

**Beyond “race” and “modernity”: Portuguese imperial expansion and processes of
difference-making at the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade**

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Abstract: This paper investigates the interplay of logics of commodification, capital accumulation and state expansion associated with the making of early modern Portuguese Atlantic empire and of the Atlantic slave trade, and the various processes of classification, embodied marking and dehumanization that contemporary scholars often describe under the umbrella of “racialization.” The paper is based on a qualitative content analysis of letters and bureaucratic documents, drawn from the *Monumenta Missionaria Africana*, written by Portuguese state authorities and colonial officials regarding their activities in West and West Central Africa between the late fifteenth and the early sixteenth centuries, as well as a smaller number of letters from African elites to Portuguese authorities. I examine the relationship between categories associated with color (such as *branco*, *preto* and *negro*, and similarly positioned labels such as *mouro*), categories indicating slavery (especially *escravo* and *peça*), and processes of social differentiation, marking, abstraction and dehumanization. I link these categories and processes to struggles for power and social and territorial control associated with Portuguese political and economic expansion into the African Atlantic. Beyond refining the historical narrative of the emergence of social differentiation at the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade, the paper contributes to conceptual and methodological debates surrounding “race”, “modernity” and the relationship between them. Rather than engaging with definitional debates surrounding these topics, I focus on tracking historically some of the *processes* of social differentiation and subject-making that have been highlighted by theories of race and/or modernity.

Beyond “race” and “modernity”: Portuguese imperial expansion and processes of difference-making at the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade

A. Introduction

This paper investigates the interplay of logics of political and economic expansion associated with the making of early modern Portuguese Atlantic empire and of the Atlantic slave trade, and the various processes of classification, embodied marking and dehumanization that commonly described under the umbrella of “racialization.” While explanations for the origins of “race” and racism vary and depend partly on how these terms are defined, scholars who are concerned about anti-Black racism must contend with the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade, i.e., the process by which Europeans enslaved and forcibly dislocated millions of Africans to the Americas. More broadly, many influential accounts in the social sciences and humanities point to the oncoming of the “modern” period, marked by European expansion and colonization of the Americas, as a critical moment for the redefinition of understandings of social difference, as well as the expansion of the scope and techniques of European and Euro-colonial political and economic power. Being the first European power to establish relationships of enslavement and colonialism in the region, with enduring and lasting consequences for the overall Atlantic slave trade and European colonial projects, the context of the Portuguese empire’s early relationships with West and West Central Africa in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries is a logical place to study the relationship between European colonial expansion, slavery and racialization in the modern world.

This paper is based on a content analysis of letters and bureaucratic documents written by Portuguese state authorities and colonial officials regarding their activities in West and West Central Africa between the late fifteenth and the early sixteenth centuries, and a smaller number of letters from African elites to Portuguese authorities. The documents are drawn from the Monumenta Missionaria Africana, a collection of transcriptions of primary sources that are faithful to the original wording and spelling. I examine the use of categories associated with color (and related categories such as “moor”), and of categories indicating slavery. I investigate how and when these categories relate to each other, and to processes of social differentiation, marking, abstraction and dehumanization. I link these processes to struggles for power and social and territorial control associated with Portuguese political and economic expansion into the African Atlantic, as well as to processes of rationalization and commodification.

The analysis reveals many of the nuances of the classification, marking and social differentiation processes that Portuguese colonizers and enslavers deployed around the turn of the fifteenth to the sixteenth centuries. From early on, the Portuguese crown treated West and West Central Africa (labelled “Guinea”) as a space for enslavement, and African Atlantic islands like Cape Verde and São Tomé as spaces for colonial settlement. Color categories and the slave/free distinction did not always overlap, because the slavery system depended on distinctions *among* sub-Saharan Africans. Color distinctions become especially salient where delimitations of geographic and social space are unstable and seen as threatening established orders: the presence of white people in Africa; the presence of free Black people in areas dominated by white settlement; the entering of African elites into European elite spaces; and the competition between European colonial officials and African elites for the control of the slave trade. Other markers of difference are used to indicate Africans’ allied elite status, and one’s status as a slave. African elites’ bodies

are marked through clothes, adding to linguistic markers such as forms of address. Meanwhile, Portuguese authorities deployed onto enslaved Africans several techniques of commodification, dehumanization, classification and bodily marking, including the treatment of people as merchandise, the deployment of objectified labels like “peça” (piece/part), the branding of bodies, and practices of quantification and accounting.

These processes can be interpreted within logics imperial expansion and the development of capitalism, and their consequences for social differentiation and inequality. Practices of classification and difference-making can be read in light of the Portuguese empire’s attempt to establish control over new territories and populations, and a profitable slave trade, and to the varying and often conflicting agendas of the various actors that the Portuguese imperial state relied on to accomplish these goals. Different modes of differentiation thus emerged as a consequence of colonialism and slavery, exceeding a simple binary between Black slaves and white enslavers. Beyond refining the historical narrative of the emergence of social differentiation at the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade, the paper contributes conceptually and methodologically to scholarship on “race,” “modernity” and the relationship between them. Rather than engaging with definitional debates surrounding these topics, I track historically some of the social and cultural *processes* of social differentiation and subject-making that have been highlighted by theories of race and/or modernity.

B. From categories to processes: rethinking the race-modernity link

In his efforts to build a historical sociology of race and modernity, Winant (2001) highlights three inter-related phenomena: “the making of new forms of empire and nation, the organization of new systems of capital and labor, the articulation of new concepts of culture and identity” (p.

21). He thereby locates the study of race within central concerns of historical sociology (Adams et al. 2005): the formation of national and imperial states, to study the development of capitalism, and the cultural and social transformations that have accompanied these changes. Similarly, this paper examines the relationship between cultural processes of difference-making and broader dynamics of European imperial expansion and of the development of the Atlantic slave-based economy.

There is no longer a consensus that “race” is a “modern,” or even an exclusively European-derived phenomenon. Contemporary historians and literary scholars have documented beliefs in naturally inherited social distinctions, linking bodies, ancestry, culture and moral worth as existing during Antiquity and the Middle Ages, both in Europe (Bethencourt 2014; Heng 2018; Isaac 2013;; Nirenberg 2014) and elsewhere (Dikötter 2008; Loomba 2009; Sweet 1997). While these scholars have disagreed about whether these older phenomena should be called “race,” they generally agree that these earlier forms of social differentiation have influenced today’s “racial” ones. Similar debates exist regarding other categories of “modernity” such as the definition of “capitalism,” the “modern state,” and their relationship to “race” and other forms of inequality. Abu-Lughod (1989), for instance, argues that prevailing definitions of capitalism and the “modern” world system are Eurocentric, ignoring how economies developed outside the West. Similarly, Quijano (2000) criticizes Marx for delimiting capitalist relations as those based on free labor, arguing that, on a global scale, the capitalist system of the modern period depended simultaneously on different forms of labor organization, which in Latin America included slavery and the system of *encomienda*. Critiques of Robinson’s (2020) conceptualization of racial capitalism often hinge on differing definitions of both race and capitalism (e.g., Go 2021; Subrahmanyam 2023; Wacquant 2023). Established assumptions about the “modern” state also break down when one examines

political institutions beyond Europe or over a longer period (Go and Lawson 2017). Despite these caveats, it is still worthwhile to study how cultural and social processes commonly associated with “modern” racism, capitalism and empire operated at the time conventionally used as delimiting the “modern” from the “medieval” worlds, and at the sites of the geographic encounters that have shaped the racial divisions that we have today.

