

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89875-1 - A Cultural History of the Atlantic World, 1250–1820

John K. Thornton

Excerpt

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## Introduction

This book grew out of my desire to see Americans, living on both continents, develop a new understanding of their past and their heritage, one that was multicentered, complex, and interactional. While my thinking was initially directed in particular toward North America, I also realized that other countries in the Americas, especially as I witnessed in my experience in the English-speaking Caribbean and Brazil, shared in their own ways variants of the collective memory I hoped to change. As Maurice Halbwachs originally envisioned it, our collective memory is our sense of ourselves as having a memory that extends beyond our personal recollections and includes the memory of the whole of society.<sup>1</sup> Others, notably Pierre Nora, who have expanded the concept, have noted the role that national symbols, cherished historical events, monuments, and, for my purposes above all, the curriculum of schools have in shaping the collective memory.<sup>2</sup>

I felt that our contemporary collective memory is often unidirectional, anchored in Europe and focused on a relatively few incidents and locations in the Americas. The locations and narratives vary from country to country; in Mexico more than many others, the indigenous heritage joins that of Europe, for example. My way to address, and hopefully to change, our collective memory is through Atlantic history.<sup>3</sup> I see an Atlantic basin focus not as replacing the Western civilization approach to our heritage, but as augmenting and extending it. While Atlantic history as a subdiscipline has a fairly long and respectable lineage, its earliest manifestation was in fact simply to recognize

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York, 1980 [French original 1950]), and Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (tr. Katherine Blamey and David Pellauer, Chicago, 2004) have influenced me in this pursuit, although this list could easily be expanded.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Nora, interpretative remarks as editor in *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past* (3 vols., New York, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> A very good overview and survey of the historiography and literature of the recent history of the Americas is Eric Hinderaker and Rebecca Horn, "Territorial Crossings: Histories and Historiographies of the Early Americas," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 57 (2010): 395–432.

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that Europe and the Americas shared a common history.<sup>4</sup> However, in the early 1990s, new conceptions of Atlantic history were emerging. The new Atlantic history deliberately decentered Europe and gave much more attention to non-European regions.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Atlantic history's new formulation has been struggling to move from using modern countries as a unit of analysis to look at regional or continental trends.<sup>6</sup>

My approach to Atlantic history in this book, however, has been guided not only by a desire to reshape the collective memory, but also to anchor it in a different approach that in some ways departs from the collective memory model altogether. I started with ideas that Linda Heywood presented in an address to the American Historical Association in which she described three roles that historians fulfill.<sup>7</sup> The first role has been as keeper and restorer of a nation's, group's, or community's heritage, reminding members of how they began, how they progressed, and how time changed or reaffirmed their principles. It is what many people think of as history's primary task, and it is the task most often cited in the theoretical and philosophical literature on collective memory.

The second role, though not much practiced today, especially by professional historians, but still very much a part of popular conceptions of the historian's role, is that of an assessor, making judgments, both moral and practical, on the role of actors in history. History can be seen as a guide to the present, a source of inspiration or a warning of the consequences of incompetence, vanity, or foolishness in human affairs. The role is important, if for no other reason than that political leaders might actually refrain from wickedness, fearing the judgment of history. It is also a role that I have largely eschewed in this book.

The final role has been greatly on the ascendance since the end of the Second World War, and that is the historian as social scientist. History can be seen as the ultimate in social comparison, not only examining societies in the present, but also in the past. If the goal of social science is to study the human experience exhaustively, then the past must be considered as well as the present. Historians have learned to use statistics, to construct counterfactual models, and to use the language of sociology, political science, and psychology to understand their subject.

My approach in this book is to work with history primarily as a social science, but along the way to create the sort of inclusive, multicentric, and multi-regional approach that I hope might revise our collective memory and thus

<sup>4</sup> For an assessment of its earlier history as essentially recognizing Europe as important for understanding America, or as a branch of Imperial history, see Philip Morgan and Jack Greene, "Introduction: The Present State of Atlantic History," in Jack P. Greene and Philip Morgan, eds. *Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal* (Oxford, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> The New Atlantic history is well represented in several new textbook treatments – for example, Thomas Benjamin, *The Atlantic World: Europeans, Africans and Indians and their Shared History, 1400–1900* (Cambridge, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> See Hinderaker and Horn, "Territorial Crossings," pp. 405–410.

<sup>7</sup> Heywood's paper, presented the late 1980s, is unpublished, but our discussions of it have been fundamental to my vision of the historian's craft.

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address the issue of heritage. Initially, the work opens with an exploration of the development of the Atlantic World, from early European explorations and contacts (in the first chapter) to a survey of the cultures of the Atlantic Basin: a chapter each on Europe, Africa, and the Americas. In this section the approach is comparative but also comprehensive. The advantage of the comparative approach is that it does not require the writer to use the criteria of heritage to choose the most important regions to study or highlight. That is, if one is North American, one does not have to justify, consciously or unconsciously, a description of events in Brazil through their relevance to the heritage of North America. Rather, as Chapter 4 demonstrates, understanding the comparative political systems of the Iroquois and Tupi makes sense as a social science exercise. It provides a solid, comprehensible reason for comparing widely disparate societies; indeed, in many ways, it demands disparity. But the discussion by itself also exposes the reader to material that can contribute to an understanding of the heritage of those societies.

