Bloodshed, baptism, beer: racial capitalism and settler colonialism on the medieval Baltic

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Bloodshed, baptism, beer: racial capitalism and settler colonialism on the medieval Baltic

Nicholas Salvato

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**Abstract:** Scholarly and popular usage of the term “racial capitalism” has increased exponentially over the past decade, but the validity and implications of its use remain hotly contested. The late Cedric Robinson is the undisputed popularizer of this phrase and is referenced widely by both the slogan’s detractors and proponents. Despite this, little work has been done to engage with the core of his argument about racial capitalism: that capitalism is inalienably racial due to the racialism of the medieval European societies that spawned it. Debates over Robinson’s ideas have thus disregarded the substance of his deployment of the phrase and eliminated his historicist critique of the European social sciences. This paper attempts to correct this lacuna through a case study of racial extractivism in a colonial region of medieval Europe: the German Ordenstaat of Livonia. I draw on the methodologies of radical historical geographers within Black Studies to generate a synthetic analysis of regional historical literatures about premodern Catholic colonialism. I find that structural racism was central in funding and organizing the institutional antecedents of the capitalist world-system which emerged in the 16th century. Ultimately, I argue that Robinson’s historicist critique disrupts many ontological assumptions about the motivating forces, developmental trends, and leading protagonists of capitalism as a theoretical object.
Acknowledgments

This project would not exist without the intellectual and moral support of my primary advisor, Dr. Moseley. Bill gave consistent time, energy, and genuine consideration to even my most arcane and fruitless flights of fancy, while always challenging me to come back to earth. I owe him an enormous debt for creating the space and the discipline to produce this thesis, as well as for his advocacy on my behalf over the last four years.

I also want to thank Dr. Barcus for transforming my senior seminar into a space of sincere and open student reflection on geography as practiced at Macalester. The generosity of this act was a boon not only to me personally, but (I believe) to all of the students who were able to participate in that process. The opportunity to consider geography as we were learning it right here played an important role in reconfiguring what I thought this project was about, and her flexibility in allowing me to use the capstone paper to workshop my thesis was also extremely valuable.

My last committee member, Dr. Velez, has been an irreplaceable mentor, role model, and intellectual fellow traveler since my first day of college. Her enthusiasm for this project was a constant font of strength and her insights fundamentally reshaped the contours of my thinking. I can only hope that I have reflected with fidelity in my work the uncountable lessons she has taught me about learning, writing, and honoring history.

Finally, I want to give thanks from the bottom of my heart to my dear friend Grace Jones for reading my drafts at their most incoherent, and to my twin
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The main object of this thesis is to explore and clarify the term “racial capitalism” by recuperating a neglected portion of the research project of its primary theorizer, Cedric Robinson. Robinson (1940-2016) was a leading radical of his generation whose field of study, ranging from political economy to theories of representation and media, does not lend itself to any simple definition. While some aspects of his scholarship have gained increasing attention in the past years, his extensive study of medieval European civilization — most evident in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* and *An Anthropology of Marxism* — has attracted little elaboration. Yet the key to understanding perhaps his most persistent and enigmatic legacy, the concept of “racial capitalism,” lies precisely within this portion of his writings.

This project is also an exercise in translation with a pragmatic purpose. I aim to rearticulate (some of) the key historiographic criticisms of radical Black scholars like Cedric Robinson and Ruth Wilson Gilmore in a discursive mode more comfortable and explicit for radical and progressive geographers influenced, even tangentially, by the Marxian (especially Western Marxist) tradition. “Racial capitalism” was and is primarily a historiographic tool designed as a corrective against certain Marxian assumptions about the historical emergence and evolution of capitalism. Through developing the engagement between recent key Black radical texts like *Black Marxism* and Gilmore’s “Fatal couplings of power and difference” and Marxian literature on the transition to capitalism, I hope to demonstrate how scholars in radical Enlightenment traditions who are concerned with understanding the local and global hierarchies of the world-system can best incorporate these crucial critiques of into our own canons. A fuller
understanding of “racial capitalism” may illuminate some of the theoretical and historiographic failings that our traditions have accumulated while, as Gilmore once put it, “not throwing out the historical materialist baby with the well-used bathwaters of three decades of Marxist geography.”

While Robinson popularized the term in his seminal *Black Marxism*, he never strictly defined it, and the words do not appear widely in the text or at all in his other work. Yet both academic and popular usage of this “activist hermeneutic” has increased dramatically in the past decade; and over time, two related but ultimately distinct types of meaning have been assigned to it. The first is found in entirely theoretical definitions. Racial capitalism is “the process of deriving social and economic value from the racial identity of another person;” or more loquaciously, it is a referent for capitalism’s “antinomies of accumulation,” which “require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value… racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires.” These constructions are valuable extensions of some of Robinson’s claims about racial capitalism in *Black Marxism*.

However, they occlude a critical dimension of Robinson’s argument: they are ahistorical, or at least highly modernist in focus, and take capitalism qua capitalism as the basic object of their analysis. By contrast, Robinson’s exposition of racial capitalism

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2 Its most prominent usage is in the chapter title “Racial Capitalism: The Non-Objective Character of Capitalist Development.”
4 For a visual representation of this phenomenon, run the phrase “racial capitalism” through Google Ngram Viewer. Now, there’s a steep curve! In contrast, while the phrase “black radical tradition” has also received an exponential rise in usage, it is orders of magnitude less than its sister term.
begins before the modern era and eschews theoretical language in favor of a historical approach. His gaze does not center “capitalism” per se, but rather the commercial-feudal societies of the high and late Medieval era and their successors in the modern period.

That is not to say that those who deploy racial capitalism as an analytic tool are ignorant of the historicism of Robinson’s theory. Indeed, across the literature, homage is often paid to the idea that capitalism emerged from a racial, feudal past. As Julian Go attests in his survey of debates over the term, “nearly all scholars claim that one of Robinson’s key contributions is to show that capitalism was forged from precapitalist racial divisions in Europe;” but this “key contribution” is rarely investigated by either detractors or proponents of the slogan and is sometimes ignored entirely. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, the leading living scholar of the geography of carcerality, renders us a definition of racial capitalism that takes this longue duree into account:

“The foundations of racial capitalism, the foundations of the social organizations of human beings in Western Europe during the rise of capitalism—they don’t have anything to do with Africa, Asia, North America, or South America. They have to do with what was happening here in Europe, between people, all of whose descendants may have become white. I mean, that is the major lesson of racial capitalism. And why does that matter? It matters because racial capitalism won’t stop being racial capitalism if all the white people disappear from the story. Capitalism requires inequality, and racism enshrines it.”

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8 Go, J. (2020). Three tensions in the theory of racial capitalism. Sociological Theory, 39(1), 38–47. https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275120979822. For authors who reference Robinson but don’t acknowledge or only briefly mention his medievalism, see Melamed, J. “Racial Capitalism,” 2015; Jodi Byrd et. al, “Predatory Value,” 2018; Virdee, “Racialized Capitalism,” 2018; Ralph and Singhal, “Racial Capitalism,” 2018; Note that many of these works contain valuable insights and contributions; I still argue that they are missing something important in their reading of Robinson.
Robin DG Kelley, a student of Robinson’s and a leading champion of his legacy in the public sphere, has also worked to recenter the conversation to the historical frame. He has published popular expositions on the concept of racial capitalism, notably a 2018 article in the “Boston Review;” and his foreword to the 2000 re-issue of Black Marxism is sometimes conflated with or misattributed to Robinson’s original 1983 work, as in Ralph and Singhal (2018). Because of his prominence as a redactor of Robinson’s intellectual project, it is worth also hearing his take on Robinson’s formula:

Robinson challenged the Marxist idea that capitalism was a revolutionary negation of feudalism. Instead capitalism emerged within the feudal order and flowered in the cultural soil of a Western civilization already thoroughly infused with racialism… Capitalism was “racial” not because of some conspiracy to divide workers or justify slavery and dispossession, but because racialism had already permeated Western feudal society.10

His interpolation of Robinson’s argument is far closer to the actual content of the passages relevant to the term “racial capitalism” in Black Marxism than many other, more theoretical engagements.

Thus two overlapping but distinct deployments of ‘racial capitalism’ have emerged in the literature. One is a descriptive tool that contextualizes racial exploitation within pre-existing discourses of capitalism and accumulation — essentially adding race as another dimension of a universal capitalist rationality. The other historicizes racial capitalism and places its raison d’être outside of the bounds of “capitalism” traditionally conceived. While the first usage adds an important analytic dimension to the theory of capitalism, the second performs a much more interesting operation: it brings into question if the motivating forces of “global capitalism” are those that radical northern thinkers

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have assumed them to be all along. If our social order really is suffused with the logics of
feudal Europe—if feudal Europe never passed away at all, but simply evolved—then
perhaps we have been misidentifying the key technologies, actors, and driving impulses
of the modern world-system. Centrally, it explodes the analytic focus on the waged
worker as the subject of capitalism’s history, while providing direction towards
identifying new protagonists and antagonists. When the modern world is considered in
medieval perspective, a diverse and polycentric field of people in struggle appears—
peasant communities, waged proletarians, unfree labor, indigenous resisters. At the same
time, it suggests a coherent system of domination which transcends the tired and
unsustainable dichotomy of “capitalist” and “state.”

This thesis is split into two sections. In the first five chapters, I introduce the
theoretical background underlying my inquiry. In the final five, I attempt to apply that
theory to a concrete historical case study in the German colonial polity of Livonia,
located in what is now Latvia and Estonia. In Chapter 2, I overview my research
methodology. In Chapter 3, I explore the original context of Robinson’s “racial
capitalism,” while Chapters 4 and 5 are devoted to comparing Robinson’s discursive
deployment of the terms “capitalism” and “racism” to alternate and critical accounts of
those terms. Also in Chapter 5, I draw on Ruth Wilson Gilmore to develop a theoretical
understanding of “racism” which undergirds both my research question and my
restatement of the theory of racial capitalism. In Chapter 6 I introduce my case study
region and provide historical background. Chapter 7 discusses the indigenous people of
Livonia before and after their conquest by Germans. Chapters 8 and 9 diachronically and
geographically trace the growth of a structurally racist regime, following first the
individual movements of a pivotal regional actor and secondly the rise and fall of a racially integrated urban organization. Finally, Chapter 10 reflects on the intersection between theory and case study and draws conclusions about the importance of Robinson’s historicizing project.

**Chapter 2: Research Methods**

In writing this paper I have attempted to draw on a networks approach to, as modeled by the recent volume *Making Livonia: Actors and Networks in the Medieval and Early Modern Baltic Sea Region*. Medieval primary sources are scarce and it is often difficult to aggregate spatial data about enough sites into large enough quantities to analyze. The networks approach focuses on individual bodies and spaces as actors and explores the modalities that connected these actors within their particular situations and mobilities. This approach avoids the question of social structure vs. individual agency by understanding agents themselves as constituting structures through their relationships with other actors. In this framework, individuals are perpetually making and remaking the structures they comprise.

Many contemporary geographers, especially urban geographers, have utilized the European Middle Ages within a comparative framework. Nezar Elsayyad and Ananya Roy played an important and perhaps causative role in bringing the Middle Ages into present-day critical urban geographic imaginaries by identifying the “medieval modernity” of urban space, a metonym for the resonance between segregated forms of

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urban citizenship present in both medieval (European) and modern (global) urbanities. After their original intervention, the eminent world cities theorist Saskia Sassen analyzed medieval French institution-building under the framework of assemblage theory, which bears many similarities to network theory in its emphasis on relationality. The methodology of this investigation, therefore, follows other recent geographers who have sought antecedents for the technologies of global capitalism in premodern Europe. All rely implicitly on synthesizing secondary literatures to reconstruct the past in the language of their present. I will do the same, analyzing specific networks in the context of their temporal and geographic situation.