The cultural processes that I examine are not an intellectual history of ideas about difference, but the more mundane cognitive and institutionalized practices of representation, classification and encoding of the social world that cultural sociologists have identified as permeating and structuring social life (e.g., Bourdieu 1991; Brubaker et al. 2004; Lamont et al. 2014).

I examine three cultural processes identified by scholarship on racialization. First, a process of *embodied marking*, where certain bodily cues—whether real or imagined, whether natural or artificial, are used to rank people according to hierarchies of worth (e.g., Heng 2018; Omi and Winant 2018). Second, a process of *dehumanization*, where certain people are seen as naturally unworthy of the treatment usually afforded to other humans (e.g. Du Bois [1903] 2015; Ferreira de Silva 2009; Mbembe 2003; Wynter 2003). Third, a process of *classification* into particular categories that are today commonly understood as “racial” (Black, white, Indian, Asian, etc), and which became relevant in the context of European transoceanic empires and slavery (Bethencourt 2014; Wade 2010).

I also attend to cultural processes that classical and contemporary sociologists have identified as characteristic of capitalism and the modern state, which can and have been tied to those associated with racialization. Marx (2004 [1867]) and Polanyi (2001 [1944]), for instance, have highlighted the commodification of labor as a central feature of capitalism, involving both a cognitive abstraction from social relations, and a real and often violent process of dispossession

and social dislocation. Race scholars have similarly theorized transatlantic enslavement as a commodification of humans, hence a form of dehumanization (e.g., Wynter N.d.). Weber and later scholars generalized the insight that the “modern” world was characterized by an increasing abstraction and rationalization of, and alienation from, social relations and local meaning systems, becoming institutionalized both in capitalist enterprises and in the bureaucratic apparatus of the state. These rationalized and abstracted systems then affected the identities and embodied experiences of individuals (Bourdieu 1991; Carruthers and Espeland 1991; Cregan 2006; Porter 1996; Scott 2020 [1998]; Weber 1978). Scholars of racialization, colonialism and migration have also studied the processes by which economic and political institutions use racial categories, and associated ideologies and techniques of difference-making, to control and segment territories and populations, delimiting access to citizenship, sovereignty and rights (Balaguera et al. 2024; Ferreira da Silva 2009; Mbembe 2003; Mills 2022 [1997]); labor regimes (Quijano 2000; Robinson 2020); and positions in organizations (Ray 2019). Processes of marking have been identified to go hand in hand with classification, as states and other powerful actors attempt to sort various individuals neatly into mutually exclusive categories, and the movement of bodies across geographic and social spaces need to be tracked. Dehumanization processes, in turn, work to legitimize the differential treatment of differently classified individuals.

Nonetheless, the relationship between cultural processes, social differentiation and inequality cannot be reduced to simple binaries of power—between the colonizer vs. colonized, state vs. subjects, capitalists vs. workers etc. Political and economic power depends not only on coercion and hegemony, but also on delegation and exchange. Much scholarship has discussed how relatively marginal individuals in the United States have exchanged cooperation with a racially oppressive and socially conservative status quo in exchange for white privilege (e.g., Du Bois

[1935] 2012; Roedinger 1999). The state itself is an arena where different actors struggle power and resources, group definition, belonging, and power (Bourdieu 1991, Omi and Winant 2014). Historiography of early modern European colonial expansion and the slave trade also show how European expansion and enslavement relied to local allegiances with African political actors, as well as delegation of the colonial project to often geographically and socially distant European adventurers and entrepreneurs (see the sections below). These distant representatives or allies of European empires often had their own agendas and engaged in their own projects of power and social differentiation. Similarly, the expansion of the Atlantic economy, even in the context of colonial dispossession and the slave trade, also transformed Africans peoples, along with Europeans, into global consumers and traders (Fromont 2018). As I hope to show in the paper, paying attention to this multiplicity of actors and their often conflicting projects of power and status is central for understanding the emergence of the patterns of inequality and difference-making that we understand as “racial” today.

C. Historical context

While Europeans were in contact with sub-Saharan Africans since Antiquity and negative understandings associated with Blackness existed, scholars of the European Middle Ages and Early Modern period suggests that Black people were not central to European medieval imaginaries of difference. They identify religious distinctions between Christians, Muslims and Jews as a prominent ideological and institutional precursor to racist institutions and ideologies that developed in later centuries (Bethencourt 2014; Heng 2018; Martinez 2008,; Nirenberg 1996; 2014). The period and context under study is one where relations with, and distinctions between, sub-Saharan Africans and Europeans, become more central.

In medieval Iberia, slavery, along with ideas and institutions that established and naturalized difference, and more sustained contact of Europeans with peoples from sub-Saharan Africa, all happened within the context of the Reconquista, the process by which Christian polities expanded over Muslim ones. As Christian realms expanded and new Jewish and Muslim populations were incorporated, these non-Christians were often met with resentment and violence by established Christian nobility and populations. Starting in the fifteenth century, violence against religious minorities, as well as forced conversion to Christianity, became increasingly institutionalized at the state level (Martinez 2008; Nirenberg 1996). Slavery, too, was initially organized and justified largely around religious lines, as both the Catholic church and Islamic legal systems prohibited enslaving co-religionists, but allowed for the enslavement of “infidels”, especially in the case of religious warfare (Phillips 2014). The Reconquista also brought more sustained contact between European Christian and sub-Saharan Africans, some of which had moved to Muslim Iberia during the time of the Almoravid empire, which spanned between Iberia and West Africa in the twelfth century (Heng 2018).

Through the Reconquista, three Christian kingdoms emerged which expanded South: Aragon, Castille, and Portugal. In the fifteenth century, these kingdoms simultaneously fought over control of territories in Iberia and overseas—in North Africa and in Atlantic islands such as the Canaries and Madeira. Territorial disputes mixed with conflicts over the rules of enslavement: between Castillian and private traders in the Canaries, and between Portugal and Castille over the former’s enslavement of Canarians (Berquist Soule 2018). In 1479, warfare between Castille and Portugal was resolved through a treaty of Alçacovas, mediated by the Catholic Church. The treaty resolved a dynastic dispute over the throne of Castille, giving the throne to Isabel and Ferdinand of Aragon, instead of her half-sister Joana, who was married to the king of Portugal. It also gave Castille the

Canary Islands in exchange for Portugal's exclusive access to the African coast. By the late fifteenth century, Atlantic islands off the coast of Africa, especially Madeira and São Tomé, became laboratories for sugarcane plantation and processing using slave labor (Berquist Soule 2018; Garfield 1992; Heywood and Thornton 2007; Moore 2009) which would eventually develop in the Americas. In Cape Verde, sugar was a less important crop, but slave labor was deployed in planting cotton that supplied both African and European consumer markets, as well as raising cattle (Santos 2007).

