, *The Structure of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, 1992).

⁴⁶ Miller, *Way of Death*, 187.

colonial encounters, with African potentates preferring long-term investments in imported goods which they used to secure dependents who would then produce agricultural products for market. Alternatively, dependents could become victims of enslavement themselves. Both strategies conflicted with a European emphasis on quick returns; or slaves traded as payment for short-term advances of merchandise.

Miller draws on demographic data to generate estimates of the demography of slaving, including population estimates for Western Central Africa, mortality rates for each leg of the slaving journey, subsequent local birth rates, and export volumes; but he also suggests the limitations of quantitative evidence and arguments before the nineteenth century, a critique that has been advanced recently by other historians of the transatlantic slave trade; namely, Stephanie Smallwood and Jennifer Morgan. Both emphasize that statistics and indeed numeracy itself are not trans-historical but emerged as a necessary technology of statecraft within seventeenth-century European empires deeply involved in slaving on the African coast. As such, numerical data is inherently ideological and conceals a range of hierarchical social interactions and African subjectivities.⁴⁷

Miller, like historians of the slave trade writing subsequently, is critical of the “de-politicization” of seemingly neutral forms of data and representation intrinsic to economists’ methodologies. Miller himself argued that uneven or absent statistical data could be surprisingly generative of historical analysis. As *Way of Death* noted: “The scattered documentation from the southern Atlantic reveals the optimizing strategies of these individuals more clearly than would available data on the aggregate behavior necessary to support other kinds of economic analysis.”⁴⁸ The paucity of data helped Miller orient narrative focus to individuals and, more often, small-group experiences with capital accumulation and merchant capitalism rather than solely on macroeconomic trends.

Beyond evidentiary limits, for historians, a more generative focus on the qualitative revolutions necessary to produce capitalist expansion envisages a humanist rather than social scientific methodological approach. His methodological concern with human motivation, in Miller’s terms—deeply contextualized—and the lived experience of capitalism and its transitions, instead of a focus on the creation of universal models, drives such inquiries.⁴⁹ On the Portuguese and later Luso-

⁴⁷ Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, especially Chapters 1 and 2; Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA, 2009).

⁴⁸ Miller, *Way of Death*, xvii.

⁴⁹ Joseph C. Miller, *The Problem of Slavery as History: A Global Approach* (New Haven, 2012), 20.

African side, Miller endeavored to detail what distinguished the slave trade from other forms of commerce and merchant capitalism, which for Miller was the novel way in which merchants held value. By controlling the monetary basis of the transatlantic slave trade through currency and imports, European merchants and their African commercial partners endeavored to “flip” or convert values from deteriorating “goods” such as malnourished slaves (currency in the African sense) for hard currencies in silver and gold by way of a chain of transactions stretching to the Americas. By attempting to displace the risk of mortality intrinsic to the owning living slaves through a string of economic exchanges both in Central Africa and across the Atlantic, Portuguese—and later Luso-African—merchants came into conflict with both African headmen and *pombeiros* (Luso-African itinerant traders) as well as the moribund conditions of enslaved detention and transportation, particularly on the *tombeiros*, or floating tombs, of the slave ship.

Miller's emphasis on how particular social dynamics generated accelerating slave trading based on commercialization of Atlantic African ports in the early modern period would be followed by a number of historians. As Paul Lovejoy has argued, “the technological breakthrough of oceanic shipping had a tremendous economic impact” on Atlantic Africa, principally stimulating the growth and intensification of slaving writ large.⁵⁰ While Robin Law's analysis of slaving entrepôt Ouidah (the second-most prolific exporter of enslaved individuals after Luanda) foregrounds the political upheavals caused by Dahomean invasions and internecine struggles, he also argues that the port city was integrated not only into Atlantic markets but also connected to rural hinterlands through its middleman role in the transatlantic slave trade, tracing the far-reaching effects of the commercialization wrought by captivity, particularly the development of a dedicated class of private merchants in the port.⁵¹ Similarly, the profound economic transformations experienced in other coastal cities connected to the transatlantic slave trade have been a particularly rich dimension of the early modern Africanist literature, both preceding and following the publication of *Way of Death*. Case studies of Luanda, Benguela, and the Loango Coast in the central region, and treatments of the “Guinea Coast” in West Africa, demonstrate the foundational nature of Atlantic slavery to early modern economies.⁵² For historians such as

⁵⁰ Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge, UK, 2000), 19–22.