The focus is not on “capitalism” in the Middle Ages. While later medieval economies were indeed highly capitalized and marketized, the term is too loaded for it to be applied profitably in this context. If capitalism is a theoretically unstable conceptual framework today, it certainly cannot be arbitrarily read into the past. Instead of trying to contort and stretch definitions to prove that medieval Europe was properly capitalist, I consider the investment and reinvestment of surplus value as capital to be one of multiple interconnected technologies of accumulation.

In doing so, I aim not only to show that racial practices structured the unfolding of the class relationship which capital expresses. I also hope to evoke recognition of non- and pre-capitalist forms of accumulation which are often racialized in their deployment — specifically, accumulation by dispossession and slavery — and which entwine with capitalist relationships today. Saskia Sassen frames a similar technique in *Territory, Authority, Rights*:

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Rather than a model, I am after a finely graded lens that allows me to
disassemble what we have come to see as necessary aggregations and to track the
formation of capabilities that actually have… jumped tracks, that is to say, gotten
relodged in novel assemblages.

Sassen’s “capability” is the assemblage of territory, authority, and rights, whereas I am
seeking to identify the networks that formed racial regimes and understand how they
produced and reproduced structural racisms. My research question is: how did Germans
produce and reproduce structural racism in colonial Livonia? In order to research and
construct an adequate answer, I take an approach that is both historical and geographic. It
is historical in the sense that it examines a spacetime located in the past; but also in that
the narrative arc of the study moves diachronically forward through time. It is geographic
in the sense that it engages theoretically with the projects of modern geographers of race;
but also in that I describe the historical processes at hand spatially by attempting to tell a
story about the changing relationships certain people and places had with one another and
how new types of racialized space were produced out of these interactions.

It is necessary to take a moment to acknowledge that I am a white, American
college student undertaking the role of exegete for a theory originating and developing in
a milieu of Black scholar-activism. Further, I am aiming to explain the origins or nature
of racism by this exegesis. There is a real possibility, therefore, that this project contains
significant misrepresentations, presumptions, distortions, and overreaches which arise at
least in part out of the disparity between my lived experiences and those of the scholar-
activists who have done the bulk of intellectual labor in this field. These risks are a part
of many projects, and mistakes I may make are only mine to be accountable for.

I maintain, however, that now more than ever Robinson’s work requires and
deserves exegesis. For while his potent terminology has been adopted in many
disciplines, Cedric Robinson himself remains underread and often misinterpreted and misused. It is therefore necessary to stop a moment and recapitulate the main points and background of the relevant text.

**Chapter 3: The project of *Black Marxism and the Making of the Black Radical Tradition***

*Black Marxism* was conceived out of conversations with a Black radical community seeking to apprehend the limits of the Western radicalism they were in contact with, as well as the connections between those limitations and the catastrophic violence of five centuries of global European imperialism. Robinson and his peers felt not only that European radical epistemologies failed to comprehend the Black subject in struggle; they also perceived that there was something about European history that whites were missing. He writes: “There seemed to us to be… in Western radicalism… a flight from the recognition that something more than objective material forces were responsible for ‘the nastiness,’ as Peter Blackman put it… It seemed a certainty that the system of capitalism was part of it, but as well symptomatic of it.”

Robinson named this “something more” racial capitalism, but more often in *Black Marxism* he speaks in terms of “European civilization.” Robinson was therefore not only mounting a critique of Marxism and Western radicalism, but of “[t]he tendency of European civilization through capitalism… not to homogenize but to differentiate—to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into "racial" ones.”

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13 Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 308
14 Robinson uses the term “racial capitalism” five times in his own words in *Black Marxism*: once in the introduction, three times in the conclusion, and once in a chapter title. By contrast, the term “European civilization” appears nine times throughout the text, in more varied settings.
Simultaneously, however, Robinson was concerned with the relationship of Black people to this tendency. While I am here interested primarily with his writings on Europe, the book’s name evinces its true heart: a history of the common tradition of Black resistance to capitalism and of the unheard pleas and commentaries of Black radicals to their white peers and comrades.

*Black Marxism and the Making of the Black Radical Tradition* is therefore a dual project. The first section of the text, entitled “The Limitations of Western Radicalism” mounts a historical critique of the Marxist assumption (shared with bourgeois European historiography) that capitalism was a rationalizing and homogenizing force. The second section bridges Robinson’s two points of concern by reconsidering the modern encounter between Europeans and Africans in light of this corrective history. Robinson elaborates further the institutional antecedents of racial capitalism (specifically in late medieval Portuguese territories) and counterposes to racial rationality the forms of resistance and being that Black people assembled in opposition, whether as captives in the New World or on the African continent itself. The final third of the book considers the intellectual legacies of W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, and Richard Wright, demonstrating tensions between them while ultimately vindicating the idea of a shared tradition of Black critique of European radicalism. The arc of the text dialectically supports the thesis of the “nonobjective character” of European development (and the resultant lacunae in Western radicalism) by exhibiting the medieval logics of European capitalism in various spacetimes and then juxtaposing a Black consciousness that is irreducible to those logics, even after centuries of sustained violence.
The first chapter is the only one in the book where Robinson directly treats the concept of “racial capitalism” on a general and theoretical level. This chapter is just 24 pages in length. Robinson makes his point very clear in the opening lines:

“The historical development of world capitalism was influenced in the most fundamental way by the particularistic forces of racism and nationalism. This could only be true if the social, psychological and cultural origins of racism and nationalism both anticipated capitalism in time and formed peace with those events that contributed directly to organization of production and exchange. Feudal society is the key.”

Robinson’s basic concern in this portion of the book is to examine the continuity of racial divisions of labor from the feudal era into the capitalist world system. He mobilizes historical evidence of immigrant and enslaved workers in the economic heartland of late medieval Europe —the band of industry and trade stretching from northern Italy to Flanders—as evidence that superexploited, racialized labor has always been a key component of capitalism. In later chapters, he examines the manifestation of this “tendency” in objects of study as well-known as the formation of the English working classes and the intellectual genealogy of Marx; but it is the medieval path of investigation that I hope to deepen in this paper.

The collocation of a study of medieval and early modern European racial regimes with a sustained survey of 20th century Black intellectuals may seem incongruous. However, it serves to demonstrate a critical point: racism is not total. It is not a transhistorical, omnipresent force that defines and reorganizes the world in its own image. It is a word to represent a series of organized and unorganized actors making the same or similar decisions for the same or similar reasons, on many scales and over the

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15 Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 9
course of many centuries. Many people and processes not only resist its logic, but are not comprehensible through its lens. The Black radical tradition that Cedric Robinson wrote of is amongst these processes. One of the most important reasons to turn to the European Middle Ages is to search for strategies of relating across difference that defy structural racism and buck the shackles it puts on our vision of the present.16

Robinson’s critique does not extend solely to concepts of race. By elevating racial power into a constitutive element of European societies and emphasizing continuity with the feudal past rather than rupture, he also destabilizes “capitalism” as the sine qua non of the modern world-order. Race’s centrality in his theoretical system calls into question if narratives which explain the making of the modern world largely in terms of market-driven behaviors of surplus value extraction are sustainable in light of historical evidence. Indeed, his propositions actually challenge the idea that we know what we’re talking about when we say the word “capitalism” at all. In order to clarify what exactly it is that is under critique, I will briefly recollect the major schools of thought on what capitalism is and in what space-time it originates, drawing specifically on the Brenner debate and the school of Political Marxism to explain how the Euro-settler social sciences have transformed their understanding of the historical roots of capitalism. I then reformulate the core propositions of the racial capitalist hypothesis in the terminology of Political Marxism in order to integrate two concerns: on the one hand, the so-called “transition” from feudalism to capitalism; and on the other hand, the role of racism in shaping the capitalist world-system.

16 This is a task that Robinson himself undertook in *An Anthropology of Marxism*, tracing Babeuf and Marx back to the revolutionary democratic socialism of Renaissance Italian workers and rebel clerics.
Chapter 4: What is capitalism and how capitalist is it?

“Capitalism” is a difficult and loaded term which means any number of things to any number of people. For the vast ocean of modern ideologies which might be deemed “liberal,” the word typically refers to a set of institutional norms and property relations centered on the exchange of goods between free agents in a competitive marketplace. For liberalism’s prickly cousins, the radicals of European Enlightenment thought, capitalism means much the same thing, with the important added caveat that the voracious drive towards accumulation of capital at the top is only possible through a relational accrual of misery at the bottom. With these principles in hand, most scholars of either stripe are confident in describing the modern world as “capitalist” in nature.

There are, however, any number of things which have happened and will continue to happen within putatively “capitalist” economies whose origins aren’t necessarily to be found in any of the logics described above. Moreover, by assuming we live under capitalism, all kinds of operations and activities are assigned as capitalist without investigation. Feminist economic geographers JK Gibson-Graham launched one of the first explicit assaults on “capitalocentrism” in The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It), where they contested the coherence and utility of “capitalism” as a construct capable of describing the totality of the modern world-economy:

“When we say that most economic discourse is ‘capitalocentric,’ we mean that other forms of economy . . . are often understood primarily with reference to capitalism: as being fundamentally the same as (or modeled upon) capitalism, or as being deficient or substandard imitations; as being opposite to capitalism; as being the complement of capitalism; as existing in capitalism’s space or orbit.”

While not appearing in so many words, a similar critique is implicit in Black Marxism’s problematization of capitalism’s origin story. In his posthumously published
An Anthropology of Marxism, in fact, Robinson gave a whole-hearted stamp of approval to Gibson-Graham’s deconstructionist project. With Robinson’s insistence on continuity instead of rupture between feudal past and capitalist modernity, it is necessary to return to that historical moment and the controversy surrounding it in order to understand what exactly Robinson meant.

In the early Marxian tradition, “capitalism” per se can only be said to have truly begun after the “bourgeois revolutions” — those political upheavals like the French Revolution of 1789 in which the rising capitalist/bourgeois class upends the feudal state and permits the transition from “the production of commodities” to “modern capitalist conditions.” In a deft rhetorical sleight of hand, “modern capitalist conditions” were also assumed by early Marxians and their co-travelers to be synonymous with industrial revolution. From where 19th century anticapitalist theorists stood, the social system they were describing appeared utterly indissoluble from the socio-technological transformation they were witnessing: “The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist.”

Since these teleologies were formulated, however, historians have criticized the presumed simultaneity and synonimity of capitalism and industrialism. In the late 1970’s, during the “Brenner” or “transition” debate, the theoretical inception of capitalist social relationships moved backwards temporally from the 18th to the 16th century and shifted geographically from the towns to the countryside, while diminishing in scale from an immanent phase of human evolution to a specific historical moment emerging out of

specific historical circumstances. Brenner understood capitalism as emerging
dialectically out of agrarian class conflict within feudal England. For Brenner, feudalism
is defined by the reign of “politically constituted property” wherein “‘extra-economic’
forms of surplus value extraction, carried out by means of political, juridical, and military
power,”\(^{19}\) predominate in accumulation. Capitalism, by contrast, is defined by the
absence of this form of coercion and its replacement by the invisible coercion of the
marketplace, wherein even the owners of capital are driven towards productive
reinvestment in order to remain afloat.\(^{20}\) A feudal class society alive with commodity
production prevailed across all of “Europe” loosely defined; but only in England did class
struggle create a rupture which allowed these conditions to coalesce into “capitalism.”

