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John Thornton

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Introduction

Atlantic history has become fashionable in the last few years. Where once historians were content to study continents and countries in isolation, they have increasingly sought to study interactions on an intercontinental scale. This is particularly true of the early Atlantic, where the dramatic European navigations of the fifteenth century suddenly brought four continents into interaction where there had been little or no communication before. As a result of these navigations, the Atlantic became the scene of major intercontinental migrations. Thousands of European settlers moved from their homes to the Americas, and joining them was a still larger group of Africans.

On the whole, the European migration and its effects have received much more attention from historians than the African migration. This is true even though the African migration was larger, at least before the nineteenth century. This book is an attempt to assess this less well known migration of Africans to the Americas and to place this assessment in the growing field of Atlantic history.

When Fernand Braudel published *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World* in 1949,¹ he pioneered, especially in France, a new way of looking at regional history. Braudel's approach changed the way regions were defined, introducing the concept of a history integrated by the sea. His approach was also noteworthy for placing economic and social factors at the center of things rather than in the background. It was hardly surprising, then, that French scholars and scholars trained in France should apply his method and approach to other great maritime regions. In this regard, it was not long before the Atlantic became an object of study along Braudelian lines.

¹ Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen dans les temps de Phillippe II* (Paris, 1949; 2d rev. ed., 1966); trans. Siân Reynolds under the title *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2 vols. (New York, 1972–3).

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Pierre and Hugette Chaunu devoted a massive study to the Atlantic, published in 1955–60, from the archives of Seville.² Their work was followed by Frédéric Mauro's study of the Portuguese Atlantic published in 1960.³ Vitorino Magalhães-Godinho published his study of the Portuguese world economy in 1962–68, in which the Atlantic economy played a substantial role.⁴ Although none of these works had quite the depth or the ambition of Braudel's *Mediterranean*, they frankly acknowledged their debt to him, both in methods and in approach. They did, moreover, "cover" the Atlantic quite thoroughly, at least for the period before the late seventeenth century.

One reason why these studies lacked the depth of Braudel's was their very strong concentration on European efforts, almost to the exclusion of the role of other Atlantic societies. Although none completely forgot that the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas and Africa also participated in the Atlantic economy, none gave them the kind of social and economic examination that Braudel gave to all the societies and civilizations of the Mediterranean basin. Braudel eventually attempted to redress some of the imbalance by devoting a section in the final edition of his survey of the world, *Civilization and Capitalism* (1979), to various Atlantic societies, capping three decades of interest on his part and vast quantities of research inspired by his original example.⁵

For all these efforts, however, the Atlantic still appeared largely from a European perspective. This was not simply chauvinistic Eurocentrism, however, but a crucial point of analysis. The Atlantic, it seems, unlike the Mediterranean, was regarded by all these researchers as being particularly dominated by Europeans. Braudel believed that the societies of the Mediterranean basin were all roughly in the same stage of economic development and were thus roughly equal contributors, and when he appeared to waver on this point with regard to the Moslem world, Turkish historians strove to correct him.⁶ But the Atlantic seemed to be different, for most of the historians who approached it seemed to believe

² Pierre Chaunu and Hugette Chaunu, *Séville et l'Atlantique, 1504–1650*, 9 vols. (Paris, 1955–60).

³ Frédéric Mauro, *Portugal et l'Atlantique, 1570–1670* (Paris, 1960).

⁴ Vitorino Magalhães-Godinho, *Os descobrimentos e a economia mundial*, 2 vols. (Lisbon, 1963–5). See also his shorter work, *L'économie de l'empire portugais aux XVe et XVIe siècles* (Paris, 1969).

⁵ Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*, 3 vols., trans. Siân Reynolds (New York, 1982–4; original French edition, 1979). See vol. 3:387–440.

⁶ Omer Lufti Barkan, "La Méditerranée de F. Braudel," *Annales: Economies, sociétés, civilisations* 9 (1954). For an overview of historiography and a development of themes concerning the role of the Ottoman Empire in the wider world economy, see Huri Islamoglu-inan, ed., *The Ottoman Empire and the World-Economy* (Cambridge, 1987), especially the introductory essay by Islamoglu-inan, "Introduction: 'Oriental Despotism' in a World System Perspective," pp. 1–26.

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that Africa (and the indigenous societies of the Americas) were on a significantly lower level of development. Therefore, an unusually prominent role for Europeans in the formation of the Atlantic world seemed especially appropriate for “scientific” reasons, and not simply because the authors were committed to Eurocentrism.