The next section assesses the nature of the encounters between expanding Europe and other societies in the Atlantic World. The approach is thematic, defining three types of encounters – conquest, colonization, and contact – and within each one there are comparative models: the Spanish conquest of Mexico and Peru is different from the Portuguese conquest in Brazil, and that again is different from Spanish conquest in the Rio de la Plata basin, just as Portuguese conquests in Angola differ from those of Brazil. By including contact among the categories, I am able to retain a theoretical and systematic unity, but also include regions that are often left out: Atlantic Africa, the American West, or the Western Caribbean where Europeans came as guests or were roughly expelled.<sup>8</sup> It allows a North American-centered history to continue to include Native Americas in the story, and thus to include it in the collective memory, if not as a part of the heritage of the United States, at least as a society to be discussed and considered and thus within the collective memory of the United States.

Although this book is dedicated to culture, in most respects the first portions of it, more than half, in fact, are political and social rather than cultural. However, the next section does take on cultural issues, again comparatively. We learn of the fate of languages, for example, by seeing the difference between the survival of French in English Canada and that of any African language in the Caribbean, and once again the comparative approach allows us to include regions and times that are usually outside the heritage track of any given area. In exploring aesthetic culture, we use the concept of virtuosity to explode regional cultures and study culture change in a way that departs from most heritage models, which all too often attempt to place value on specific aesthetic forms. In the chapter on religion, the concept of revelation and co-revelation

<sup>8</sup> Again, the problems of “borderlands” and inter-European competition versus an indigenous center definition is a problem being confronted today; see Hinderaker and Horn, “Territorial Crossings,” pp. 410–412.

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likewise invite a comparative approach that cross-cuts regional and sectarian/religious divisions, but manages to intersect with the encounter models.

The last section of the book, dedicated to the revolutions that set most of the Americas free from European control, is much more conventional. Aside from being comparative and problem-oriented (the central problem being how revolutionary leaders dealt with forming alliances with subordinate groups they hoped to dominate), it is primarily narrative-driven and ultimately is a fundamental part of the collective memory of all the counties in question. Its basically chronological organization also reinforces its refocus on cherished stories of resistance and independence on a regional level. Only by working comparatively and being deliberately comprehensive does the work expand any individual heritage.

By abandoning much of the narrative approach so characteristic of heritage history, this book takes a deliberate chance in becoming confusing. There is little doubt that chronology is a powerful tool that helps bind diverse elements in any story, and narrative is more accessible than social-science-oriented comparative history. It is a chance I am taking, not just because I think it is the best strategy for achieving my goals, but also because it is much more in keeping with my own training and predilections as a historian. I hope that the work that follows allows inhabitants of all parts of the Atlantic basin to reconsider their collective memory.

## PART I

## THE ATLANTIC BACKGROUND

The formation of the Atlantic world was the result of Columbus's voyages to America and subsequent discoveries in navigation that allowed European sailors, for the first time in history, to reach every other part of the world. It is not any surprise, then, that 1492, the date of Columbus's crossing of the Atlantic, is a signal year in the history of the world, for the creation of the Atlantic world involved one of history's great intercontinental migrations and the most massive cultural encounter and engagement that the world had seen up to that time. It is easy to give too much credit for this to European achievement, for a great deal of what happened was as much accident and happy circumstance as it was part of a deliberate plan. And although Europeans initiated the Atlantic navigations, others also benefited from or exploited the opportunities that the navigations created.

Europeans did not possess decisive advantages over any of the people they met, even though their sailing craft were indeed capable of nautical achievements that no other culture up to that time was able to perform. But although we focus on the Atlantic as a maritime highway that connected cultures, the real stuff of human interaction took place on land. There, often enough, sailing advantages were not much help.

The book that follows examines the cultural consequences of European navigation and settlement outside of Europe in three parts. The first part traces the backgrounds of the three continental landmasses whose populations were brought into contact by those navigations. The second section examines the primarily political and social implications of the contact and traces the origins of a variety of Atlantic societies. Only in the third part are specifically cultural issues addressed, in an attempt to see how new ways of eating, drinking, speaking, and worshipping developed in the newly created Atlantic world.

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## I

**The Formation of the Atlantic World, 1250–1600**

## MASTERING THE ATLANTIC

It is easy to forget in the age of motorized travel that before the middle of the nineteenth century, the easiest, fastest, and cheapest way to move cargo of any significant size and people in any numbers was by water. Only extraordinary effort with horses and draught animals could move goods faster, and then only at considerably more expense. This simple fact goes a long way to explaining why river and sea travel was so important, and why humans worked hard to master maritime and nautical technology.