⁵¹ Robin Law, *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving Port, 1727–1892* (Athens, 2005), 6, 111.

⁵² Mariana Candido, *An African Slaving Port and the Atlantic World: Benguela and Its Hinterland* (Cambridge, UK, 2013), 12; Roquinaldo Ferreira, *Cross-Cultural Exchange in*

Colleen Kriger, the arrival of Royal African Company traders and personnel in northern Guinea in the seventeenth century not only helped produce a new commercial class but also infused dynamism into pre-existing regional currency flows as Europeans introduced large volumes of foreign commodities in their efforts to secure slaves.⁵³

The Most “African” of Philosophers

Reading European social and economic histories from a South Atlantic perspective creates an alternate chronology of market expansion while re-affirming some of Marx’s main findings and conceptual conceits. Emphasizing the mobility of capital, particularly credit, Marx’s account zeros in on the interpolation of the origins of Atlantic capitalism and European colonialization and imperialism, placing two diverging forms of economic logic (African and European) side by side, as market-based societies interacted with non-market-based ones. The suppleness of historical analysis provides a window into what Miller terms the “structural gap between two political economies of remote and incompatible characteristics: the African one of use-values . . . and the much more thoroughly commercialized and anonymous trade of the Atlantic.”⁵⁴ In focusing on the interaction between the deeply commercialized economy of Portugal and the only faintly market-oriented communities of West Central Africa, Miller’s scholarship on the transatlantic slave trade echoes works by Karl Polyani, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Walter Rodney. The latter in particular emphasized the consequence of “underdevelopment,” which resulted from commercial contact between “communal” or “transitional” economies of Western Africa and “capitalist” economies of Europe.⁵⁵

As an explanation of historical change, Miller breaks decisively with liberal economic theory and draws extensively on orthodox Marxist historical materialism. Marx, he quipped, was the most “African” of all European philosophers.⁵⁶ Beyond a purely economic grounding, Miller also incorporates the pioneering works of economic anthropologists such as Claude Meillassoux, who conceived of enslavement as the

the Atlantic World: Angola and Brazil During the Era of the Slave Trade (Cambridge, UK, 2012); Daniel B. Domingues da Silva, *The Atlantic Slave Trade from West Central Africa, 1780–1867* (Cambridge, UK, 2017).

⁵³ Colleen E. Kriger, *Making Money: Life, Death, and Early Modern Trade on Africa’s Guinea Coast* (Athens, 2017), 12–13.

⁵⁴ Miller, *Way of Death*, 173.

⁵⁵ Karl Polyani and Abraham Rotstein, *Dahomey and the Slave Trade: An Analysis of An Archaic Economy* (Seattle, 1966); Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London, 2018), 12, 82, 91–105; Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis*, 20.

⁵⁶ Private communication with Jared Staller.

eradication of the ability to socially reproduce kinship; as well as Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff's explication of African notions of wealth in people as the foundation of African economic logics; and sociologist Orlando Patterson and his theorization of slavery as social death.⁵⁷ In these scholars' works, Miller discovers an entry point into the subjective economic values that shaped African economic behavior as well as the means to apprehend how a commercial system infused with obscenely high rates of death could be rendered amenable to the very merchants who controlled transactions in people. *Way of Death* incorporates ethnographic insight and method with a more traditional political economy emphasis on trade, credit, and finance to produce an interpretation of qualitative economic change over time.