In his *Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development*, Brenner explains
that “in England, as throughout most of western Europe, the peasantry were able by the
mid-fifteenth century, through flight and resistance, definitively to break feudal controls
over their mobility and to win full freedom.” Despite the end of unfreedom through
serfdom and other forms of coerced labor, however, landlords across the continent
nevertheless retained the power to levy arbitrary fines and taxes on peasant inheritance, to
receive arbitrary rents, and on occasion to command eviction and expropriation. In the
early 16th century in England, a series of peasant rebellions and reactionary noble
crackdowns effectively eliminated these legal powers while nevertheless leaving most
peasants landless or extremely land-poor. In place of the previous feudal mechanisms of
value appropriation, a triangular social structure emerged between landed property-
owners, capitalist tenants who rented and improved their land, and waged rural


proletarians working that land in the employ of the capitalist. All three parties were subject to the discipline of the market in various forms; hence, for Brenner, this historical moment in England represented the beginning of capitalism, a social model from which all other capitalisms ultimately derive.

Brenner’s contribution played an important role in rehistoricizing capitalism and critiquing circular, structuralist accounts of its emergence. I cite him to demonstrate how within the heart of the Northern radical canon, intellectuals have already engaged in a critique of the idea of a universal, inevitable capitalism. However, there is much that remains assumed or ignored in his retelling. In particular, the putative absence of politically constituted property under capitalism, broadly defined in the manner of Woods and Brenner, assumes away or makes anachronistic any form of value extraction facilitated through extra-economic means. The problem of empire and colonialism effectively disappears from the theoretical framework of capitalism; or rather, flying in the face of the timeline of history, it insists that the logic that creates empires can only exist subordinate to the logic that drives capital accumulation. In doing so, it reifies exactly that transhistorical, unmaterialist idea of an immanent capitalism which it attempts to abjure.

Robinson, in contrast to the Marxist method, is not particularly concerned with specifically placing or timing “capitalism.” As with “racism,” he uses the term generically to refer to a set of broadly similar practices related to the productive reinvestment of monetary capital in a global marketplace. This is the logical conclusion of the dethroning of capitalism’s conceptual primacy which western radicals have already begun to undertake. When capitalism is no longer understood as a latent reality of human
history, we no longer have to search for a specific starting date or location and may instead deploy the concept descriptively rather than prescriptively. More importantly, we are free from the burden of attempting to fit modern human (re)productive practices into a narrow economistic mindset, and may go on to consider the many other forms of social command and control which obtain in the contemporary world. While Robinson’s critique was extended initially to the Marxist milieu, this anti-capitalocentricism could be extended to the entire Enlightenment economic tradition.

“Racial capitalism” is therefore an appropriate term because it foregrounds the role that violent, irrational, political accumulations — particularly slavery and conquest — have played in shaping what “capitalism” is. If we consider ourselves to be living under “capitalism,” we assume the primacy of market relationships or class positionality as guiding historical and spatial logics. If we consider ourselves to be living under “racial capitalism,” we are reminded immediately that relationships of unfreedom and violence are living modes of value extraction existing alongside, while overlapping and intersecting with, the relationship between labor and capital. For it is undeniable that much of the modern world-economy is directly articulated through the politically-constituted property of global European imperialism, a process reliant from before modernity on racism.

Robinson pointed the way towards the Middle Ages as a guide for understanding the implications of this articulation, but left much implied or unsaid. He deliberately avoided the ugly work of definitions and abstract theorizing, preferring to let his historical evidence speak for itself. In particular, the contours of what constitutes “race”

21 See the chapter “An Ending,” in Black Marxism.
is never strictly clarified. For our purposes, it is important to explain what is meant when I use the words “race,” “racism,” or “racial.” Robinson explicitly and repeatedly describes relationships between European peoples as racial, evoking criticism from other scholars who accuse him of a slippage of language between “race” and “ethnicity” or “nationality.” We now turn to these debates to untangle what distinguishes “race” from other signifiers of inherited difference in Medieval Europe.

**Chapter 5: Race, nation, ethnicity: when and why is difference race?**

The general obscurity of the meaning of “race” within the broader discourse has led many critics of the framework of racial capitalism to quibble with or wholly reject Robinson’s usage of the word to broadly signify hierarchizations of difference within capitalism. Julian Go provides a paradigmatic example of these critiques when he protests Robinson’s references to “linguistic rather than phenotypical differences” in defining medieval race, and with his conflation of “national” or “ethnic” differences with racial ones. He suggests that “ethnic capitalism” might be a more appropriate term.22

Go concludes by asserting broadly that scholars of racial capitalism have not adequately defined race or racism, leading to a situation of general confusion around what is actually meant by “racial capitalism”—a proposition that echoes Ralph and Singhal, who declare that “the ‘racial capitalism’ literature rarely clarifies what scholars mean by “race” or “capitalism.”23 Michael Walzer’s article in *Dissent* goes far further than Go or Ralph and Singhal in directly challenging the idea that capitalism and racism

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22 Go, Three Tensions, *Sociological Theory*
are innately united: “Overthrowing racism will still leave us with capitalism; overthrowing capitalism will still leave us with racism. Putting the adjective and noun together gives us a false sense of the relationship between the two phenomena.” Go’s survey and Ralph and Singhal’s article make none of these claims and are far more sympathetic interventions, but all of these authors share the view that “race” is an inadequate and sometimes inaccurate descriptor.

While concerns with the elliptical nature of the use of “race” in these debates are legitimate, the critique of the vagueness of race rather misses the forest for the trees. Ruth Gilmore reminds us that “race has no essence:” it is a composite, moving signifier that is variably religious, linguistic, economic and phenotypic, amongst other components. Robert Bartlett, the doyen of medieval settler colonial studies, calls these differences the “raw materials from which race or ethnicity can be constructed.” Bartlett, like Robinson, was criticized decades ago for his usage of the word “race” in the medieval context. Against those who prefer instead to speak about “ethnic” difference, he points out that “ethnicity” is equally as constructed as “race,” and therefore provides no theoretical refuge.

He further explains that medieval Latin Europeans typified the world of human bodies not into races or ethnic groups, but into a variety of their own demographic constructs. One of the most common ways to classify bodies was into gens. This word

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24 Walzer, M. (2020). A note on racial capitalism. Dissent Magazine. Walzer does not make his understanding of what “race” is entirely clear. He does assert that violence against Muslims in the Caucuses by the Russian state cannot possibly be considered racial because both Russians and those Muslims are “Caucasian.”


26 Ibid. 46
is most accurately translated as “peoples,” but sometimes appears in modern English as tribe, race, nation, family, or ethnicity, depending on the proclivities and agendas of the translator. For our purposes, we should understand “gens,” and by extension “race,” as a genealogical construct: a method of classifying bodies into imagined groups of descent and kinship, sharing as a result certain spiritual, cultural, or biological characteristics. Cedric Robinson often uses the term “racialism” in the medieval context to distinguish this ideological practice from racism as a system. While “race” therefore ultimately is an anachronistic term in the context of the European Middle Ages, it is not any more anachronistic than “national” or “ethnic” as a word to describe how medieval bodies were configured into hierarchies of difference.

Indeed, over the course of the past three decades, postcolonial medievalists have spilled an enormous amount of ink in demonstrating that recognizably “racial” practice did occur in medieval Europe. Their work has shown that even “phenotypic” difference is not a presupposable fact but rather a floating signifier that undergoes a painstaking process of social construction. A later medieval conception that lives to this day is the hook-nosed, bloodthirsty, feline Jew, but there are also characterizations that are more foreign to the modern eye. Two recent scholars of medieval race on the British Isles, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Cord Whitaker, have recently produced enlightening commentaries on racial storytelling which I would like to draw on to demonstrate both the existence and the exoticism of premodern racialism. Cohen relates Cambro-Norman tales of Welshmen who feast on grass and a Welsh knight who births a cow after three years of agonizing labor;27 and Cord Whitaker recounts the remarkable English romance

of the “blac and loathely” Muslim knight in the “King of Tars,” who miraculously becomes white just before his baptism.\textsuperscript{28}

In each of these cases, “phenotypic differences” are mobilized to serve complicated agendas that confound modern expectations. Cohen finds that rather than acting solely as a mechanism of dehumanization, monstrous and hybrid representations of Welsh bodies are metonyms for the anxiety of the Norman-Welsh borderland. The author of the chronicle in which the tale is found, Gerald of Wales, was of both Welsh and Norman descent. Through stories of monstrous bodies he sought to understand “how, in the face of vexing hybridities and in the wake of historical trauma, to imagine that divided and heterogeneous peoples constitute a union.” Paradoxically, these tales are a means to negotiate a new hybrid identity and lay claim to ancestral territory under the auspices of Norman hegemony.

Meanwhile in the English romance, Whitaker shows that what appears to us to be a straightforward (if magical) mutation of a sinful black body into a pure white body through the saving power of Christ belies deeper complexities; for the knight in the Sultan of Tars still retains the violence and brutality of his “Saracen” origins after joining the white, Christian host. The conversion of the “blac and lothely” knight’s body and spirit is a “polysemous metaphor” which “exploits the already conventional 'color-coding'” of religious and cultural difference in order to assert the permeability of the boundaries between the metaphorical whiteness associated with Christian purity and the metaphorical blackness associated with non-Christian sinfulness.”\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid. 67
represents a plastic periphery which is both infinitely redeemable by the universal Church and a constant threat to the purity of the Christian self. Medieval Europeans thus had perhaps a more complicated relationship with “phenotypic difference” than modern audiences might give them credit for, and we cannot assume that they would draw the same racial categorizations as we do.

In truth, however, it must be admitted that the rationale behind using the language I am using to describe these relationships is political. It is an attempt to inscribe the present on the past for the purpose of intervention in the bigger conversation about the relationship between white supremacy and capitalism in the United States and the world at large. To be upfront about the ideological goals of this argument is nothing new. Geraldine Heng makes clear the revisionist political project at the heart of postcolonial and critical race medievalism in her volume *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*:30

The use of the term race continues to bear witness to important strategic, epistemological, and political commitments not adequately served by the invocation of categories of greater generality (such as otherness or difference) or greater benignity in our understanding of human culture and society. Not to use the term race would be to sustain the reproduction of a certain kind of past, while keeping the door shut to tools, analyses, and resources that can name the past differently.

“Racial capitalism” does not merely claim that race existed as a discursive classification in the medieval past, however. It also asserts that premodern societies were structurally *racist*, and that this racism — understood as a category parallel to capitalism, feudalism, or socialism — obtained a predominant role in structuring the world that

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Europeans created. It is therefore critical to explain what exactly constitutes structural racism on a theoretical level.

**What do we mean by racism?**

In search of a coherent understanding of what “racism” is, I turn first and foremost to the work of radical historical geographers within Black Studies. Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Cedric Robinson are the thinkers who most inform my approach, but other non-geographical intellectuals within critical race studies like Barbara and Karen Fields, Geraldine Heng, Robin D.G. Kelley, and Cord Whitaker also provide reference points for the study of race. In her 2002 “Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference: Notes on Racism and Geography,” Gilmore provides the following theoretical definition of “racism.”

If race has no essence, racism does. Racism is singular because, whatever its place-based particularities, its practitioners exploit and renew fatal power-difference couplings. Fatalities—premature deaths (Greenberg and Schneider 1994)—are not simply an objective function of any kind of power differential… Rather, the application of violence—the cause of premature deaths—produces political power in a vicious cycle (Feldman 1991)...

Racism is a practice of abstraction, a death-dealing displacement of difference into hierarchies that organize relations within and between the planet’s sovereign political territories. Racism functions as a limiting force that pushes disproportionate costs of participating in an increasingly monetized and profit-driven world onto those who, due to the frictions of political distance, cannot reach the variable levers of power that might relieve them of those costs. Indeed, the process of abstraction that signifies racism produces effects at the most intimately “sovereign” scale, insofar as particular kinds of bodies, one by one, are materially (if not always visibly) configured by racism into a hierarchy of human and inhuman persons that in sum form the category “human being.”