Iberian Christian expansion both within and outside the Peninsula led to a reconfiguration of social structures, which included struggles over both the control of the empire's apparatus of power, and over definitions of citizenship and belonging. In 1492, Isabel and Ferdinand simultaneously sent Columbus to find a passage to India across the Ocean (being barred by the Portuguese to take the African route), took over Granada from Muslim control, and expelled unconverted Jewish and Muslim people from their territories. This set the stage for the development of *limpieza de sangre*, an institutionalized attempt by the Spanish state to control access to public office through an investigation of people's lineages, tying religious ancestry to a discourse about purity of "blood," which were implemented later to develop the *casta* system in Spanish America (Martinez 2008).

In Portugal, blood-cleansing policies against religious minorities arrived slightly later, and already in a context of expansion into sub-Saharan Africa. While many Jewish people expelled from Granada fled to Portugal in 1492 (Swetschinski 1982), the following year the Portuguese crown ordered all Jewish children between two and ten years old to be taken from their parents and sent to São Tomé, and forced all Jewish people to convert or leave in 1496. The exile of Jewish children was wedded to a broader strategy of settling São Tomé and getting rid of "undesirable" populations, as these children joined a larger group of convicts being sent to the

island. African enslaved women and men were brought from the African continent to São Tomé to “breed” children of the convicts, and to plant sugar and other crops (Garfield 1992).

The settlement of Madeira, Cape Verde and São Tomé happened hand in hand with Portuguese expansion along the African coast, expanding geographies of enslavement. Having consolidated Christian rule in the Iberian Atlantic with the taking of Algarve in 1249, Portugal extended the Reconquista to North Africa, conquering Ceuta in 1415, followed by other territories in Western Morocco, which they eventually lost. In 1434, Portuguese navigators crossed the difficult sea currents of Cape Bojador, opening Atlantic pathways into sub-Saharan Africa. Slave raiding followed these routes from Iberia to North and West Africa. But raiding in West Africa met fierce local resistance, leading to a policy of establishing diplomatic relations with local rulers around mid-century. In 1483, the Portuguese arrived at the Kingdom of Congo, which would soon become an important ally (Heywood and Thornton 2009; Mattoso 1998; Newitt 2010).

The above dynamics meant that, in the Portuguese empire in the early sixteenth century, neither was slavery exclusively Black, nor was Blackness—or African-ness—exclusively associated with slavery. Historians have recently highlighted the presence of African and Black individuals who were treated as free and even high status in the early modern Portugal, including priests (Paiva 2023) and noble elites (Bennett 2018), although their incorporation was the object of debate and struggle. Over time, a class of free people of sub-Saharan African descent also emerged within European settlements in Cape Verde and São Tomé, as well a group of Afro-Europeans in the African continent, generating new identities and statuses (Garfield 1992; Heywood and Thornton 2009; Santos 2007).

As Portuguese colonizers and enslavers enmeshed themselves into the internal politics of Western African kingdoms as a strategy to obtain slaves, and as they turned the export of humans into the primary economic means for Africans to engage with global trade, they radically uprooted existing social and economic structures. African polities usually did not enslave their own, but some were willing to sell prisoners of war into slavery. Polities and elites that allied with the Portuguese and that enslaved and sold humans, gained power over others, while slavery became more common in Africa. Atlantic slavery not only generated inequality among Africans, but generated inter-state and civil war, crowded out alternative economic activities, generated social dislocation and dispossession, and set the conditions for European economic and political domination (Candido 2013; Green 2019; Heywood and Thornton 2007; Rodney 2018 [1972]).

Conflicts also pitted Europeans against one another, as independent slave traders' fostering of warfare and social instability and dislocation in Africa sometimes conflicted with the crown's later attempts to create tax-paying subjects and vassals (Heywood and Thornton 2007). Another source of the Portuguese crown's concern was competition by Europeans arriving from various origins arrived in Africa, first as independent merchants, financiers, missionaries (Newitt 2010) and, by the sixteenth century, as representatives of other newly expanding European empires. Portuguese and Luso-colonial actors (eventually centered in Brazil) would remain central to the Atlantic slave trade until its abolition in the nineteenth century.

D. Analysis

The analysis below is based on a collection of transcribed primary documents called the Monumenta Missionaria Africana (MMA), containing some of the most important official correspondence between the Portuguese crown and colonial officials in West and West Central

Africa. While encompassing only a subset of the existing archival material on the subject matter, the MMA has been widely used by historians who write about the Portuguese early modern involvement in Africa and in the Atlantic slave trade. Being numerous, transcribed and available in PDF, the documents from the MMA are more easily amenable to a content analysis than handwritten physical primary sources would be. The documents are faithful to the original text, including its archaic, and not always consistent, spelling and grammar, and so they lend themselves to an analysis of the vocabulary used during the period.

Drawing on five volumes of the MMA (listed in the bibliography), I extracted all documents written between the 1430s and the 1510s into separate PDFs and incorporated them into NVivo, building a database. I chose this period because it marks the beginning of the Portuguese engagement with sub-Saharan Africa, and before the slave trade expands to Brazil. Since my goal was to focus on the everyday bureaucratic management of colonialism and enslavement, rather than on philosophical or religious rationalizations of these projects, I excluded two types of documents from my analysis that were present in the MMA volumes. First, I excluded segments of “narrative” books, published at a later date about the history of certain events or encounters in Africa, which may be based on first-hand or second-hand experiences. Second, I removed documents written in Latin by representatives of the Catholic church.

My final sample was 243 letters, and legislative and administrative documents, written in Portuguese by crown and colonial officials, and occasionally by a priest or another individual involved in the colonial enterprise. Starting in the 1510s, there are also several letters from the King of the Congo, and a few from other African elites, allowing for an interesting analysis of these elites’ point-of-views. As shown in Table 1, MMA documents for the fifteenth century are much sparser than those in the sixteenth century, reflecting the slow Portuguese expansion in the

region. The table also shows the number of documents that contained the main terms discussed in the analysis.