By marrying the material, the cultural, and the social, Miller generates the methodological concept of "ethno political economics." This concept revealed that the "political and economic changes associated with slaving in the eighteenth century are thus largely explicable in terms of Africans' perceptions of the relationship between goods and people."⁵⁸ This insight can be extrapolated to the genesis of Atlantic capitalism—the formation of which necessitated a reorganization of perceptions of the relationship between goods and people in myriad communities along the Atlantic Basin.⁵⁹ The book's core narrative charts the dynamic ontologies of goods and people, with an emphasis on the practical conditions of daily life, and how manipulations of the material world enabled manipulations of social relations, and indeed enacted control over people. As Miller explained, "modern Marxist concepts like the '[human] relations of [material] production'" and the "[political] struggle of [economically defined] classes" "capture much of the bivalent essence of this emphasis."⁶⁰ Scarcity, as much as a will to economic production, created the historically situated motivations of African actors, as patrons sought "control of necessary and scarce material goods" to exercise authority over dependents, while simultaneously using their "power to channel access to material wealth."⁶¹

⁵⁷ Jane I. Guyer and Samuel M. Eno Belinga, "Wealth in People as Wealth in Knowledge: Accumulation and Composition in Equatorial Africa," *The Journal of African History* 36, no. 1 (1995): 91–120; Jane I. Guyer, "Wealth in People, Wealth in Things—Introduction," *The Journal of African History* 36, no. 1 (1995): 83–90; Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison, 1977); Claude Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold* (Chicago, 1991); Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, MA, 1982).

⁵⁸ Miller, *Way of Death*, 40.

⁵⁹ As Miller argues, "Political economy must, as the term implies, consider simultaneously and explicitly the interaction of human beings and material goods that sustain their lives and structure relationships among them. Miller, 40.

⁶⁰ Miller, 41.

⁶¹ Miller, 41.

The methodological approach typified by “ethno political economy” explains the “need for emphasis on the relativism of the political-economic aspect of human life,” which challenges the “supracultural objectivity” embedded in both Marxist theory and “formalist” economics.⁶² Miller departs from both bodies of theory and method by incorporating “the relativistic lens of cultural, symbolic, and structural analysis” found in anthropology, particularly works on “non-modern” economies.⁶³ Such an intervention into the demography-based explorations of slaving that dominated the field before the 1980s was underpinned by Miller’s belief that “cultural metaphors and abstract economic principles” equally underlay all human behaviors.⁶⁴

Just as material goods achieved specified social ends in Africa, particularly the securing of dependents through obligations generated by the distribution of foreign commodities, Europeans strategized to acquire—and accumulate—capital. By placing Africa and Europe in the same analytical frame, *Way of Death* endeavors to broaden the definition of “capital,” which Miller argues is “any source of productive . . . wealth in the future.”⁶⁵ Rejecting capital’s innate materiality means eschewing its conception as an essentially “depoliticized concept in modern liberal thought.”⁶⁶ If people as “source of productivity” act as capital in African contexts, and conversions of value between people and goods form the foundation for all social and political power, then rational “capital investments” in any collective’s futurity necessitates an expansion of ties of either blood relation or dependency. Thus, Miller redefines capital from the perspective of his historical actors rather than insist on its normative and thus transhistorical meaning and value, while the “ethno” portion of ethno political economy auspiciously avoids any Manichean division between political economy and culture. Social and moral logics shaped how and why Africans sought material goods. Such framings offer an implicit critique of “Western ideologies” as concealing rather than revealing the nature of capitalism as a historical process—this includes ideologies of capitalist individualism, which is the tendency to use explanatory models that rely on a level of abstraction that would not be intelligible to the historical actors engaged in the process of capital formation.⁶⁷ Rational, strategic African actors sought to “dispose of perishable material

⁶² Miller, 41 fn. 2.

⁶³ Miller, 41 fn. 2.

⁶⁴ Miller, 43, fn. 2.

⁶⁵ Miller, 42.

⁶⁶ Miller, 42.

⁶⁷ “Liberal economic thought has (perhaps only recently) triumphed so completely that it has virtually excluded systematic examination of the ways in which goods inevitably mediate control over people and how control over people is necessary to acquire goods, so long as human welfare remains dependent on material wealth.” Miller, 42.

to secure enduring values of personal debt.”⁶⁸ To do so they sold people to generate expanding networks of dependency. The resultant exploitation of dependents (both those retained in Africa and those sold externally) envisages the ironies of capital accumulation that were no less marked than in industrializing Britain.