Pierre Chaunu has been most forceful in his defense of the “Eurocentrism” of French scholarship. Europe possessed a lead over the rest of the world, he argued, a lead originating in the complex changes of late medieval society, which gave Europeans an extraordinarily dominant position in the world – so dominant, in fact, that for better or worse, they became the sole significant actors. Chaunu reproduced a map that Braudel and the anthropologist Gordon Hewes drew for the first edition of *Capitalism and Material Life* in 1967 in which world societies were divided into levels on the basis of technology and population density.⁷ African and Native American societies were at a lower level, and thus the imbalance of the Atlantic interaction was explained.

Of course, the French writers began their studies of the Atlantic world at a time when Eurocentrism was the order of the day, in the last years of European colonial domination of Africa and when the European modes of nation building and development were the expected norms for newly independent African states. African and Latin American nationalist movements and their historians and apologists changed this emphasis in the late 1960s and 1970s. Eurocentrism met numerous challenges from the historians of the newly emerging non-Western world.

The nationalist school of history sought to demonstrate that European world supremacy in recent times had worked strongly to the detriment of the various non-European peoples in the Atlantic basin and elsewhere. Much of their work focused on European exploitation, largely in seeking to explode the colonialist myth that European domination had brought backward societies into the modern world.⁸ In response to such criticism, Chaunu reiterated his position in 1969 by asserting that these arguments did not invalidate French Eurocentrism, and that its relevance had been confirmed by many other historians of the time period. European domination was founded on European superiority, and whether this was good or bad for the people being dominated was not necessarily a relevant point. The history of the Atlantic still ought to be the history of

⁷ Pierre Chaunu, *L'expansion européenne du XIII^e à XV^e siècles* (Paris, 1969), pp. 56–7. The original map was drawn for the 1967 edition of Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism*, trans. Siân Reynolds (New York, 1973), and can be found in the 1982–4 English version at 1:56–7.

⁸ The work of an early pioneer is Celso Furtado, *The Economic Growth of Brazil: A Survey from Colonial to Modern Times* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1963). See also Stanley Stein and Barbara Stein, *The Colonial Heritage of Latin America* (Oxford, 1970). For Africa, see the work of Basil Davidson, especially *Black Mother: The Atlantic Slave Trade* (London, 1961).

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Europeans, and the rest was still only background.⁹ According to Chaunu, if history is the story of movement and initiative, then European history is the only history that is really important.

On the whole, Chaunu's analysis does not contradict much of the work of the nationalist historians and their more recent manifestations – dependency theory and world systems analysis, as characterized by the work of such scholars as André Gunder Frank, Walter Rodney, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Eric Wolf.¹⁰ These writers infused the work of the *Annalistes*¹¹ with a neo-Marxist focus and reinforced and reiterated the essence of Chaunu's conclusions. However much they were committed to the study of the non-Western world, or however sympathetic they were to its people, they still agreed that the non-Western world, including Africa, had played a passive role in the development of the Atlantic. Although their radical perspective and their advocacy of Third World causes tended to make them sympathetic to Africa, the effect was simply to reinforce the tentative conclusions of the French pioneers that Africa was a victim, and a passive victim at that, for it lacked the economic strength to put up an effective resistance.

Coupled with these various lines of research that suggested African passivity in its relations with the Atlantic economy was an equally strong emphasis on the passivity of the Africans who were brought out of Africa in the slave trade. Slaves left very little documentation reflecting their point of view. Much of the research on slavery thus echoed the work of the dependency theorists. Just as the rise of partisans of the emerging Third World had sought to refute the rosy colonialist image of a progressive Europe rescuing the colonial world from backwardness, so historians of American slavery in the era of the civil rights struggle and black power movements in the United States sought to demolish the earlier portrait of the slave as contented. Pointing to the harshness of American slavery, they argued that the institution stripped the slave of culture, initiative, and even personality.¹² Thus, in spite of their general sympathy to the plight of the slaves and their descendants in the New World, they nevertheless reinforced the image of the slave as helpless

⁹ Pierre Chaunu, *Expansion européenne*, pp. 53–54.

¹⁰ André Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America* (New York, 1969); Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London, 1972; reprint, Washington, D.C., 1974); Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System*, 2 vols. to date (New York, 1974–80); Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley, 1982).

¹¹ The *Annaliste* school, named after its principal journal, *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, was founded on the initiative of Fernand Braudel and Lucien Febvre after the Second World War. It sought to integrate social and economic history as the focal point for historians and deemphasized traditional themes of political, military, and diplomatic history.

¹² See the very influential work of Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (New York, 1959).