Table 1 - Number of MMA documents coded by decade, for selected categories and totals

Decade	Number of documents coded						Total
	negro	preto	mouro	branco	escravo	peça	
1430	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
1440	0	0	1	0	0	0	2
1450	0	0	0	0	1	0	5
1460	3	0	1	1	0	0	10
1470	0	0	1	0	3	0	7
1480	0	0	2	0	2	0	27
1490	14	2	1	1	14	4	40
1500	6	0	0	0	15	4	31
1510	27	16	4	19	103	48	119
Total	50	18	10	21	138	56	243

I read all the selected documents and coded for the use of certain words that indicated markers of social difference that are salient in the literature on the history of race and slavery. I identified all references to categories such as “negro,” “preto,” (two words for black) “branco” (white) and “mouro” (moor) or any categories that could indicate mixture between them (there was one reference to “mulato”). I also identified all documents that used the terms “escravo” (slave) or “peça,” (literally “piece” or “part”) and coded for other words indicating slavery or former slavery, such as “cativo” (captive) or “forro” (freedperson). In the discussion below, I leave the original Portuguese terms, in italics. All the quotes in English are my own translation.

I then went back to each document that had mentioned these categories and examined the broader narrative around the category. In doing so, I paid attention to how these categories were deployed toward the doings of slavery and colonialism, and to other information that could indicate how social distinctions were perceived and enacted. While I was not initially looking for processes

such the marking of bodies, dehumanization and abstraction, my prior sociological training led me to recognize these processes in the documents and incorporate my observations into my analysis.

Settling lands, peoples and categories

Early documents already show the Portuguese crown as defining “Guinea”, the region of West Africa and the Atlantic coast to the South, as a space for exploitation, conquest and enslavement. In contrast, the archipelagos of Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe appear from the start as places of settlement. Here, documents deal with the distribution of authority to govern settled populations, and with the regulation of trade between these islands and the continent. Other documents regulate the practice of enslavement and slave trading, equating Africans to merchandise even before they are labelled as “black.” The earliest documents talk about enslaving *mouros*, and even when *negros* are mentioned, they are not the only category classified in connection to slavery. While one might assume that the word *mouro* is used to label North Africans, and that *negro* (or, sometimes, *preto*) is the label for sub-Saharan Africans, this distinction is not always clear-cut.

While the word *negro* first appears in my sample in the 1460s, but category *mouro* is first mentioned in a 1443 document from the Portuguese crown that gives Infante Dom Henrique (aka in English Prince Henry the Navigator) the right to monopoly over the exploration and trade with Western Africa south of the Cape Bojador. This text claims that, before Dom Henrique sent ships over there, the territory south of Bojador was unknown to anyone in the Christian world [“*na cristandade*”], nor did anyone know if the region was populated, nor was this region represented in navigation maps or world maps, and

because this was a doubtful thing [*coisa duvidosa*] and men did not dare to go, he sent [ships] there 15 times until he knew parts of that land and brought from it, twice, about 38 arrested *mouros* and had a navigation map made of it; and he asked that he wished to send his ships further to get to know part of the said land, and he asked us to please give our letter saying that no one should go to these lands without his orders or permission, to make war or for merchandise. (Brásio 1958: 266-267)

Here, the justification for capturing *mouros* seems to go together with knowing the land and collecting evidence for this.

In the 1460s, the association between skin color, religion and slavery seemed to be a slippery business. Two documents from the 1460s mentions the word *negro* (the second of which also mentions *mouros* and *brancos*). First, in a 1462 letter from the Portuguese crown to Dom Duarte Meneses, giving him permission to send ships loaded with merchandise, and to send this merchandise to “our trade of the *negros*, which are from Cape Verde and beyond [...]” (Brásio 1958: 413-414). In a footnote, the editors of MMA explain that the original “*dos negros*” is a replacement for the crossed-out expression “of Guinea.” It would be interesting to know when the word “*negro*” came to replace “Guinea” in the document, but here in any case it is clearly being used to refer to the territory and the people with whom trade is supposed to happen. While maybe the meaning changed to include the slave trade in people labelled as *negros*, it is not clear from the original phrasing if the slave trade was included initially in the scope of letter.

Second, in a 1466 letter to from the crown, which gives Infante Dom Fernando, identified as responsible for peopling the island of Santiago in Cape Verde five years prior, rights to govern the peoples of the island. The letter states that the crown gives Dom Fernando the right to decide on criminal and civil affairs “over all *mouros*, *negros* and *brancos*, freed (*forros*) or captive, and

all their progeny [geração] that exists in the island, as long as they are Christian and while it is our mercy.” (Brásio 1958: 431-435). The sentence distinguishes between *negro*, *branco* and *mouro* citizens, but does not identify them as demarcating the boundary between slave and free. Later, however, the same letter refers to *negros* as merchandise, and even as currency for taxation, saying that “we want, after removing all the said *negros* and merchandise which by right they need to pay us, they, the said inhabitants of this island, may sell their remaining shares to anyone they wish, either in the said island or in any of our kingdoms or outside of these.” While the previous letter includes *mouros* among possible Christians, a 1513 document seems to equate *mouro* with being Muslim, by using it together with *preta*. It asks for Cabo Verde’s Ilha do Fogo resident João Fernandes to be pardoned for the death of and enslaved woman “named Ixarandy, who was a *moura preta*.” (Brásio 1963: 59-61).

Among the 1470s documents there are no mentions of *negros* or *brancos*, but there is one reference to *mouros*. This happens in a document that starts by stating that the “priests of Rome have given us the mercy and donation forever of the parts and seas and land of Guinea and the islands of the ocean sea from the cape of Nom and Bojador until mid-day [check what this means]” (Brásio 1954: 9-11). However, the document states that, since people have been trading and making war in this region without consent of the Portuguese crown, and the penalties for this had not been previously legislated, therefore:

We determine and declare and put into the law that any person of any origin, standing [*estado*] or condition, which to the said parts and lands and seas of Guinea orders trading or acquires [*resgatar*], or takes *mouros* without our license and authorization, should die for this and for this same fact they should lose all the property that they have [...].

Mouro here appear as a generic term for people of Guinea, and as potential subjects of enslavement.

Mouros appear again as merchandise in a 1489 document, where the Portuguese king gives his cousin, Dom Manuel, Duque of Beja, the lordship over parts of West Africa, as well as “the power and authority to be able to send, from the said parts, gold, silver, *mouros* and any other merchandise” (Brásio 1958:570-579)).

Even when the category *negro* is used by the end of the century, some documents still showed evidence that people otherwise classified could be recognized by the crown as enslaved. In a 1499 document, the king gives Fernão de Melo “civil and criminal jurisdiction, including death, over *escravos negros e brancos* that are in the said island, be they captives or freedmen” (Brásio 1952:180). It is unclear how to parse this sentence, if they are suggesting that there were white slaves in the island, but I think this is the correct interpretation, especially if one takes into account that a more expansive definition of *branco* was being used, which might include Canarians, Arabs, North Africans, and European Muslims, all of which were to be found among enslaved peoples in Iberia.