Thus, Africa is no longer an aberration. The inherent volatility of ontological categories during the era of emergent capitalism meant that economic wealth and political power were indistinguishable in Africa where “capital was people.”⁶⁹ Across West Central African political economies, kinship and dependency structured the operating logic for the distribution of material resources and compelling productive labor, while in Western industrializing societies the “market” played this function.⁷⁰

To a less veiled degree than in the “West,” Miller argued that eighteenth-century Africans assumed that commodities mediated human relationships, their acquisition was about the expansion of human networks of dependency and the securing of exploitative labor relationships for future production. The promise of human potentiality—though not identical to labor power—drove West Central African integration into Atlantic markets. Miller theorizes this overarching historical process at two levels: first, through global mechanisms of value-making or value-conversion and production; and second, through the simultaneous local erosion of social logics and moral values—particularly the slow death of the social values of reciprocity, collectivity, respect, and trust. Such changes were refracted through moral discourses condemning anti-social acts of cannibalism and witchcraft.⁷¹ In the eighteenth century, Mbundu, Ovimbundu, and Chokwe peoples, like others on the margins of the Atlantic system, operated in a different economic reality and lived through a transition from valuing “production for use and on people” to “an exchange economy.”⁷² Their sometimes-contradictory responses to such a transition reveal much about the uneven and multidirectional nature of capital’s evolution globally. By focusing on the local, Miller helps historians to provincialize the political economies of Europe while also providing a powerful explanation for how the economic strategies radiating from the “West” refashioned the political economies of colonial regions throughout the world.⁷³

⁶⁸ Miller, 51.

⁶⁹ Miller, 43.

⁷⁰ This distinction might prove to be a bit too stark, though it could be said that kinship still informed European economic relations while the deepening penetration of slaving and commodity markets in Central Africa also structured kinship and dependency.

⁷¹ Miller, 5-6, 157.

⁷² Miller, xvii.

⁷³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2009).

Since its publication 35 years ago, a number of scholars have revisited the key arguments advanced in *Way of Death*. Some historians have questioned such an emphatically economic approach, arguing that it simplified slavery's complex dynamics—especially in its focus on credit expansion as a key mechanism of enslavement. For Miller, the period between the 1610s and the 1680s was marked by the spread of a “slaving frontier,” or the violent edge of commercialized enslavement, which swept the interiors of Kongo, the Kwango Valley, and the region south of the Kwanza River.⁷⁴ In the following decades, in the wake of acute violence, regions that had once yielded captives through warfare and predation began to produce captives through “debt-based seizures” or as repayment for goods advanced by itinerant traders connected to Portuguese-speaking *pombeiros*. An increasing reliance on foreign credit, or “capital intensive slaving,” in Miller's terms, underwrote the slave trade's increasing volume in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Some scholars have confirmed *Way of Death*'s chronology. Roquinaldo Ferreira, for instance, argues that “the nexus between debt and enslavement is undeniable.”⁷⁵ His examination of slaving in eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Angola also revealed the pervasiveness of judicial enslavement, independent of debt repayment, as some locally free individuals were rendered as captives through manipulations of the *tribunal de mucanos* (a colonial judicial body) by *capitas mores* (Portuguese officials).⁷⁶ José C. Curto and Mariana Candido have also outlined a more complicated portrait of the varied mechanisms of enslavement in colonial Angola, with the latter challenging the notion that the concentration of slaving activity moved westward into the interior and progressively away from coastal areas, particularly in Benguela to the south of Luanda.⁷⁷ A multiplicity of forms of enslavement—from opportunistic acts of kidnapping and small-scale raids, to wars of conquest, and the forced payment of *baculamentos* (taxes) in enslaved individuals by conquered local *sobas*, as well as judicially enforced punishment—existed alongside the more strictly economic mechanism of debt repayment in various regions of West Central Africa, as identified by Miller.⁷⁸ Once slaving's violence had been unleashed, many scholars

⁷⁴ Miller, *Way of Death*, 234–235.

⁷⁵ Ferreira, *Cross-Cultural Exchange in the Atlantic World*, 66.

⁷⁶ Ferreira, 114.