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and necessarily passive. Radical historians sought to explain slave culture and slave religion in terms of the institution of slavery and thus reduced the African identity of the slave.¹³

It is ironic that the development of nationalist historiography of Africa and Afro-America should have produced these results. Some of the earliest nationalist historians of Africa, such as Basil Davidson, from whom so much of the fervor of early Africanist historiography derived, sought to refute the notion in colonialist ideology that Africans had never had a "real history" of their own; rather, they demonstrated the impressive achievements of African cultures and showed that before the colonial occupation, Africans had been firmly in control of the destiny of their continent.¹⁴ But even as African initiative, skill, and progress were being researched, the dependency theorists clung to and developed the ideas of ultimate African weakness, while making concessions to the research on the reinterpretation of the African past.

Some historians of Afro-America sought to assess the Afro-Americans as purveyors of a unique variant of African culture to the New World. Indeed, Afro-America has not lacked its nationalist historians who, like their colleagues in African history, have seen the Afro-American as exercising initiative and preserving and creating in spite of slavery and racism. Some of these historians have come to appreciate the slave as an African and increasingly have sought the African background as a means of understanding the unique contributions of Afro-Americans to the culture of the United States. Their work, though often focusing on the nineteenth-century United States, has been to try to restore what they see as a positive dimension to the Afro-American experience, a program emphasized by the nationalist historian Sterling Stuckey.¹⁵ Thus, for example, Sydney Mintz and Richard Price sought to connect the African background of Afro-Americans with the development of Afro-American culture, while Albert Raboteau and Mechal Sobel and more recently Margaret Washington Creel have focused on religion.¹⁶ Sobel has extended her research to a wider world view and has tried to show the African influence not only on Afro-American culture but on

¹³ Here the work of Eugene Genovese is significant; see *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974) and compare it with his earlier *The World the Slaveholders Made* (New York, 1969).

¹⁴ Basil Davidson, *Lost Cities of Africa* (Boston, 1959).

¹⁵ Sterling Stuckey, "Through the Prism of Folklore: The Black Ethos in Slavery," *Massachusetts Review* 9 (1968): 417–37, and more recently, his summation of this and other work, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (Oxford, 1987).

¹⁶ Sydney Mintz and Richard Price, *An Anthropological Approach to the Afro-American Past: A Caribbean Perspective* (Philadelphia, 1976); Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1978); Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Westport, Conn., 1979); Margaret Washington Creel, "A Peculiar People": *Community Life and Religion among the Gullah* (New York, 1988).

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that of Euro-Americans as well.¹⁷ They have relied on the revived Africanist historiography to give them a dynamic and creative background for the African people in America, while emphasizing the role of the African in American culture and life.

This interest in the African background of American culture has led many historians of the Americas back to Africa. Unfortunately, all too often, these specialists in the history of the Americas have not fully grasped the dynamic of precolonial African societies. Frequently, they have studied African culture through the medium of modern anthropology rather than the careful study of contemporary documents. Because anthropologists' knowledge is based on fieldwork in contemporary (usually mid-twentieth-century) Africa, until quite recently their statements about earlier times were based on theoretical supposition or an assumption that African society and culture did not change. Reading contemporary documents helps to offset this modern bias. The latter approach is just beginning to bear fruit in African studies, especially in the field of cultural and social history.

Even among these historians, with their acceptance of the importance of African history to American history, there is still strong debate concerning the exact way in which Africans have affected New World societies as cultural actors (as opposed to their undoubted role as workers). Mintz and Price, for example, argue that the conditions of slavery in the Americas and the cultural diversity of imported Africans made the direct transmission of African culture to America difficult, whereas Sobel has gone quite far in arguing that these factors were much less significant and an African world view prevailed among Afro-Americans. In part, the debate continues to hinge on the issue of the degree to which the exploitation of slavery and the denigration of racism crippled the slaves' ability to maintain and transmit an African culture in the New World.

This book seeks to resolve a number of these contradictory positions. Is it correct to see Africa as being on a lower level of development than Europe and this imbalance as being the cause for the slave trade? Did Africans participate in the Atlantic trade as equal partners, or were they the victims of European power and greed? Were the African slaves in the Americas too brutalized to express themselves culturally and socially, and thus, to what degree was their specifically African background important in shaping Afro-American culture? On the whole, the conclusions of the research on which this book is based support the idea that Africans were active participants in the Atlantic world, both in African

¹⁷ Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth Century Virginia* (Princeton, 1987).

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trade with Europe (including the slave trade) and as slaves in the New World.

The present book is divided into two parts. The first part examines in detail the nature of the interaction between Africa and Europe. The second part of the book deals with the role that those Africans who went to live in the non-African parts of the Atlantic played in their new societies. It examines some of the institutional background that shaped their participation from the point of view of the dominant powers of the non-African Atlantic, but focuses more particularly on the economic, political, and cultural life of the newly transplanted Africans.