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To reformulate this sentiment: racism is the practice of making violence against certain types of people acceptable and systematic. When a person is configured as a body available to harm—when harm can be brought to another human being without fear of social censure or even notoriety—they also become available for exploitation, robbery and colonization, political disenfranchisement, etc. All of these processes are enabled by violence. There are many ways that fatalities are unevenly distributed through race: state violence, as in police brutality or acts of war and occupation; environmental violence, as in deliberate situating of individuals in dangerous living conditions; social violence, as in the pogrom and the lynch mob; or psychic violence, as in the degradation of a human’s personhood and their sense of identity and self. Regardless of which of these forms of violence we speak of, structural racism begins at the point of violence and is sustained by acts of violence.

Many “fetishes,” cultural customs, and media arise to vindicate these acts, and when a fatal coupling of power and difference is reproduced for centuries, race becomes an ingrained psychology that structures human brains from a very young age. We might consider these fetishes “superstructural,” or dialectical reflections of a system of “premature fatalities.” In toto, such a system might be termed a “racial regime,” or “an unstable truth system in which race is proposed as a justification for relations of power.” To be reproducible, racial regimes must organize and systematize violence into military (or paramilitary) form.

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32 Ibid. 2
35 We might think of the Klan or the Minneapolis and Saint Paul Police Departments as entities which have historical roots in such a need. See MPD150.
The postcolonial medievalist Sara Ahmed (2015) calls race “a sedimented history: many particles swirling around; particles settling down.” I argue that the accumulation of these historical particles of violent domination is what gives race material existence in the form of structural racisms. Racial capitalism, then, is all capitalism, because the unequal distribution of violence through ethnic or racial difference on every scale, from the body to the global marketplace, has been a keystone of the actually-existing European world-system and the geographies under its hegemony since before capitalism was capitalism.\textsuperscript{36}

This definition of race and racism sits oddly with popular understandings of the meaning of these concepts. In particular, it appears to entirely sideline the idea of hatred or prejudice based on the color of another’s skin—especially black and brown skin. That this definition of racism is so ubiquitous is partially a manifestation of the way that “race” has become synonymous with the condition of social death that white supremacy imposes on Black people.\textsuperscript{37} There is good reason for this to be so. The Atlantic plantation holocaust fundamentally reshaped the European societies that carried it out, and marks a crucial disjuncture between medieval and modern racial practice. Whatever the role of black metaphors in the construction of medieval race, modern European racism often structures itself on the axis between black and white.

Anti-blackness is not central to the world-system merely because the brutality of the enslaving enterprise irreparably degraded the psychology of its purveyors and beneficiaries. It was and is an inescapable economic reality. The unpaid labor of millions of Africans incarcerated in the New World between the late 15th century and the late

\textsuperscript{36} Geographies of Racial Capitalism with Ruth Wilson Gilmore  
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
19th century remains the material foundation of not just US imperial prosperity, but also of much of the inherited wealth of the Euro-settler capitalist world.\textsuperscript{38} It is not necessary here to quantify the contribution of kidnapped African labor to founding the world-system as we know it. Suffice it to say that the domination of today’s global politics and economies by white Europeans and their diasporas would be unimaginable without this historic crime. Nowhere have the inheritors of this vast fortune made restitution for this theft to the descendants of enslaved people. Instead, the post-emancipation regimes of the imperial West have accumulated a bloody interest on their debt through persistent police and social violence, ubiquitous attacks on Black people’s political and civil rights, and the rebirth of mass captivity. As Jared Sexton pointedly asks in his contribution to the volume \textit{Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction}:\textsuperscript{39}

“‘The modern world owes its very existence to slavery.’ What could this impossible debt possibly entail? Not only the infrastructure of its global economy but also the architecture of its theological and philosophical discourses, its legal and political institutions, its scientific and technological practices, indeed, the whole of its semantic field.”

Anti-blackness therefore has a special and primary place in the construction of modern race, and through race, conditions of abjection, unfreedom, and dehumanization. This is not to suggest that colonial violence exacted against non-Black peoples is not also uniquely formative to the formation of the world-system and modern racism, but rather to say that talking about race and capitalism in this moment, and especially in this place,

\textsuperscript{38} See Eric Williams, \textit{Capitalism and Slavery}, 2021. I am writing in a North American context, so here emphasize slavery as the foundational moment of modern anti-blacknes. However, we should also note the frenzied plunder of African land, biodiversity, and labor within the continent itself that began in the 19th century and continues today.

\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction} (2017). Minneapolis: Racked & Dispatched. 168
without acknowledging the specific foundational role of the Atlantic slave regime is 
malpractice. So long as reparations with interest have not been paid and the lives of Black 
people across the European dominion remain under a regime of violence, conversations 
around what racism is and what it means to be liberated from it will by necessity revolve 
around the twin questions of white supremacy and anti-blackness.

Racism, however, precedes and exceeds the specific epidermal hierarchy of our 
time. In order to understand modern race, we have to take a hard look at technologies of 
racial domination that are extremely different, yet directly related, to our own. Robinson 
read widely across the Middle Ages in *Black Marxism*, but excepting his extended 
treatment of the late medieval Kingdom of Portugal, he did not descend deeply into the 
minutiae of specific historical assemblages. If his theory is to be valid, then it should be 
legible on multiple molecular scales as well as in the grand narrative. In other words, we 
should be able to identify *reproducible systems of violent extraction predicated on racial 
difference* - the historical reflections of that “something more” which Robinson identified 
in some form or another almost anywhere in medieval Europe. The goal is to understand 
a specific structural racism on its own terms first, and then to analyze how it intersected 
with and co-articulated capitalist social relations.

**Chapter 6: Background on the Case Study: Livonia from 1180 to 1535**

I explore this theme through a place-history in high and late medieval Livonia\(^{40}\) — a colonial mission established by Germans on the Daugava delta in 1180 which 
became a confederation of crusader estates that stretched across modern-day Estonia and

\(^{40}\) German: “Livland”
Latvia. For centuries, this region was home to a remarkably heterogeneous society. “Racially” heterogeneous because a small number of urban and suburban Germans ruled a diverse population of mostly rural native peoples; politically heterogeneous because sovereignty was diffused between a patchwork of secular and fraternal lords and mercantile burghers living in republican or ecclesiastical city-states; and economically heterogeneous because a religious war machine sat astride a highly international urban economy dominated equally by mercantile capitalists and monastic clerics. Difference abounded in medieval Livonia, and in many ways the development of this region was a paradigmatic racial settler colonial project.

Despite this, its history, culture, and social structure are essentially unknown to critical race or postcolonial medievalists. It does not figure at all, for example, in Geraldine Heng’s magisterial *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*; and Latvians, Estonians and Livs do not make the cut in Robinson’s itinerary of oppressed and proletarianized European racial groups, despite undergoing parallel experiences of dispossession and subordination as the Irish, the Roma, and others that he lists. This is partially because both Robinson and most critical race medievalists put a rather arbitrary geographic emphasis on Western Europe and the Mediterranean. I hope to correct this lacuna by expanding the spatial scope of both the Robinsonian and the critical race medievalist research projects into the North-east of premodern Europe.

In order to render a more complete image of the ways that violence was systematically distributed through inherited difference in the medieval Baltic, this case study is broken into three sections. First, I survey the societies of indigenous Livonia

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42 A medieval term for urban citizens, cognate to the French “bourgeoisie.”
before 1200 to provide context about the lands that Germans colonized. I then examine the legacy of a pivotal early German settler and politician — Albert, bishop of Riga — and the seasonal armed migrations he inspired from across Germany to the Baltic littoral, putting them in the context of the *longue durée* of the conquest. Finally, I consider the rise and fall of a pair of integrated laborers’ corporations in Riga, the beer guilds, and explore their complicated place in the making of a racial capitalist order on the shores of the Baltic. Through these three sections, I attempt to diachronically trace the expansion of the colonial project from the period between 1180, around the time German merchants first created temporary settlements on the Daugava river, to 1535, around the onset of the Reformation in Livonia.

While this approach may seem expansive, it in fact waylays any number of important actor-networks. To name a few: the secular Baltic chivalry, who formed the majority of the petty tyrants of the countryside and personally undertook the enserfment of native Balts; ¹⁴³ foreign German merchants from western Hanseatic cities, who profited hugely from the Baltic trade and played a defining role in urban politics; ¹⁴⁴ the Danish and later Swedish monarchies, whose mighty sea power made them a competitor for Baltic domination; and Western European crusaders, who traveled by their thousands to war against the heathen in Lithuania and to attend some of the most lavish and famous parties

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in Latin Christendom.\textsuperscript{45} Unfortunately, there is not the space to adequately consider these individuals in detail, but they will appear throughout the story nevertheless.

\url{https://doi.org/10.1080/01629778.2010.527124} pp. 415
Map 1: 16th-century Map of Livonia by Geradus Mercator in the *Atlas Sive Cosmographicae Meditationes de Fabrica Mundi et Fabricati Figura*. The red points represent castles and associated settlements.
During this period, the Baltic experienced profound transformations in its political and social landscape. The movement of Latin Germans into the eastern Baltic began in the late 12th century with merchants seeking furs and amber, which in time begat priests seeking converts, who soon declared a crusade that brought knights seeking salvation, land and glory.\textsuperscript{46} While these actors were often in violent conflict with one another, they nevertheless together undertook a forever-war — first against the many native peoples of Livonia and neighboring Prussia, and then against the pagan empire of Lithuania — which raged for over two centuries. This endemic violence transformed the Baltic into the second pole of chattel slavery in Europe, paralleling the Mediterranean slave trade in the south.\textsuperscript{47} Meanwhile, the settler bourgeoisie grew enormously wealthy off of trade coming from the East, and an immigrant nobility began slowly bringing the native population into serfdom.\textsuperscript{48} In the long run, German ethnic hegemony in the region lasted until the Soviet invasion in 1939.\textsuperscript{49}

\textbf{When is Livonia? Getting situated in the Early Colonial Baltic}

The High Middle Ages were a period of dynamic expansion for Latin Europe.\textsuperscript{50} This was an age of movement of larger magnitude even than the Migration Period which

\textsuperscript{47} Selart, A. “Slavery in the Baltic Area” in Cavaciocchi S., ed. (2014.) \textit{Schiavitu e servaggio nell’economia europea Secc. XI-XVIII (Serfdom and Slavery in the European Economy. 11th-18th centuries)}. Firenze, Italy: Firenze University Press. Selart finds that around 8300 war captives were sold in the decade between 1358 and 1368; not an enormous number, but no small change either. Most enslaved people were settled as urban or manorial servants, and many were later ransomed and repatriated.
\textsuperscript{48} Niitemaa, V. (1949). \textit{Die undeutsche Frage in der Politik die livländische städte im Mittelalter}. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedakatemia, 58
\textsuperscript{49} Munzinger, Profits of the Cross, in \textit{The North-Eastern Frontiers of Medieval Europe}, pp. 163
\textsuperscript{50} I use the term “Latin Europe” to represent the Western European Christian territories whose ruling classes paid homage to the Pope at Rome and whose liturgy and written language were Latin.
hailed the end of the Roman Empire, and no region received more Latin immigrants than Europe east of the Elbe.\textsuperscript{51} This mass movement of people is sometimes known in the historiography as the \textit{Ostsiedlung} (“eastern settling”), a term mostly referring to the migration of individuals from German territories, but also encompassing the participation of the diverse peoples of the Low Countries (modern-day Netherlands and Belgium).