Overall, Portuguese official colonizers get privileges from the crown to exploit enslaved people as a resource, while the crown attempts to organize and profit from the slave trade and the settlement process. Some documents portray this regulation as essential for the colonial settling of land, particularly in island colonies like Cape Verde and São Tomé, where enslaved Africans from the continent were being brought to help colonize and populate the land. In a 1472 document, the Portuguese courts criticize a previous contract between the crown and Fernão Gomes (a Portuguese merchant and explorer) that gives the latter too much leverage over the resources of the continent. Regarding enslaved people, the courts say that:

As to the slaves that come from Guinea, and much more so those that come from parts of Africa, we ask that you please strictly defend that they do not take them outside of your

kingdoms, nor do you want to give license [to others] take them outside, and if you have given any such orders you should revoke them, because sir, they do much to people your kingdoms, and they are the cause of making new lands and cut forests and open paving and other uses (Brásio 1958: 451-454)

The same document contains the King's response:

The King responds that there is not, for the service of himself or his kingdoms, anything to require regarding slaves that come from Guinea and Africa, because of the multitude of the said slaves there is more use if they continue to be taken and sold outside of the Kingdom, because of the greater prices that are given for them, and because they [the slaves] are not taken without the King's special permission, when he believes in the contrary, for the benefit of his kingdoms, he would have things the way that would be of greater service to him and that would be of better use for his naturals. (ibid.)

Here, there is a disagreement, which would continue within the Iberian empires, between selling slaves and populating the territories.

Managing settlement and trade, sorting “negros” from “brancos”

As Portuguese administrators established themselves in the islands of Cape Verde and São Tomé and in trading ports like Elmina, and as they established many different interactions with the population, the words *negro* (or, less often, *preto*) and *branco* became established as ways that Europeans and Africans would describe the various relationships with each other. Here, while the *negro* category does sometimes appear to indicate enslaved people, this category is often employed to describe the local populations more broadly, reflecting a wider array of political and economic relations. The category *branco* would also become more prevalent, being deployed both by

Africans themselves (at least the elite Africans represented in the MMA documents), by white colonists, and by the Portuguese crown, which was increasingly preoccupied with managing Europeans in Africa.

The word *negro* is sometimes used as synonymous for slave, but more commonly other words like *escravos* or *peças* are used to describe enslaved people. Among the documents that equate being *negro* with being enslaved is a 1509 document, which describes the accounts of Fernão de Melo, captain of the Island of São Tomé, associated with slave trading in Benin, includes the purchase of “*ferro de prender negros*” [iron for tying up *negros*] (Brásio 1954:58-59). Another example is a document from 1500 where the crown outlines the rights and obligations for inhabitants of Atlantic islands to enslave people, as long as some enslaved people are given away as taxes:

Additionally, it pleases us and we want that after all the *negros* and merchandise are removed that the inhabitants of the said island are obligated to pay us, they can sell their remaining shares to any persons that they want or find appropriate, both in the said island to anyone, as well as in all our kingdom and outside them, and if they sell in the said island, that the buyers do not pay [taxes] from the said merchandise in these kingdoms [...] (Brásio 1988: 17-20).

Some documents leave room for interpretation about whether *negros* are enslaved or not. For instance, in one document, a colonial administrator writing from the island of Príncipe asks his superior for a blacksmith, because “these *negros* know how to make nails and nothing else.” (Brásio 1954:109-112). In a 1512 a man called Gonçalo Ruiz was accused of ordering a person labelled as *negro* to be thrown alive in the sea. The document does not clarify whether the victim was enslaved, but later says that Ruiz had left on the island of Príncipe a sailor, a slave, and a

“*escravo forro*” (freed slave), who is mentioned by name. Neither person labelled *negro* nor the enslaved people are mentioned by name, and the freed and enslaved people’s color are not mentioned (Brásio 1952:215-221).

Other documents make clear that the *negros* in question were not enslaved, but were part of the peoples inhabiting the African continent with which Portuguese officials and traders interacted. One, from 1509, details the rules and provisions for Gonçalo Ruiz to assist the King of the Congo in fighting rebels, stating that “this armada will go to make war against the *negros* of the islands that have rebelled against the king of Manicongo” (Brásio 1954:60-62). The primary identity assigned to *negros* here is political, and there is a linguistic sorting between *negros* that are allies (not labelled by color) vs. enemies. Another document describes *negros* in Elmina as discerning consumers. In 1518, Fernão Lopes Correia writes that the *negros* did not want to buy certain clothes that the king sent for the stipulated price, because the cloth did not have the expected texture (Brásio 1954:117-122).

An important use of the distinction between *negros* and *brancos* seems to be the regulation of rights of Europeans to live and trade in Africa. In a document from 1497, the king prohibits anyone coming to “Guinea” to trade in iron with the “*negros infiéis*” [infidel blacks] (Brásio 1958: 587). Some of these documents use the terms *brancos* or *lançados* (settlers) to describe these Europeans who needed to be regulated. In a 1514 document, the crown document restricts European settlement in West and West Central Africa, stating that “from now on no person of any quality or condition should settle with the *negros* in any part of Guinea.” (Brásio 1954:70-83). The expression “of any quality or condition” also erases all status distinction that these Europeans might have had back home, or that people of any origin might have in Africa or elsewhere. Another document by the crown, written in 1518 (Brásio 1963:149-150), explicitly labels settlers as

brancos. The document prohibits inhabitants of Cabo Verde to acquire slaves in Guinea, and argue that much damage was done to the merchandise, and that much of this damage “was done by the *branco* men that in the said parts of Guiné are settled with the *negros*” and declares that these *homens brancos* [*branco* men should be expelled from the region and “give all their possessions [fazendas] to the Kings and *negros* of where they are so that they can kill them or give them to the captains of our ships,” and that they will pardon the *homens brancos* that volunteer to come on board captain Bernaldim Gomez’s ship and pay a fine.

The legal and social boundaries between *negros* and *brancos* within the settled islands also become more complicated, especially as enslaved Africans could be manumitted, creating the category of *forro* (freedperson). In a 1517 document, for instance, the king of Portugal gives free status to some formerly enslaved Africans. The letter says that “let it be known that the *negros* that in our island of São Tomé have been given to some *degradados* [convicts] to serve them” should be set free. The letter argues that female slaves (“*escravas fêmeas*”) had already been given freedom based on the same reason (Brásio 1952:376). While this could indicate that convicts were not allowed to have slaves, Garfield (1992) suggests a different interpretation, saying that enslaved women were brought to the island to procreate with convicts, and that their ambiguous status as wives or slaves may have been the reason for their manumission. In any case, it seems like the case of women set a precedent for the freeing of men belonging to convicts.

The existence of freed Black inhabitants of the islands created a further “problem” for the crown to manage the flow of people and goods across the empire. A document issued by the accountant of the Santiago island of Cape Verde stated that ships going to trade with the West Africa should only include capitains that are “inhabitants of the island, *branco* men, and not *negros*, even if they are *forros*,” and that when each ship returns from Guinea there should be an

“investigation of whether there remains in Guinea any *branco* men of those that went in the ship,” in which case these people’s belongings [fazendas] would be confiscated. Finally, the document says that this policy applied to *brancos* will be extended to “*preto* men who are Christian” (Brásio 1963). Here, colonial officials are faced with the fact that there are free Black men who are Christian, who reside in Cape Verde, who could in theory be captains of ships trading with Africa, and who could in principle stay in Africa and not be traceable through their skin color. The regulations use color very explicitly, precisely because these potentially blurry boundaries are at stake.