Thus, after a chapter sketching the geographical and historical origins of the Atlantic world, the book moves on to an analysis of Euro-African trade and the African productive economy. I conclude that the Atlantic trade was not economically essential to African well-being or development, being as it was largely luxury goods that did not even displace the African luxury goods industry (for example, in the case of textiles) or a relatively minor supplement to existing African industries (for example, the mining and metallurgical industries). Finally, the examination of the economy emphasizes what has increasingly been noted by recent research into African production – that Africa possessed a much more varied and productive economy than has been believed previously.

Moreover, my examination of the military and political relations between Africans and Europeans concludes that Africans controlled the nature of their interactions with Europe. Europeans did not possess the military power to force Africans to participate in any type of trade in which their leaders did not wish to engage. Therefore all African trade with the Atlantic, including the slave trade, had to be voluntary. Finally, a careful look at the slave trade and the process of acquisition of slaves argues that slaves had long been used in African societies, that African political systems placed great importance on the legal relationship of slavery for political purposes, and that relatively large numbers of people were likely to be slaves at any one time. Because so much of the process of acquisition, transfer, and sale of slaves was under the control of African states and elites, they were able to protect themselves from the demographic impact and transfer the considerable social dislocations to poorer members of their own societies.

In the second part of the book, the emphasis shifts to the New World and the contributions of African slaves to the Americas. After considering the conditions that made African slaves so attractive to European colonists in the New World and also ironically placed them in a good position to be central actors in the new cultural milieu of the Atlantic world, the analysis then focuses on the nature of slavery with an eye to

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assessing the likelihood of enslaved Africans playing a larger role than is usually assigned to them in the cultural and social world of their enslavers. On the whole, the evidence supports the idea that at least some, and probably a significant number, in all parts of the Atlantic world possessed sufficient freedom of movement and social interaction to participate actively in the cultural life of the region. The focus then shifts to the issue of culture and examines the cultural zones of Africa, their interactions with each other and with Europeans, and the development of an Afro-Atlantic culture. It then examines the role that Africans, African culture, and African institutions have played in such diverse matters as slave rebellions, communities of runaways, and the cultural and religious life of the New World.

The second part of the book has been buttressed by research that demonstrates that European influences on African life, such as Christianity, creole languages, and fashion, were often encountered first in Africa and only later transferred to the Americas. Thus, where Africans have borrowed from Europeans they often did so willingly and on their own terms in their home territories, and not always under the stultifying influence of slavery. How African culture changed on its own and how it incorporated foreign influences are examined to reveal a deep dynamic functioning in Africa that would be unleashed in the Americas.

The research that supports these conclusions, both for Africa and for the New World, has necessarily had to involve a reassessment that goes counter to the analysis of much of the secondary literature. In large measure this is because the primary concern of most researchers has been local rather than international. Thus, Africanists have not always addressed themselves to those issues in African society and history that would clarify African interactions with the Atlantic world, especially how the African background of Afro-American slaves affected their response to their new environment. As a result, Americanists, whose principal concern is the fate of Africans once they have arrived in the Americas, have not had a secondary literature about Africa written with their concerns in mind. Of those whose interest is in trade and economic interactions, few indeed have known enough about the areas outside their specialty to attempt independent analysis and synthesis.

Consequently, I have consulted primary sources as much as possible. Obviously, such a strategy is essential if one wishes to make any substantial revision in the existing historiography, and it is particularly necessary when the specialists in Atlantic history, African history, and the history of Africans in the New World have not attempted to ask questions that include the whole Atlantic world. This task is almost impossible to accomplish as completely as one would wish, even though the eventual success of the analysis depends on thorough examination of all

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the primary material. The research results must be able to convince the Africanist that no violence has been done to the primary evidence on African history and society, the Europeanist that the essence of European economic and political background is respected, and the Americanist that the full range of slave societies is considered.

No scholar can single-handedly tackle the primary literature in its entirety, even with the help of the existing secondary literature, and readers should be aware of this. The documentation consulted is most complete with regard to African societies and the societies of the Atlantic islands, and I have examined an extremely large sample of the published and unpublished material. In the Americas the material on slaves is much more scattered, and each item of documentation less complete than for Africa, and moreover, I have consulted only a small, but I trust representative, sample.

In any case, the documentation is incomplete, and the analysis thus must be considered more suggestive than conclusive. I can only hope that my reanalysis points in directions that others will find fruitful and that they will take up more detailed examination and case studies to refute or support the results reached here.

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Part I
Africans in Africa