One important type of movement was the crusade: armed pilgrimages, equally religious and extractive, which created new frontiers and settlements from Spain and Palestine to the Baltic and Greece. We must understand the crusades in the context of the commercial revolution which had been connecting, monetizing, and capitalizing European economies since the beginning of the 12th century. While the crusades may seem primeval or barbaric to modern eyes, behind these holy wars were sophisticated financial and technological infrastructures which had to be mobilized in order to put thousands of armed bodies on the move across vast seas. The crusades to Greece and Palestine would have been impossible without the maritime resources of Italian capitalists and merchants; likewise, the Baltic crusades could not have been carried out without the materiel and financial assistance of North German entrepreneurs. Robinson emphasized the role of “a small group of well-informed men,” almost all Italian, in orchestrating and exploiting the vast system of credit which kept medieval Mediterranean commodities on the move across Southern Europe and up to the Low Countries. In the north, trade on the Baltic was dominated by the Hansa, a parallel “small world” of German individuals and institutions which created a segregated ethnic network of maritime trade on the Baltic and North seas.

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52 Munzinger, Profits of the Cross, *The North-Eastern Frontiers of Medieval Europe* 164
53 Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 25
The Hansa was a loose but expansive association of urban governments, guilds, and smaller settlements in territories beyond German control called Kontors. The basic unit of the Hansa was a partnership between two men, one located in the metropole and the other in the colonies, who coordinated their trading activities and shared profits; but larger joint-stock companies were by no means unknown and merchants often had many partners simultaneously.\textsuperscript{55} This common system of institutional norms and information-sharing facilitated a vast commodity trade that had significant ties to the industrial heartland of medieval Northern Europe in the Low Countries.\textsuperscript{56} It was the desire of German merchants to see this system of economic norms extended to the southern Baltic littoral which led to their support of missionary activities on the Daugava river and the subsequent onset of settler colonialism.\textsuperscript{57}

Colonies in medieval Eastern Europe generally were not usually direct dependencies of a “home” polity, but rather “a kind of cellular multiplication of the cultural and social forms found in the Latin Christian core.”\textsuperscript{58} Settlers recreated the Western European worlds of their origin in miniature under the auspices of many diverse, transregional institutions, from monastic orders to mercantile guilds to feudal lordships. Networks of these “cellular” bodies together constituted the social and political fabric of Latin Europe; and it was therefore through their extension that Latin Europeans colonized their peripheries. Cedric Robinson quotes the Communist British historian V.G. Kiernan in underlining the centrality of these multifarious collectivities to medieval Europeans:

\textsuperscript{55} Ewert and Selzer, \textit{Institutions of Hanseatic Trade}, 39
\textsuperscript{56} Modern day Netherlands and Belgium. See ibid, 52
\textsuperscript{57} Munzinger, \textit{Profits of the Cross}, \textit{The North-Eastern Frontiers of Medieval Europe} 167.
\textsuperscript{58} Bartlett, \textit{The Making of Europe}, 306
“Altogether western Europe had acquired a greater richness of forms, of corporate life, a greater crystallization of habits into institutions, than any known elsewhere.”

This indicates an important distinction between medieval and modern European imaginaries of territorial governance. The administration of space in the medieval Catholic mind was not an attribute possessed by a single institution as in our time, but rather a layered process of interaction between multiple actors with specific rights and obligations towards each other and the subjects within their jurisdiction. Inheritance, marriage, new enfeoffment, land sales, and conquest created an ever-shifting patchwork of feudal, allodial, and communal properties united temporarily in the bodies of individual men or Church and municipal institutions. The overlapping of ‘borders’ between different kinds of territorial entities was not only common but expected. Multiple corporate bodies — the Church, noble estates, the prince, the guilds, the communal government, heretical movements — might have the capacity to mobilize violence and loyalty from the same land and peoples.

I digress to discuss this because one of the biggest mistakes we can make in writing about political geography in the Middle Ages is to project our understanding of the territorial state onto the past. The extraordinary coercive power of the modern state obscures the layered realities of premodern political geographies; this is doubly true on the frontiers. Thus, if we were to map the political boundaries of Livonia according to modern definitions of sovereignty, we would see a unitary state established by the end of

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59 Robinson, Black Marxism, 24
60 As in held through bonds of homage or vassalage.
61 As in held as alienable private property.
62 As in held collectively and administered by community institutions.
the 13th century, but the legal dates for the conquest of each region of Livonia belied a much slower process of transformation. Coerced baptism and the imposition of German institutions and rule did not mean the immediate erasure of the old way of things, and the same territories were sometimes host to multiple and competing claims to sovereignty. Precolonial political and social networks continued to exist as incorporated substratum of the new regime; but such substrata could also act as parallel power structures lying in wait to reactivate. It is therefore important to get an understanding of whose lands the Germans found themselves in before we discuss their technologies of conquest.

Chapter 7: Indigenous Livonia before and after the Conquest

Estimates put the population of the region at around several hundred thousand at the beginning of German settler colonialism. German sources list several different ethnonyms which modern scholars agree provide suggestive but rough guides to the different peoples indigenous to the land. They labeled the diverse groups of Finnic-speaking societies to the north of the bay of Riga “Esths” or “Estonians,” although they were regionally divided between each other. Along the Daugava and the bay of Riga were the Livs; and inland to the south, the Curonians, Semigallians, Latgalians, and Selonians, who became collectively known as “Letts” or “Latvians” in the centuries to

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64 Auns, M., “Acquisition of the Acquired” in *The North-Eastern Frontiers of Medieval Europe* 179-186, discusses at length the gaps between formal dates of conquest and the actual establishment of effective government.

Further inland lived the Samogitians, and beyond them, the mighty Lithuanian peoples.

Written records from this region are nearly nonexistent before the 13th century, but archeological evidence and careful readings of documentation from the early contact period has allowed scholars to partially reconstruct indigenous life before colonization. The remains of prehistoric material culture are silent but evocative: a network of hill-forts located primarily along trading routes evince the regular movement of merchant from Russia and and the presence of organized violence; burial grounds and cremated remains suggest competing forms of religious practice existing side by side. We know that native Balts venerated their ancestors and the forces of nature, but not much more in concrete detail.

At this stage we can only guess at the exact contours of the preconquest political systems of the Baltic indigenous peoples, but unlike the settling Germans, it does not appear that the centralization of coercive power in the hands of a propertied caste was the norm in native Baltic societies. Rather, elders and coalitions of small and large landholders situated in hill-forts loosely governed populations of free and semi-free peasants. Their ability to dominate the district around them was present but limited.

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67 This is a term used in the literature of Baltic medievalism to describe the period before written sources appear from the region itself, approximately 1200 CE
68 Magi, “Political Centres or Nodal Points in Trade Networks? Estonian Hillforts Before and After the Thirteenth-century Conquest,” *Making Livonia*, 54
Indigenous people utilized sedentary agriculture, but like rural populations in other parts of Europe, they also gathered food from their environment. 71

Despite the protestations of some latter day nationalist historians, there does not appear to have been a shared identity between the various peoples who inhabited the lands that would become Livonia. 72 Even groups that shared common languages had regional divisions. 73 In fact, as with many other European societies, local warfare and raiding were common practices that created enduring hostility between neighboring peoples. War bands often took captives and subjected them to forced labor, albeit on a limited scale compared to the time of Christian rule. 74 Therefore, while Germans classed all these peoples together as “pagans,” they did not necessarily share communal identities even within linguistic groups.

72 Eihmane, A Clash of Two Identities, 46
73 Christiansen, The Northern Crusades, 41
74 Selart, Slavery in the Baltic Area, 352
Map 2: The Indigenous peoples of the Baltic. Drawn by Alexander

Pluskowski. From the introduction to *Terra Sacra II: ecologies of crusading, colonization, and religious conversion in the medieval baltic*.\(^5\)

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While it is conventional to understand the conquest as a rapid and unilateral process, more recent scholarship has instead emphasized its piecemeal and negotiated character. In many places, German overlordship was not much more than nominal at the moment of its declaration. As we will see, communities were forced to accept baptism, provide levies, and pay tribute; but indigenous societies generally remained armed and retained freedom of movement throughout the countryside. The peoples of Livonia simply could not be made to submit wholly. The issue of physically holding the country was therefore of paramount importance, and expert German stonemasons were brought in from Saxony and Visby to build a network of castles and fortified towns that stretched down and out from the mouth of the Daugava into the Latvian hinterland. It was this extensive military infrastructure which determined the extent of German governance and settlement.

Outside of these ethnic enclaves and their satellites, Letts and Livs continued to live much as they had before the conquest. Recent paleo-archeological evidence has read continuity in the environment where political maps might have us assume rupture. In the direct proximity of German settlements, new forms of farming took place, but beyond a short radius soil analysis has shown no significant change from pre-conquest land use patterns until the 15th century, at least along the Daugava. The spiritual lives of

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76 Mägi, Hillforts, in Making Livonia 62
77 O’Connor, House of Hemp and Butter, 47
78 Stivrins (2019) Paleoecological evidence for the ecological impact of the crusades, in Terra Sacra II, pp 151,
79 Kalnina et al., “Human impact and vegetation change at sites along the River Daugava,” in Terra Sacra II. Note that after the 14th Century, the region’s ecology was significantly impacted by deforestation and intensive agricultural practices.
Indigenous people adopted aspects of Catholic practice but remained grounded in precolonial sacred spaces of ancestor and nature veneration, with Christian parish chapels at best secondary sites of worship. Even Livs permanently settled inside the city walls of Riga, the largest city in Livonia, did not typically change their lifestyles to match their German neighbors.

Yet in spite of the gradual nature of this transformation and the substantial continuity of old ways of life, the conquest created the conditions for the slow demolition of the legal rights of natives and the (often illegal) expropriation by force of native land. By the end of the 15th century the manors of German nobles dominated the countryside and imposed rents in cash and in kind on great swathes of the rural population. By the 17th century, 90% of the population of Livonia were unfree peasants, and excluding a small community of freemen, to be a Liv, a Latvian or an Estonian was to be a serf. This was the culmination of a long colonial process catalyzed largely by one man: a priest from Saxony named Albert of Riga.

Chapter 8: The Violent Mobilities of Albert of Riga

In 1165, a boy named Albert was born to the noble Buxhoevden family in Lower Saxony. When Albert was twenty-one, his cousin, a monk named Meinhard who had


\[ \text{Hui-Yuan, Y. and Mitchell, P (2019). “Parasites and Baltic crusading in medieval Riga.” in \textit{Terra Sacra II} 121. Also see Banerjea et al., “A multi-proxy, diachronic and spatial perspective on the urban activities within an indigenous community in medieval riga, latvia,” \textit{Quaternary International} pp 75-76} \]

\[ \text{Niitemaa, \textit{Die Undeutsche Frage} pp 205} \]

\[ \text{Cerman, “Seignorial Systems in East-central and Eastern Europe, 1300-1800,” in \textit{Serfdom and Slavery} pp 205} \]

\[ \text{Seppel. The Growth of the State and its Consequences on the Structure of Serfdom in the Baltic Provinces, 1550-1750 in \textit{Serfdom and Slavery} pp 292} \]
settled alongside German traders in Livonia, was pompously declared Bishop of the Livs by another cousin named Hartwig, the powerful Archbishop of Bremen. Meinhard was duped into building the locals a fort with empty promises of baptism, got himself promptly expelled, and died haplessly in 1196. Pacifist missionary work had failed, but the land had already been claimed for the Virgin Mary; so, the new motherland needed to be made Christian by force. In 1198, Hartwig had the Pope declare a crusade and sent a new Bishop to the Livs. He was promptly captured and executed as well. Albert had meanwhile become a monk himself; and so, duly, it was Albert’s turn. Unlike his predecessors, Albert would not fail.