Attempts at spatial regulation of the slave trade would set the interests of island colonizers against those of the crown. A letter from the “people of the Island of Santiago” to the crown, for instance, critiques legislation that required that all the trade between Cape Verde and the African continent went through Portugal, so as to facilitate the crown’s taxation and control. Traders of “Castille, Algarves, the Canary Islands and of these Kingdoms” would not be interested in buying slaves if they have to go through Lisbon, because, among other reasons, the longer trip would “risk the slaves, which are dangerous merchandise, because they die a lot.” (Brásio 1963:53-55). Here, one could see both the commodification of enslaved humans, and the conflicts over the proper management of these commodities. Rather than representing the interests of the Portuguese empire, however, (predominantly) white colonizers and enslavers from Cape Verde represent broader (trans-imperial) European interests.

Marks of distinction: the making of African allied elites

In addition to white colonial settlers and enslavers, the Portuguese crown also relied on African elite allies to advance the business of the slave trade, and its broader colonial mission in Africa.

For their cooperation to work, both African allied elites and the crown had an interest in distinguishing among Africans, and in narrowing the gap between Christian African elites and their European counterparts. This approach, however, brought these elite Africans into social and geographic spaces that some Europeans regarded as their own, both in Africa and in Europe itself, generating conflict.

This contradictory positionality of African elites is reflected in the different ways in which they are “marked” and classified in the documents. Several documents simultaneously classify African allied elites as *negros*, or sometimes *pretos*, and recognize them with vocabulary indicating status of nobility. Beyond linguistic labels, crown documents also indicate the distribution of bodily markers of status in, literally, the European fashion. In a few documents, crown officials order the distribution of appropriate European clothes to African allies and their relatives, servants and slaves, noting their differential status as well as their blackness. In a 1493 document signed by João de Barros, a well-known chronicler who then worked for the Portuguese crown, ordered a certain Rui Gil to:

give to Bassy, *negro*, relative of Ligitír [...] one hood and *pelote* [clothes worn under the hood/cape] and pants made of cloths from Ipre [in Flandres] and *gibão de chamalote* [Brásio describes it as a “short coat that covered men from neck to waist, which was worn over the shirt”] and three shirts made of French cloths, and one black cap [*barrete*] and a belt of black leather and some *borzeguins* [boots] and shoes. And in this way you will give Cumba, *negro* slave that came to serve the said Ligitír one *fraldilhe* [underwear] of Bristol wool, and one *sainho* [skirt] and one bando of said cloth and two shirts of cloth of the land [Portuguese cloth]. And you will give to João of Portugal, *negro* of our stables that takes care of horses, a cape

and *pelote* and a hood and pants made of Bristol cloth and two shirts of cloth from the land
(Brásio 1958:577-578)

While all the receivers of clothes here are labelled *negros*, what clothes they receive depends on their differentiated social position. The cloth origins are different (from France and Flandres) between Bassy, who is said to have an important relative Ligitír, and the enslaved woman and the stable caretaker, who wears things made out of cloth from Portugal or from Bristol. As skin color cannot be used here to make the desired status distinctions between *negros*, clothes serves as an important bodily marker of difference. Having slaves, servants and subordinates also reinforces African elites' claims high social status in the eyes of the Portuguese crown, as well as relations of kinship to important people (Bassy is important because he is a relative of Ligitír).

In her study of written and visual representations of clothes in Angola of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Fromont (2018) argues that clothing was an important symbolic way in which Africans communicated their various social statuses not only to Europeans, but also to other Africans. Textiles flowed both into and out of Africa during the era of the slave trade, and imported cloth became a means of symbolic distinction for those who became wealthy and participated in global networks, which increasingly meant participating in the slave trade. Santos (2007) argues that the Cape Verde economy developed a significant cotton plantation system, partly to satisfy African demand. One 1514 document where the crown's attempts to regulate Cape Verde's trade with Africans, attests to these sophisticated consumption patterns, saying that nobody can send to the Islands of Cape Verde and Fogo several products including "cloths of India, capes from Chaul [city in India]; brocades from Flandres, silk shirts, or of the colors that the *negros* bring" and "red and yellow cloths that are usually brought to Guinea" (Brásio 1963:71-73)

In another document from 1493, the Portuguese king orders that Dom Pedro, ambassador from the King of the Congo to Portugal, be given similar clothes as Bassy (*pelote, gibão, barrete, borzeguins*, etc), made of several materials and coming from several places. But besides the fancy clothes, he is also identified as Dom Pedro (Brásio 1952: 150-151). In my sample of documents, the title Dom is used almost exclusively for nobility, and most people referred to as *fidalgos* (“son of something,” a term akin to “gentleman”) are not called Dom. Dom clearly marks this individual as royalty, in recognition for his blood ties to the king of the Congo. But Dom Pedro’s status as a nobleman in the Portuguese court was not without contention. In a 1515 letter, Dom Pedro writes to one of the Portuguese authorities:

Your Mercy [*vossa mercê*] will know that the King our lord gave me a mule for me to ride, which I told my servants to heal, and I had it contained [*aferrar*] from the money they give me for my expenditures; and already having tamed this mule, and I tamed it myself [...] and he gave me another that was so wild that twenty *mouros* from the stable could not control her, because she would kick, bite and, however, sir, I worked so much with her, and my servants, that I made her tame (Brásio 1952:349-350).

Here Dom Pedro is complaining of a practical joke made at his expense by the staff at the Portuguese court who provided him with the mules, suggesting that some kind of bullying may be going on, despite the ostensive treatment of the kingdom of Congo’s ambassador as a nobleman. Interesting too is the re-appearance of *mouros* in the archive, working in the royal stables (perhaps as slaves?), and now aiding an ambassador from Congo to Portugal reign in his mule.

In very long letter to the King of Portugal, written in 1514 (Brásio 1952: 294-323), Afonso I, the King of the Congo, lists the many ways that Europeans who went to his kingdom did not follow the Portuguese kings’ orders to help him Christianize the population, and to provide him

and his subjects with the appropriate clothes and equipment to live like European elites and build European-like buildings and institutions. Many European individuals are mentioned negatively in the letter, including lazy bricklayers (even though they were given money to buy slaves to help them); a priest who transformed his house into a “brothel” and had a “*mulato*” child with an African woman; and various intermediaries who intercepted letters and appropriated merchandise meant for King Afonso or his subjects, as well as enslaved individuals that, he argued, “belonged” to his noble subjects or were being sent to the Portuguese crown in exchange for goods and services. The most mentioned culprit was Fernão de Melo, the captain of São Tomé, whom, Dom Afonso said, empowered or even ordered many of these people to act this way, and himself intercepted and confiscated goods and enslaved peoples that the kings of Portugal and of the Congo sent to each other. Newitt (2010), commenting on her own translation of segments of this letter, argues that Fernão de Melo, along with other colonial administrators, viewed Dom Afonso and other African elites as competitors, did not recognize their status as nobility and as allies, and sabotaged all attempts to establish relationships with these elites or to help them with Christianization efforts. Afonso’s letter certainly paints a picture of this happening.