⁷⁷ A critique of Miller's contention that the slaving frontier reached the Kwango Valley in the early nineteenth century can also be found in Domingues da Silva, *Atlantic Slave Trade from West Central Africa*, 12; Candido, *African Slaving Port and the Atlantic World*, 194–236; José C. Curto, “Experiences of Enslavement in West Central Africa,” *Histoire sociale/Social History* 41, no. 82 (2008): 381–415.

⁷⁸ Crislayne Alfagali, *Ferreiros e Fundidores da Ilamba: Uma História Social da Fabricação de Ferro e da Real Fábrica de Nova Oeiras (Angola, segunda metade do séc. XVIII)*

argue, the vulnerability of individuals who could not defend themselves as insiders continued to grow.⁷⁹ Subsequent literature has only amplified the degree to which both political and interpersonal violence suffused the socially deleterious processes of the deepening commercialization produced by transatlantic slaving.

Conclusion

In tracing capitalism and slavery's *longue durée*, Du Bois, Williams, and James demonstrate the mutability of capitalism over the course of the early modern period. As Fernand Braudel argued about the patterns of economic exchange that developed in the medieval Mediterranean World, "one essential feature of the general history of capitalism [is] its unlimited flexibility, its capacity for change and adaptation."⁸⁰ This literature crucially attempts to understand how the lives (and deaths) of captive human beings became wrapped up in the temporal and geographic circulation of value during the era of Atlantic commercial expansion. It encompasses the methods of business history, for example by exploring how traders and firms utilized finance to surmount the logistical challenges inherent to slaving, ensuring a high degree of profitability from their dehumanizing business practices. Such interpretations also reframe questions of the evolution of labor regimes in the early modern period. The enslaved acted as a nearly inexhaustible labor supply for Europe's American colonies, while the business of transatlantic slaving generated its own maritime and auxiliary labor markets in colonial entrepôts. Furthermore, histories of finance and economic transitions also form the basis of key interpretations. Miller's *Way of Death* points to an alternative to seeing the history of capitalism as more than merely the sum of parts of other sub-fields touching on the economic. Capitalism unleashed awesome transformations around the world, not only remaking the nature of production, exchange, and communal use of material goods and private consumption but also restructuring the basis of political power, social relations, and the moral values that substantiated them. Apprehending and analyzing the totality of such an evolution distinguishes Miller's approach to merchant capitalism from a narrower business or economic history.

(Luanda, 2018), 81–82; José Lingna Nafafé, *Lourenço Da Silva Mendonça and the Black Atlantic Abolitionist Movement in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, UK, 2022) 9–10; Aida Freudenthal and Selma Pantoja, *Livro dos Baculamentos que os Sobas deste Reino de Angola pagam a Sua Magestade 1630* (Luanda, 2011).

⁷⁹ Candido, *African Slaving Port and the Atlantic World*, 220.

⁸⁰ Ferdinand Braudel, *The Wheels of Commerce, Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century* (New York, 1982), 433.

Studies of the slave trade's capitalism or captivity's commerce argue that objectification, and not necessarily racialization, is the cornerstone of capitalist development and expansion of markets. Depersonalization occurred as merchants and patrons rendered dependents as fungible goods, and even currencies. In essence, the process of slaving became an unintended consequence of the formation of expansive networks of commercial credit. Slaving and the expansion of the bullion markets on which credit was based, gave rise to new political formations in West Central Africa, particularly centralized states whose fiscal basis was the selling of captives to foreign merchants. For Miller, this was the lasting legacy of the transatlantic slave trade in Angola. Rather than presuming politics is an incursion on the "economic," this literature sees the two as inseparable. Just as militarized slave trading monopoly companies from Europe worked to utilize commerce to accumulate domestic and continental political advantages, ambitious Mbundu sobas acquired European goods from pomberios to distribute internally, securing an ever-growing population of dependents who empowered them politically. Those who were incapable of providing returns on foreign credit consigned their own retainers to a fate as enslaved chattel across the Atlantic, as debts were settled through the payment of people. By placing ethnographic and quantitative data in conversation with one another, by reading the correspondences of Lusophone merchants with an eye to West Central African worldviews, Miller's multi-method approach provides not only an account for eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Angola but also a methodology for analyzing early modern capitalism and its mercantile dimensions outside of the boundaries of the African continent.

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