In the spring of 1200 he brought a new force of 500 knights and their auxiliaries to ravage the countryside and forcefully baptized several native communities, then constructed a new fort at the mouth of the Daugava, neighboring a Livish village called Riga. This settlement soon became the center of Latin European immigration to the Baltic, and in time would grow to become the largest city on the Baltic sea and the eastern capital of the Hansa, rivaling Lübeck in size and prominence. Although his spiritual victories proved ephemeral, Albert would become a pivotal figure in the history of Northern Europe. His most important legacy was the annual violent pilgrimage to the Baltic that he popularized, a tradition which would spread across Western Europe and lasted for over two hundred years. The campaigns that Albert inspired laid the groundwork for the incorporation of the southern Baltic littoral as a colonial periphery of Western Europe.

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85 Christiansen, The Northern Crusades, pp 203
86 Christiansen, The Northern Crusades, pp 208
87 O’Connor, House of Hemp and Butter, pp 6
Albert spent much of his life on repeated tours of Germany and Italy on a circuit that ran from Riga to Rome. First he would make the dangerous spring marine voyage to Lübeck, always threatened by pagan pirates. He spent a season traversing the cities of Saxony and Westphalia, where he propagated tales of the crusade to kings, noblemen and middle-class burghers.\textsuperscript{88} His foremost supporters were his family and those who had married into it, and soon the Buxhoeveden would own vast territories in Livonia and Estonia.\textsuperscript{89} Albert’s most important base of recruitment was Magdeburg, whose citizens might have remembered the words of the Magdeburg Letter, penned a century earlier as an incitement to colonize the land of the Wends in modern day northwestern Germany:

“These gentiles [pagans] are most wicked, but their land is the best, rich in meat, honey, corn, and birds; and if it were well cultivated none could be compared to it for the wealth of its produce. So say those who know it. And so, most renowned Saxon, French, Lorrainers, and Flemings and conquerors of the world, this is an occasion for you to save your souls and, if you wish it, acquire the best land in which to live.”

From there, it was across the alps to Rome and back, begging for the crusade on the Daugava in the court of the universal monarch in Rome. This an era when the Vicar of Christ was the most powerful man in Europe and had pretensions to the administration of the entire world.\textsuperscript{90} Albert only managed to meet with the Pope a single time, a polite encounter where he was denied his dream of an archbishopric; but other powerful actors at the heart of the church took material interest in his endeavors. Through his efforts in

\textsuperscript{88} Marek Tamm, Missions and Mobilities in \textit{Making Livonia}, pp 28
\textsuperscript{89} Christiansen, \textit{The Northern Crusades}, pp 415
\textsuperscript{90} Southern, R. W. (1990). \textit{Western society and the Church in the Middle Ages}. Penguin Books., pp 105. A fantastic illustration of the status of the Bishop of Rome in the High Middle Ages is the 1126 Walk to Canossa. As penance for defying the church, the Roman Emperor Henry IV donned a hairshirt (a garment made of coarse animal hair designed to irritate the skin) and knelt in a blizzard for three days outside of the Pope’s residence.
Italy and northwestern Germany, Albert was able to mobilize multiple large, temporary forces from across Germany to maraud in the Daugava delta.\textsuperscript{91} More importantly, he founded a nucleus of permanent armed and resourced settlers whose institutional descendants would, over the course of centuries, subjugate the people of the region.

\textsuperscript{91} Sne, The Emergence of Livonia, in \textit{The Clash of Cultures} pp 55, details such an expedition.
Map 3: The journeys of Albert of Riga. Reproduced from “Mission and Mobilities” by Marek Tamm in the volume *Making Livonia: Actors and Networks in the Medieval and Early Modern Baltic Sea*
These men called themselves the Schwertbrüderorden: the Order of the Sword Brothers. They were a small guard of North German knights and merchants — in the beginning, just fourteen men — formed in 1202 in Riga by Albert’s deputy, Theodoric. They were to be the permanent garrison of the Church in Livonia.⁹² There were not many of these warriors, but they were resourced, disciplined, and armed. Their presence was dearly needed, for when Albert’s crusaders departed for home in Germany or France, the rising of the Livs was usually imminent.⁹³ Unlike the fleeting Danish military incursions of the past or the cumbersome pilgrim armies that perennially landed on the shores of the Baltic, the Swordbrothers were settlers.

Alongside Albert’s seasonal crusades, the Order embarked on a permanent war with native polities and began to establish the built environment necessary to allow for large-scale Latin settlement. Military infrastructure, which is to say built environments designed to facilitate the use of coercive force, was of crucial concern for settler elites. Castles could function as command-and-control centers, not only for military purposes but also for the distribution of grain and cattle, the maintenance of critical transportation infrastructure, and the management of local financial affairs.⁹⁴ Behind the Order’s armed guard, a network of new urban settlements sprung to life, populated by immigrants from Saxony, Westphalia and neighboring regions. It was through the mastery of river fortresses and their associated urban spaces that the Orders cemented their rule of the

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⁹² Christiansen, *The Northern Crusades*, pp 175
⁹³ As in 1206, when a local leader named Åko of Kirchholm (Salaspils) rose against the Germans upon the spring departure of a crusading force. Åko’s severed head was sent to Albert upon his defeat. O’Connor, *House of Hemp and Butter*, pp 54
⁹⁴ Klavins, “Reorganizing the Livonian Landscape” in *Terra Sacra II*, pp 202
country, and it was from these nodes that manors proliferated and serfdom crept onto the native countryside.

In theory, the Brothers were ascetic servants of the Church, wholly subordinate to the wishes of the Bishop at Riga. In practice, they were a group of ambitious, highly trained warriors who asserted their autonomy from their formation and disregarded unwelcome orders, even from Rome, whenever it was politically feasible to do so. Within a decade of their founding, Albert and the Sword Brothers were already at odds over the Order’s territorial ambitions, birthing a conflict between the ecclesiastics and the Orders of Livonia which would last until the final destruction of the fraternal state in 1558. Local church entities were constantly sending reports of great atrocities committed by the Brothers in their pursuit of uncontested sovereignty up the ecclesiastical chain. In 1234, for example, the Pope would hear the accusation that fraternal knights had massacred converts and one of the Papal See’s personal episcopal subordinates in Curonia.

Although many of these specific reports may have been falsified or exaggerated for effect, we know that in general, the Brothers took a free hand with violence against native people from very early on.

However, Germans and Natives did not meet each other exclusively in hostility. Once conquered and baptised, the German ecclesiarchy sought to integrate Livonian neophytes as subordinates into relationships of mutual, if unequal, obligations. Protection from traditional enemies — a category that encompassed everyone from distant Lithuanians to neighbors of the same tongue — came in return for nominal

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95 Marek Tamm, Mission and Mobilities in Making Livonia pp 20
96 Eihmane, A Clash of Two Identities, The Clash of Cultures, 41
97 See as another example the arbitrary arrest of an important group of Livonian elders on their way to a regional assembly in 1221. Urban, The Baltic Crusade, 121
Christianization, tribute, and the provision of men for war. Historical conflicts between Indigenous groups played an important role in enabling German colonialism, as it allowed them to take on the role of protector for certain natives and to make territorial alliances with leading local figures.

This strategy might be called “divide and rule,” but such naming obscures the importance that indigenous agents had in shaping the contours of German colonization. The Livish king Caupo was one such decision-maker. His coerced baptism and consequent military cooperation with Albert and the Germans dramatically reversed the position of his tribe. Where for decades they had been the endemic victims of violence from neighboring tribes, at the sides of the Germans they became the terror of their former persecutors.\textsuperscript{98} Albert hoped that baptized elites like Caupo could be a template for a native Christian aristocracy, but this was not to be.\textsuperscript{99} Nevertheless, collaborators figured as an important if always numerically limited caste of native nobles, who, in places like Courland, retained their hereditary right to rule and the use of the title “king” until as late as the 18th century.\textsuperscript{100} There was therefore a degree of mutuality and perhaps even sociality between Germans and neophytes allies; but as with any mutuality based on subordination, it was tenuous at best.

Albert died in 1229, permanently ending the hegemony of the See at Riga over the colonial project as a whole. While the powerful and influential Albert could count on his networks in Germany to periodically put large crusading armies at his hands, these manifestations were a temporary buffer against the infrastructural dominance of the

\textsuperscript{98} Urban, \textit{The Baltic Crusade}, pp 120
\textsuperscript{99} Urban, \textit{The Baltic Crusade}, pp 105
\textsuperscript{100} Christiansen, \textit{The Northern Crusades}, pp. 403
Order. His successors at Riga could not hope to contest them and by the 1230’s, the Brothers were the unofficial masters of Livonia. When they suffered a devastating defeat which decimated their numbers in 1236, their neighbors in Prussia — the equally perfidious Teutonic Order — were well positioned to incorporate their network of castles and contacts, continuing the pattern of baptism at the point of a spear followed by armed urban settlement. Under this protective aegis, an aristocratic diaspora from Saxony was lured by generous grants of land, labor and tax into ruling and defending this new land for the Order.  

Over the course of the 13th and 14th centuries, this tendency slowly but surely concentrated effective power on the local level in German-ruled territories into the hands of a few wealthy, interconnected families, some commercial, some aristocratic, but all with living connections to Germany and the Low Countries. The privileges and holdings of these families increased progressively over time, and as we have seen, by the modern era they had brought almost the entire native population into unfreedom. This outcome was never the intention of churchmen like Albert. As individual agents, the missionaries and even the military orders came as representatives of a universalizing institution, to save souls and spread the word; they did not want to see a secular knighthood grow fat off the enserfment and taxation of the Natives.  

We should not doubt the sincere concern of the clerical hierarchy for the liberty and well-being of the neophyte. Indeed, when the crusade was preached it was often said to be for the protection of newly converted native persons.  

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101 Bartlett, *The Making of Europe*, pp. 146
102 Kaljundi, “Neophytes as Actors,” in *Making Livonia*, pp. 105
military project that, over the course of centuries, created a confederation of segregated estates that ruled an ethnically distinct peasant population.

The racializing impact of an ostensibly universalizing mission provides an important lesson: racist social systems can be activated and perpetuated by actors who construe or perceive themselves as part of a non-racist system. Albert was a preacher; the Swordbrothers were friars. They spoke for the savior of all mankind, not for a German national interest. But once racial violence is mobilized in support of a political or social project, it becomes an embedded part of the corresponding networks’ motivating logics. The repercussions of violence do not simply disappear. They live on, and condition the decisions of all actors that live in their wake. Enacting systematic violence that relies on inherited difference as a mobilizing logic therefore “racializes’ ’ both the aggressor and the aggressed. The aggressed are racialized in the sense that they have been subject to a historical trauma; the aggressor is racialized in the sense that they have produced networks and institutions whose continued existence is predicated on the reproduction of racially differentiated violence. This is the “sedimented history” of which Sara Ahmed spoke.