Some of the language in the letter is worth highlighting. First, the word *branco* is used multiple times to describe the various Europeans that arrive in the kingdom, where the African king highlights how he repeatedly treated them well and they repeatedly disrespected him and his subjects. He also frequently describes some of his subjects as *fidalgos*, whom, he says, are doing the work that *brancos* should be doing, are scandalized at the behavior of *brancos*, and are therefore questioning Afonso’s decision to preach Christianity and ally himself with these dishonest people. He describes himself and his African allied subjects as Christians, who are attempting to overcome their prior status as *gentios* (gentile) and to not live like “barbarians.” And

he often describes enslaved people as *peças*, which he at various times claims to have offered to the Portuguese king and to various *brancos* (including priests) as currency to pay for the construction of his Christian kingdom. The *brancos* nonetheless keep taking more than their share. The description, consistent with other documents by the Portuguese crown and officials, also suggests that *brancos* are subject to their own separate justice system, led by other *brancos*, and that the king of the Congo recognizes this system (ibid.).

Several boundaries are being made and unmade: between African nobility, commoners and enslaved people; between civilized Christians and barbarian pagans, and between *brancos* and *negros*. The *branco/negro* distinction does not necessarily overlap with the two others, and the king of the Congo is working very hard to separate them from each other. Rather, the color boundary serves primarily to denounce the undue interference of *brancos* into his and his kingdoms' affairs, despite the various special privileges that they enjoyed within his kingdom, the combination of which had delegitimized Dom Afonso in the eyes of his own subjects. The captain of São Tomé, on the other hand (and his European accomplices), is working in the opposite direction. It is the colonizers at the frontier who seem to have the most interest in the overlap between slavery, skin color, social status and pagan-ness/barbarism. The interests of the Portuguese crown, at least for the time being, are more complex, as the allegiance of African elites and subjects is still viewed by the crown as beneficial and consistent with the goals of imperial expansion and enslavement.

Slavery and the human/commodity boundary

While Portuguese enslavers and colonial authorities did not always equate African-ness with slavery, they *did* mark and count and, and thereby commodified and dehumanized, those Africans that they *did* enslave.

Documents from the 1450s to 1470s already mark “Guinea” as a land where enslaved people are counted as a resource to be extracted, sold as merchandise and paid as taxes to the crown and other authorities the crown appoints. In a 1457 document, Infante Dom Henrique passes on his rights to a share of the resources from “Guinea” to the Order of Christ:

the things which in the said land of Guinea, from the Cabo do Nã forward, they take [*resgatarem*] or acquire [*houverem*] by any means, such as slaves, slavesses [*escravas*], gold, fish or any other things or merchandise, should be given to the said order and pay as tithe one in twenty-one each of said things. (Brasio 1958:391-393)

Over time, the Portuguese crown deployed more elaborate techniques for managing the slave trade from a distance. Various techniques of commodification can be identified in 1519 document where the King outlines how enslaved people should be handled:

You will choose for pilots and masters of our ships that you send for the acquisition [*resgates*] the best and most correct [*certos*] there is, and similarly for the sailors and cabin boys. And because we have information that the traders paid per year as the salary of each pilot six *peças* of slaves, and four to the ship master, and to each sailor with five three [*sic.*] and each cabin boy three and this a little more or less (Brasio 1954:124-133)

Here, enslaved people are called *peças*, are treated as currency and are given as salary to the crew.

The document continues the instructions:

[...] you should send them our message that, under the penalty of losing their income and the salary of the said scribes and pilots, they don't pay per *peça* more than forty manilhas

[currency] or less, the least possible; and in the other rivers and where the transparent coral-colored linen cloth is valuable, they should decide soon what you will pay per *peça de escravo* and ivory and red cloth and other merchandise and they should not pay over that [what they had decided] (ibid.)

Through the expression *peça de escravos*, we can see that *peça* is a unit for counting enslaved people. Enslaved humans become a unit of accounting, and the prices for them are to be haggled, along with the prices of other “merchandise.” Later, the document instructs the slave traders to brand the enslaved people, to ensure that they are marked as property of the crown:

you will make a mark on our slaves that come from the said rivers and it will be an SR on the right arm and a cross as the accountant said that was the custom for our *peças* and you should make sure that no one marks the said mark nor on the said arm, under the penalty of losing the said *peça* (ibid.)

Then the document talks about how the enslaved people should be maintained:

in each of the said farms that is declared in the letter from the administrator [*feitor*], that you buy for the maintenance of our slaves, you should put a housekeeper [*caseiro*], a well-regarded *branco* man, that he takes good care of all the *peças* that are given to him by the supervisor (ibid.)

The only person whose color is mentioned is the *branco* housekeeper, a person who will be directly involved with the daily management of enslaved people, who are close to the enslaved, but whose interests and authority are to be aligned with those of enslavers. And then the document outlines the prescribed accounting procedures for buying and selling enslaved humans:

when you send ships for the acquisition [of slaves] you will receive from the said administrator [*feitor*] the merchandise necessary for their pilots you should inform about

them in a book that is in the house, open. And you will carry them [the slaves] as revenue to the *escrivão* [scribe, clerk] of the ship so that he can account for them. And so that when they have gone and arrived for acquisition the scribe can know what merchandise that you are taking, because he was present during their acquisition and will write down in his book the *peças* and merchandise that they buy, and by which price and kind of merchandise, while they are being bought, with every good declaration. (ibid.)

Words such as “escravo,” “mercadoria,” and, even more so, “peça” do the linguistic work of dehumanization and commodification. Branding does the physical, embodied, work of both demarcating someone as a slave and establishing them as someone else’s property—in the example above, of the Portuguese crown. The process is rationalized through prices, accounting practices, bookkeeping and the reduction of humans to numbers. There is no justification for slavery in the documents, the system is very matter of fact. People are simply described as things, as merchandise, and also often as currency, which can be used to pay for the salaries of bureaucrats and free laborers. Their names are not present in the archive, their agency is usually omitted. As enslaved people are recognized as living merchandise, some documents talk about their maintenance, about the need to select healthy ones and to take care of their health. One document, for instance, which deals with the management of the property of recently deceased free persons on ships that arrive to Cape Verde, states that “because there may be things of the said deceased people that if are not availed of quickly will be damaged and lost, such as slaves, or dresses, or similar things, which if they are in storage may be damaged”, these “things” should be auctioned off and sold quickly (Brásio 1963: 103-113).