This layering of structural violence is reflected, naturally, in the cultural products of racist societies; just as much, the pre-existing culture of practitioners of racism determines the way that racism is constructed discursively. Rather than drawing on ideas of genetic or otherwise “biological” superiority, Medieval Germans explained their relationship with their new subjects in terms of a spiritual hierarchy of relationship to divine and infernal forces. Religious belonging rather than ethnic background legally and culturally determined accessibility to violence, but as Cord Whitaker attests, the
distinction between racial and religious identity in the medieval era is not one that can be made lightly, or at all.\textsuperscript{104}

Religious and racial discourses produced by Germans about Baltic natives were naturally not static or uniform, but instead varied geographically, temporally, and across different kinds of actors. Nevertheless, a certain set of assumptions about the racial-social order was widely shared across most settlers. For early German settler elites, Livonia’s population was divided into three parts: Christians, neophytes (after the later 14th century \textit{Undeutsche}, or non-Germans), and apostates. Christians were people from Western Europe and their descendants. As a category it extended beyond Germans to the many other Latin Catholics who visited or settled in the East. Neophytes were the vast majority of the population, those baptized natives formally inducted into Christendom but, because of their ignorance and continued adherence to traditional idolatries, not yet fully Christian.\textsuperscript{105} Finally, there were “apostates” — baptized natives who wilfully betrayed the Christian regime and readopted demonic worship.

The religious positionality of baptized Natives was always contested. Latin Catholics were part of a universal body, and to be baptized into the church was to become adopted into that body. As such, Livonia witnessed perennial efforts by high-status Latin Catholic actors, from local clergy to the Papal office, to protect the political and social rights of the neophyte in Livonia.\textsuperscript{106} Nevertheless, the threat of “apostasy” always lingered and implicitly structured the treatment of baptized Natives by Germans. Apostasy, or the abandonment of Christian practice and the return to pagan beliefs by

\textsuperscript{104} Whitaker, C. (2020). Review of “The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages” by Geraldine Heng, in \textit{Critical Inquiry}

\textsuperscript{105} Niitemaa, \textit{Die Undeutsche Frage}, 32

\textsuperscript{106} Fonnenberg-Schmidt, I. \textit{The Popes and the Baltic Crusades}, pp 201.
baptized Natives, was a constant anxiety for the settlers. The charge was referenced often in Papal incitements to crusade in the Baltic, and as we shall see below, later fueled the institution of legal segregation.\(^{107}\)

Although apparently a spiritual concern, certain kinds of “apostasy” could have enormous political and social consequences. It could mean, for example, the mass desertion of Latin armies by Native auxiliaries on the battlefield. Such retreats contributed to devastating losses of personnel for colonial armies on several occasions.\(^{108}\) Apostasy could also mean the violence by natives against their colonial masters, as in the 1356 St. George’s Night Uprising, when Estonian rebels indiscriminately slaughtered all the German settlers they came across.\(^{109}\) This is perhaps why the paranoia of apostasy was always on German lips, even amongst otherwise liberally-minded clerics. A rabid obsession with the reversion of the convert to pagan ways was the dark underbelly of pious concern for the convert. As such, a protected “neophyte” community, physically adopted into the body of the church, could quickly become a hated group of apostates: abject, infernal, and therefore accessible to violence. Leading critical race medievalist Cord Whitaker uses the term “shimmer” to represent the way converted peoples could simultaneously occupy multiple distinct social and cultural locations, and suggests that it is central to medieval racial technologies.\(^{110}\)

\(^{107}\) Kaljundi, “Neophytes as actors,” in Making Livonia, pp. 108; and Eihmane, “Clash of two identities,” pp. 45, in Clash of Cultures

\(^{108}\) Two critical examples are the flight of Livs from the 1236 Battle of Saule and 1260, when Estonian and Curonian auxiliaries fled from the Samogitian advance at Durbe. The defeat at Saule decimated the Sword Brothers and led to their extinction as an independent organization, while at Durbe 150 knights and the Livonian Master - the chief executive of the Order in Livonia - were killed. Both defeats sparked the uprising of many different peoples and their open readoption of native religious beliefs.

\(^{109}\) Raum, Estonia and the Estonians, pp. 26

\(^{110}\) Whitaker, Black Metaphors, pp. 5
Racialized agents do not, however, exist solely in light of the violence they and their ancestors have experienced or undertaken. They do not confront the world, or racial dominators, exclusively as traumatized subjects; they also have many other motivations, needs, desires, and traditions which guide their decision-making process. This complexity presents many opportunities and reasons to relate across difference. In Livonia, unequal accords and accommodations between colonizers and colonized created relationships which intersected in complicated ways with the legacies and institutions of violence. Nowhere was this more evident than in the many new urban spaces that sprung up along the waterways and coasts of Livonia. There, relationships cut across and through difference, while nevertheless still being fundamentally shaped by the reality of military occupation. As settlers imported nascent forms of capitalist social organization from the Hanseatic west, these relationships as well were structured by the racial stratification of colonial society.

Chapter 9: Germans and others in urban Livonia: conversion, accommodation, capitalism

In this chapter, I explore a case of social integration between Germans and non-Germans in the Livonian metropolis of Riga: a curious pair of institutions called the Beer-Carter’s Guild and Beer-Porter’s Guild, which tied working-class natives to Germans of both high and low status together in a shared social environment. Through its rise and fall, I illustrate the dialectic between acculturation on the one hand and racialization on the other. Before we discuss them, we should be situated in the social and cultural context of the Livonian cities.
German colonization in Livonia was almost exclusively urban.\textsuperscript{111} Even when settlers lived on their properties in the countryside, they often remained “ausburghers” (citizens of the city not physically resident inside the walls) and therefore tied to the urban space.\textsuperscript{112} Because the mortality rate usually exceeded the birth rate even in times without widespread plague, new migration was always a necessity to replenish the urban population.\textsuperscript{113} Except during times of blockade, there was a constant influx of people from many directions; and so urban spaces became dynamic zones of intercultural contact. From Novgorod and Pskov in the East came Russian traders; From the North came Danish and Swedish nobles; from the West, Germans and Flemings acting variously as entrepreneurs, crusaders, monks, and their servants; and from the hinterlands, an indigenous peasantry that formed a third or more of the population of the German urban territories.\textsuperscript{114} In general, residence in German cities was spatially segregated by ethnic background. However, Germans and non-Germans sometimes lived together and married.\textsuperscript{115}

\textsuperscript{111} Stivrinš, Paleoecological evidence of crusades and impact on the livonian landscape, in \textit{Terra Sacra II} pp. 151, \\
\textsuperscript{112} Niitemaa, \textit{Die Undeutsche Frage}, pp. 24 \\
\textsuperscript{113} Strenga, Turning Transport Workers into Livonia, \textit{Journal of Baltic Studies}, pp. 66 \\
\textsuperscript{114} Mänd and Tam, introduction to \textit{Making Livonia}, pp. 3 \\
\textsuperscript{115} Strenga, Making Transport Workers Latvians, \textit{Journal of Baltic Studies}, pp. 64
Indigenous migrants born in the countryside — usually runaway bondsmen or the children of poor peasants — were the vast majority of the working class and poor of the Livonian cities, employed variably as miners, mercenaries, food vendors, sex workers and manorial farm laborers.\textsuperscript{116} Native Livonian individuals were usually waged proletarians, whose only property was their labor power and who were generally consigned to manual labor. They existed alongside a protected, German-dominated guild system that monopolized artisanal skills, manufacturing, and commerce. The central economic engine of the urban commercial economy, however, was the muscle of the men and women who appeared when the weather warmed to put the Hanseatic merchants’ commodities on the move. Each spring, they loaded Russian furs and Latvian timber for sale in Western markets onto cogs, and unloaded salt, textiles, and other value-added products from industrial Northern Europe for the cities and their suburbs. The prosperity of both the cities and the outlying manors depended on these seasonal migrants.\textsuperscript{117}

Individuals came not just to work, but also to enjoy the specific privileges that residence within and around the urban space imparted. As in the European core, “\textit{Stadtluft macht frei}”: city air made you free. Runaway serfs could evade their lords in the city, and after a year and a day of residence within the walls, custom stated that they could no longer be reclaimed by their masters.\textsuperscript{118} Although the freedom of the city did not legally extend beyond the walls, tenancy rights were somewhat stronger in the regions around larger cities, which may also have encouraged migration to the metropolitan

\textsuperscript{116} Niitemaa, \textit{Die Undeutsche Frage}, pp 17
\textsuperscript{117} O’Connor, \textit{House of Hemp and Butter}, pp 90
\textsuperscript{118} Note that serfs could sometimes be obliged to return to their master’s service (or made to pay a fine, or have a family member enserfed as recompense) even after becoming a legal resident. See Niitemaa, \textit{Die Undeutsche Frage}, pp 161.
North-eastern medieval European cities usually possessed diverse suburbs that could be of equal population to the metropole. While Livonian suburban spaces have not been documented extensively in English-language literature, it is evident that Livonian suburbs had substantial populations from the quantity of animal bones found in archaeological sites. We may take as an example of a typical suburb the Tallinn (German: Reval) satellite of Fischermay, a predominantly native community where many of the city’s fishermen, domestic servants and porters lived.

We have little record of the inner lives of the thousands of rural indigenous people — “country people,” in the language of their German neighbors — that settled in and around the cities of Livonia, and even less of the thousands more who passed through to work for a season, then dissolved back into the hinterland; but archaeological excavation has demonstrated that at least in the bustling Livish quarter of Riga, residents did not adopt German material culture or utilize imported goods from Western Europe. Instead, rural migrants built Livish homes, ate a Livish diet, and generally lived Livish lives. Livs did not seek to become Germans, and we may assume that other native groups did not either. How could they? Although they inhabited the same city, they were judicially and socially separated from their rulers. Even after the customary year, natives did not become full burghers, but rather “inwaner:” resident aliens.

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119 Cerman, Seigneurial Systems, in *Serfdom and Slavery* pp 193
121 Rannamae and Lougas, Animal exploitation in karski and viljandi in the late iron age and medieval period, in *Terra Sacra II*, pp. 66-67
122 Niitemaa, *Die Undeutsche Frage*, pp. 213
123 Pluskowski, multiscalar impacts of crusading in the environments of the eastern baltic, in *Terra Sacra II* pp. 7
125 Christiansen, E. *The Northern Crusades*, pp. 413
We have already discussed the corporate nature of Latin European society and its colonial extrusions, and urban Livonia was no exception to this rule. Confraternities, religious orders, and guilds together formed an ecology of social networks that together governed and disciplined public space.\textsuperscript{126} The municipal legislative body was usually called the \textit{Rat}, or city council, and recruited its members almost exclusively from the upper echelons of the merchants’ organizations. Ethnic belonging played a determinative role in accessing any of these networks from the beginning of settlement, but some of the craft guilds were semi-permeable to assimilated and educated natives.

However, at least in Riga, segregation of corporate networks became legally codified in the middle of the 14th century in the wake of a mass native uprising in the Duchy of Estonia on St. George’s Night in 1354. Fear of a similar rebellion incited a decision by the Riga merchants to forbid all natives and waged workers from joining or even attending meetings at their new Great Guild.\textsuperscript{127} This formal act of exclusion inaugurated a brutal crackdown on the civic and social life of native urban residents and a suppression of the possibility of upward mobility. Within forty years, the ban on commercial activities was followed by the prohibition of natives from almost all artisanal trades and their associated guilds. Some craft guilds went so far to prohibit marriage between their members and indigenous women.\textsuperscript{128} This period represents a pivotal shift in the legal consolidation of the inferior status of urban natives, a trend that would only accelerate in the decades and centuries to come.

\textsuperscript{126} Mänd, A. \textit{Urban Carnival} pp. 31
\textsuperscript{127} Niitemaa, \textit{Die Undeutsche Frage}, pp. 58-60.
\textsuperscript{128} Strenga, Turning Transport Workers into Latvians, \textit{Journal of Baltic Studies}, pp. 65
Yet simultaneous to this movement towards segregation, Riga witnessed the formation of a new type of integrated corporate body which typified a trans-ethnic Christian universalism that was being rapidly demolished in the city at large. The Beer-Carter’s Guild, approved by the Riga city council in 1386, and the Beer-Porter’s Guild, which is first attested around 1425, evolved into social networks that brought together urban residents from across ethnic and class divisions in a common space of religious observance and mutual resource transfer. The majority of the Guilds’ members were the workers and spouses of workers responsible for transporting the copious amounts of beer consumed by the German urban populace. Alcohol and drinking were a critical part of the culture of German Livonia especially during the revelry of the Drunke, a sort of medieval German Carneval:129

It was a matter of honour and pride for the Livonian lords that they be hospitable in their castles and entertain everyone, be he of high or low degree, with mighty drinking bouts. All their subjects followed this example until finally even intelligent people no longer considered boozing and gluttony a vice, but rather a virtue and mark of distinction. Consequently, people diligently devoted themselves to drinking and, as is also noted in several other chronicles in all countries of the time, the Livonians’ greatest fame and mark of distinction was that they were consummate boozers.130

While in the historiography the Carter’s and Porter’s guilds of Riga have been traditionally considered “Livonian brotherhoods” whose members were exclusively indigenous people, Gustavs Strenga has recently demonstrated that this a historically untenable proposition. Ethnic background is not obviously discernible in guild records, as almost all names were Germanized; but Strenga has shown that Germans could be

129 Gustavs Strenga, Turning transport workers into Latvians, *Journal of Baltic Studies* pp. 3 and O’Connor, *House of Hemp and Butter*, pp 85. Native Rigans were generally excluded from these festivals.
130 Russow, B (1578). *Chronicle of the Province of Livonia*. Quoted from Mand, *Urban Carnival*, pp. 2
members, whether as laborers themselves or as the spouses of native workers. He has further found evidence that high-status Germans, including patrician merchants, town councilors, and influential Dominican and Cisterican nuns, joined the beer guilds and shared ritual space and resources with native workers.131

The interconnections between the Porters’ Guild and the upper echelons of urban social life were cemented physically in 1458, when a new, centrally located altar for the Porters was built inside the most important church in the city, St. Peter’s. This act regularly brought natives into a space of spiritual and temporal power normally reserved for Germans.132 Through this institution, lower-class natives gained access to higher status, a secure and protected career, and important ceremonial spaces, while elite German members received a powerful spiritual boon in the form of inclusion in the collective prayers and ritual observations of generations of guild-members. Meanwhile, we also have record of the reciprocal exchange of monetary resources.133 Rather than mere patronage, the Guilds therefore represented networks of mutual exchange of spiritual and social solidarity across class, ethnicity, and even gender.

Strenga has used these important discoveries to question the primacy of ethnic identity in urban Livonia. At first glance, the Porters’ and Carters Guilds appear to

131 Gustavs Strenga, “Cistercian networks of memory,” in Making Livonia
132 Strenga, Turning transport workers into Latvians, Journal of Baltic Studies pp. 69. Dr. Karin Velez has made the incisive observation that in contemporary colonial Spain, altars could be sponsored for baptized Black members of confraternities by their elite counterparts without the subaltern members of the confraternity ever personally attending the altar. It is therefore entirely possible that neophyte Carters were not actually able to worship at their own altar. While clarity on this issue is not forthcoming in the secondary sources, I would argue that even the inclusion of the altar in St. Peter’s represented an important symbolic integration.
133 At least near the end of the 15th century and the beginning of the 16th, there are records showing that the Carter’s Guild paid the abbess of the Dominican sisters two marks a year in tribute, whereas the abbess paid a hefty sum of three marks for each of her 50 nun-members during each Drunke. Strenga, “Cistercian networks of memory,” in Making Livonia
contradict Robinson’s assumptions about “[t]he tendency of European civilization through capitalism… not to homogenize but to differentiate—to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into "racial" ones.” I suggest that this interpretation belies a geographic and social stratification of the native working class which enabled German hegemony rather than mitigating it. Medieval guilds were not labor unions. They were corporate bodies which, amongst many other functions, gave some workers within a profession a form of representation and legitimacy in civic life. Gaining access to the guild-network and rising to high positions inside the guild came with certain criteria that most working natives could not fulfill.

In order to be a member of the guild, a native worker had to be a permanent resident in the city. When we consider suburban natives alongside the predominance of temporary migrant labor in the workforce, especially during the critical unloading season in the spring, we can assume significant stratification between the permanently resident, *inwaner* guild members and temporary or suburban wage-workers. Within the beer guilds themselves, there was ethnic subordination: higher positions were monopolized by German members who could use their authority to surveil and discipline an important segment of the native population. Nevertheless, they were uniquely integrated and mutualistic social networks that developed during a period when rural natives were increasingly becoming enserfed and urban-dwelling natives were being proletarianized and disenfranchised.

Even as the status and social integration of the movers of beer was rising, more and more restrictions were imposed on other native Rigans which specifically signaled

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134 Niitema, *Die Undeutsche Frage*, pp. 183
them as Undudischen (non-Germans) and therefore of lower status. In time, the hybrid nature of the beer guilds made them uniquely vulnerable to political pressures. In the context of the explicit ethnicization of religious practice in Riga during the Reformation, the corporate rights of the members of the guild were attacked and its intercultural character destroyed. Symbolically, the altar of the Porter’s in St. Peter’s was destroyed in an iconoclastic fury in 1522, thus removing a critical shared social space between natives and settlers. In 1524, there is an abrupt halt in the meticulous records of new members of the Carter’s and Porter’s guilds. Around the resumption of record-keeping in 1532 and 1540 respectively, the Rat imposed severe new restrictions on the transportation worker’s guilds, decreasing the number of allowed members and outlawing many of their traditional rights and activities in the city. All of the elite German members of the guild — nuns, merchants, politicians, artisans — were gone, and the inter-class and inter-ethnic bonds they held severed.

Strenga specifically attributes the Reformation with preventing the assimilation of Livonian natives into Germans. As we can see through the violent attack on the rights of the Carter’s and Porter’s Guilds, the Reformation did catalyze a dramatic shift in inter-ethnic relationships. However, this was the culmination of a much longer process of explicitly segregationist legislation that had been removing natives from corporate spaces for the past century and a half. Rather than a disjuncture, the Reformation marked a dramatic assertion of a much longer historical process of racialization that accelerated in

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135 Strenga, Turning Transport Workers into Latvians, *Journal of Baltic Studies* pp. 74
136 Ibid. pp. 75
137 Ibid. pp. 78
the second half of the 14th century but ultimately began with the onset of settler colonialism.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

Over the course of the three centuries between the declaration of Albert’s crusade and the destruction of the beer guilds, what it meant to be German changed dramatically. To be “German” in Livonia in the 13th century signified belonging to networks of kinship and sociality that extended back to the European core and was often identical with power-holding in the conquered territories, but it did not carry legal meaning. By the middle of the 14th century, this demonym had crystallized into a judicial category that excluded the majority of natives from participation in urban civic life and all natives from the upper echelons of governance. Simultaneously, a new type of human identity had been constructed and imposed on the subject population. Regardless of their own identities, the indigenous people of Livonia found themselves collectively made *undudischen*: not-German.

In the polycentric dominions of Livonia, “race” thus emerged primarily in the distinction between settler and settled. It was not constructed deliberately, nor did it emerge necessarily out of “capitalist” rationalities which aimed to differentiate labor as to facilitate value extraction. Rather, it became an encompassing social mode because thinking and acting racially proved again and again and on multiple scales to be an effective way to organize violence. As immigrant Germans produced new spaces, they became racialized as a matter of course, not only because of the foundational violence of the conquest but also because their newly constructed social and political configurations
were predicated on maintaining unequal and extractive relationships across difference. Even as certain spaces cultivated alternative forms of relationality between natives and colonizers, the remnant particles of violence inexorably produced new kinds of personhood that were constructed in opposition to one another.

“Capitalism” — or at least social forms and economic logics we associate with capitalism — appears in this story as a critical technology of colonial extraction that coexists alongside more antique forms of extraction: conquest, serfdom and slavery. Capitalists and proletarians came into relationship bearing identities and historical memories that preceded the wage-relationship. This demonstrates that racism is not reducible to the economic logics of capitalism. Instead, the geographies of capitalism are themselves overdetermined by a nexus of other historical and social forces, of which racism is one. As geographers endeavor to untangle this web, I contend that the comparative perspective will continue to prove fruitful in identifying forms of social extraction which may appear modern while in fact being very old. Investigating the medieval European past can be a critical part of making the strange familiar and the familiar strange. By immersing ourselves in the social geographies from which our present world-system descends, geographers will be able to recognize, recontextualize, and understand in new dimensions forms of socio-spatial organization which we have taken for granted.

A fundamental assumption in both liberal and Marxist discourses about the difference between capitalism and feudalism is the predominance of free labor in capitalist economies. Robinson questions that assumption, and I concur. While chattel slavery has become much a smaller portion of the global labor market than in the
preceding centuries, other forms of judicial and political unfreedom characterize extremely large numbers of working-class people in the core countries. The majority of the modern American working class are in this category: racialized individuals in a racist system.\textsuperscript{138} Undocumented migrants stand out as a racialized group that, even now, lack legal personhood in many contexts and constitute a disproportionate segment of the modern American industrial and service proleteriat. Far from being a modern construction, however, the socio-legal marginality of today’s waged proletarians is a distorted mirror of premodern laborers like those in Livonia.

We must therefore consider the possibility that the tiered and multiscalar hierarchy of relationships which compose the modern world-system are not always or exclusively “capitalist” in nature. Many global and local relationships of domination and extraction do not follow market logics of supply and demand or hew strictly to the class struggle between free labor and freer capital; they are just as often predicated on arrangements of unfreedom borne out of conquest. The use of the word “capitalism” to represent the entire logic of the modern global economy is therefore untenable.

However, the social groupings evoked by the word “capital” nevertheless still hold tremendous power and are often key actors in purveying modern colonial violences. The commanding heights of the economy and vast tracts of wealth are, now more than ever, captured by a very small group of predominantly Euro-settler men and their families. How to account for this situation? In my view, our discourse should proliferate with historically situated, intersectional ethnoclass signifiers. Terms like “the Black working class” or “the white capitalist class,” while potentially misleading if not

deployed carefully and contextually, nevertheless highlight the role race plays in enabling and constructing class positionality. The term “racial capitalism” captures the global totality of this conjuncture well.

If five centuries of global European militarism has never been reconciled or even brought to a close, it should come as no surprise that the modern world-economy remains basically tributary in structure. The flow of colonial tribute and accumulation by dispossession is today more often mediated through market mechanisms than unabashed expropriation; but the positions different locations occupy in global markets today are often directly attributable to massive and often genocidal violences that have occurred over the course of the past five centuries. In reactionary Euro-settler discourse, this violence is lauded; in liberal discourse, forgotten; in radical discourse, hand-waved as “primitive accumulation.”

The conceptual primacy of “capitalism” over other constructs like “colonialism” or “racism” in determining our understanding of why and how bodies and resources move around the world the way they do limits our capacity to theorize that movement and prompts radical scholars and activists to prioritize certain strategic commitments — namely, those having to do with “traditional” working-class formations, especially in the capitalist core — over others. Radical European and Euro-settler theorists within or influenced by the Marxist tradition have long held that the expansionary urge of capital is the driving force behind colonialist expansion.139 I argue, alongside Cedric Robinson, that capitalism as we know it is just as much a product of that violence as it is its cause. As we can see from the Livonian example, capitalism can be built on violent foundations

139 Rosa Luxemburg and David Harvey are two temporally distant but theoretically related thinkers who hold to this idea.
laid by non-capitalist actors following non-capitalist rationalities. If we are to understand why the modern world-system is configured the way it is, we might profit by putting race first.
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