While the MMA does not contain transcriptions of books where enslaved people were recorded as “cargo” for the period analyzed, a document from 1535 does show a transcription of such a

recording (Brásio 1988: 98-102). After listing all the expenses incurred for the operation of the ship and the feeding of the enslaved people and the crew, the document then lists the name of the owner first, then the number of *peças* that each of them embarked. No names are mentioned for enslaved people, they are represented solely as number of *peças* associated with each owner's name on a list. While treated as objects, the *peças* are understood to be alive. Not only because they eat—and the documents lists which owners provided how much in terms of food—but also because they die. Their deaths during the voyage are recorded list-wise in the same fashion, with the dead described as *peças* belonging to particular owners, in phrases like “on the seventeenth day of the month of May of fifteen hundred thirty-four, that is, five years, died one *peça* of the scribe.” And then, after proceeding in similar fashion for a few lines, the list continues “in the said month, one *peça* died, because they threw themselves into the sea [there is no pronoun in the original], which they said belonged to Diogo Fernandez.” Here, in the act of suicide, one is reminded not only that the *peça* is a living being, but that it is also, tragically, human. Otherwise (and even here, to some extent) the humanity of the enslaved becomes abstracted and objectified, in a document that allows Portuguese authorities to track and do an accounting of the slave trade from a distance.

Portuguese enslavers' commodification of humans in the early 1500s involved both manipulations of the body (through feeding, branding, chaining etc), as well as abstractions away from the body and from the human condition of enslaved peoples (through labelling, un-naming, counting, etc), to allow for the management of slavery from a distance. Both embodied and disembodied practices not only dehumanized enslaved individuals, but also regulated and tracked relationships of property, to be distributed to both wealthy Europeans and to European people of lesser status as payment for various services related to the slave trade and to colonial administration.

While overall the dehumanization of enslaved people by slave traders, colonial officials and Portuguese state officials is pervasive, there are a couple of partial exceptions. The first is a concern with saving the souls of enslaved people through baptism. In one document, for instance, the king orders the baptism of “*negros* that come from Guinea” to Lisbon “in the ships themselves where they come, or in the stores or houses into which they are put, so that some that arrive sick do not die without being baptized,” and so that “with the sacrament of the holy baptism their souls may be saved” (Brásio 1963:122-123). The concern for the souls of enslaved people is not brought into contradiction with slavery itself or with the violence and death that enslavers perpetrate. If there is an understanding of enslaved people as humans, it is only in the afterlife that their fates matter.

The second exception is the existence of an institution that was authorized and funded by the Portuguese state to advocate on behalf of enslaved and freed Black people: the *Confraria dos Pretos de Lisboa*, a religious confraternity that was open to free and enslaved people and that had been founded by Black inhabitants of Lisbon. Besides its religious mission, the confraternity, like similar ones that followed, assisted enslaved Black people to purchase their freedom, and advocated for freed and enslaved people’s rights (Fonseca 2020). The MMA documents show the recognition by the crown of this organization. In one, from 1518, the king states that “the stewards and confreres [*mordomos e confrades*] of the *homens pretos* of Nossa Senhora do Rosario told us that there exist many slaves, where their masters leave them free in their wills” but whom the heirs maintain enslaved, and “asked us to remediate this [...]” (Brásio, 1963:151-152). The document then declares that enslaved people whose masters freed them in their will should be freed immediately after the masters’ death. In another document, from the same year, the king orders that all ships that come from Elmina should give 500 reis to that same

confraternity (Brásio 1963: 153-54). Here, the category *preto* becomes a group that can organize collectively and be recognized by the state as worthy of certain rights, albeit very limited.

D. Conclusion

The paper set out to investigate the cultural and social mechanisms by which the Portuguese early engagement with Africans in the Atlantic coast, and early efforts to develop what would become the transatlantic slave trade, produced social differentiation and inequality. I have focused in particular on the cultural and social processes highlighted by scholarship on “race” and “modernity,” and on the time period and geographic encounters often understood to have inaugurated (or at least set the stage for) “modern” race relations. But I have chosen, at least for the moment, to examine these processes independently from the umbrella concepts under which they often reside: “race,” “modernity,” “capitalism,” etc.

From early on, the Portuguese crown already saw western Africa was as a place of enslavement and colonial domination. But the practical implementation of this imperial project required more complicated practices of delegation, diplomacy and exchange, and, consequently, of social differentiation. There were multiple and often conflicting actors with projects of enslavement and colonization, on which the Portuguese crown both depended and sought to control. Two sets of actors are particularly salient in the data analyzed: Portuguese colonial officials in Africa, and African elites. The larger object of social control, in which all these actors were invested, were non-elite Africans and Europeans: subjects of African elites, European settlers, and populations to be conquered and enslaved. For the most part, the documents analyzed here do not document their agency or point of view. Nor do we learn much about Africans whose lives were less connected with, or visible to, European colonial actors, or about African ways of making

distinctions and organizing social life. However, we learned much about the systems of social differentiation that Portuguese authorities created as they interacted with Africans.

While I did not find any mention of the word “race” (*raça*), the documents regularly evoke categories such as *negro*, *preto* and *branco* to distinguish between Europeans and sub-Saharan Africans. These categories are still widely used to describe people in the Portuguese Atlantic world, demarcating distinctions, for instance, in countries like Brazil, where they have been found to be correlated with experiences of discrimination, victimization and socioeconomic inequality. While the category *mouro*, present earlier documents, is no longer in use, its etymological descendant, *moreno* has survived, though with different connotations and objects. This suggests a legacy of slavery and difference-making that is at least half a millennium old. Perhaps due to the early period under investigation, one does not (with one exception) find categories indicating mixed descent between Africans and Europeans.

While slavery impacted color differentiations during the early 1500s, this did not happen primarily through the distinction between slave and free. Distinctions between *negros* and *brancos* became important in situations where Africans and Europeans shared social and geographic space, and where this sharing was seen as threatening a desired social order. Moreover, natural physical cues and color distinctions were not sufficient to create the social cleavages and relationships that made large-scale enslavement possible. Other kinds of embodied and linguistic distinctions developed. Some marked African elites as similar to European nobility and differentiated them from other Africans, while others marked certain Africans as commodities and as property of particular Europeans. Some distinctions amongst Europeans in Africa seem to have been losing their importance, as suggested by rules that applied to people of “any origin, status or condition”, or by the incorporation of convicts as settlers of São Tomé.

The paper also has shown how slavery related to processes of commodification and rationalization attributed by Marx, Weber and later scholars as associated with “modernity”, in particular the rise of capitalism and the modern state. While these processes may not be unique to this time and place, they are certainly present as applied to the slave trade. They are techniques by which an expanding overseas empire attempts to manage and profit from the slave trade from a distance. In this context, processes of commodification and rationalization contribute to a dehumanization of enslaved individuals. These practices of dehumanization, simultaneously abstracted and embodied, worked to make the slave trade, including its violence and deadliness, seem legitimate and normalized.

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