Given this fact, it may seem extraordinary that the Atlantic Basin was the last large body of water to be mastered for navigation. The vast Pacific was being crossed by Polynesians in increasingly more elaborate watercraft from the time of Christ, following remarkable breakthroughs in oceanic navigation and watercraft construction. The Indian Ocean was crisscrossed with trading boats long before the Common Era began, as the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, a guide to navigation of the first century, shows. Ancient navigators voyaged into the Mediterranean even before historical records marked their journeys, and Europe's northern seas saw ports and trade long before the Romans conquered Gaul.

It was not as though the Atlantic Basin was without those who might sail on it. Roman ships had ventured out into the Atlantic in the early centuries AD, exploring the north coast of Africa and visiting the Canary Islands, the "Fortunate Isles" of ancient geographers. Archaeologists confirm that even before Christ, people of the Orinoco Basin were building seaworthy craft and were beginning to move from the river into the Caribbean.<sup>1</sup> By the time European sailors visited its waters, there was substantial shipping there. Columbus saw a boat whose length he estimated at 96 palms, which carried, by his estimate,

<sup>1</sup> Desmond V. Nicholson, "Pre-Columbian Seafaring Capabilities in the Lesser Antillies," *Proceedings of the Sixth International Congress of Pre-Columbian Cultures of the Lesser Antillies* (Pointe-à-Pitre, 1976), 98–105.

150 people off Hispaniola; on another occasion, he saw a watercraft large enough to have a superstructure, a “house” on its decks. A quarter-century later, the first visitors to North America, such as Giovanni de Verrazano, noted quite a sophisticated maritime culture; one of the local boats that visited him was some twenty feet long, sailing outside the Chesapeake Bay in 1524. Native North Americans regularly traveled by water between modern-day New Jersey and the Chesapeake on boats powered by sails.<sup>2</sup>

European travelers to the Atlantic coast of Africa were regularly met by local watercraft. Early descriptions speak of craft that could hold up to a ton of cargo and dozens of sailors all along the coast. Alvise da Mosto, visiting the coast in 1455, thought the local watercraft were good “barche,” and he met a fleet of seventeen of them at one point.<sup>3</sup> His contemporary, Diogo Gomes, saw 2 such craft carrying 38 men each;<sup>4</sup> slightly later sources mention as many as 100 fighting men in such craft, which were as long as the European ships, along the coast from Senegal to modern-day Sierra Leone; others might carry several head of cattle.<sup>5</sup> The early traveler Duarte Pacheco Pereira marveled at the Ijo canoes he met off the coast of modern day Nigeria, equal in size and capacity to those he and others met off the coast of Senegal or Sierra Leone.<sup>6</sup>

For all the elaboration of watercraft found throughout the coastal Atlantic, even those cultures that made regular voyages on open seas, like the Europeans or people of the Caribbean basin, it was not until the fifteenth century that the Atlantic became a regular channel of navigation. There were crossings before, and even perhaps on some scale, but they had not made the Atlantic the sort of highway that other large bodies of water had become centuries earlier.

The best known of these early crossings were the north Atlantic explorations of the Scandinavians. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, they had succeeded in pioneering trade and settlement with Iceland, Greenland, and even North America. But as promising as this start had been, expanding ice and increasing difficulties in navigation made it only a temporary breakthrough. By 1400, the northerners had long since ceased to travel across the Atlantic, and their brave, tenuous settlements were abandoned.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Examples cited in Jack Forbes, *Africans and Native Americans: The Language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples* (2nd ed., Urbana and Chicago, 1993), pp. 6–14.

<sup>3</sup> Alvise da Mosto, “Mondo Novo,” in Tullia Gasparrini Leporace (ed.) *Le Navigazioni atlantiche del Veneziano Alvise da Mosto* (Milan, 1966), p. 82.

<sup>4</sup> “De prima inuentione Guine,” in António Baião (ed.) *O Manuscrito ‘Valentim Fernandes’* (Lisbon, 1940), fol. 280v (original foliation marked in this edition).

<sup>5</sup> Valentim Fernandes, “Descripçã da Cepta e sua Costa” (MS of ca. 1508), fols. 102v, 117v in Baião, *Manuscrito* (I have followed António Brásio’s reading of the text, which he presents, recording original foliation in *Monumenta Missionaria Africana*, 2nd series, 6 volumes, Lisbon, 1958–1991) 1: 672–739.

<sup>6</sup> Duarte Pacheco Pereira, *Esmeraldo De Situ Orbis* (MS of ca. 1506), Book 2, chapter 9, modern ed. from two eighteenth-century MSS, Augusto Epifânio da Silva Dias (Lisbon, 1905, reprinted 1975).

<sup>7</sup> For a good overview of the archaeology and documentation of these settlements, see Helge and Anne Stine Ingstad, *The Viking Discovery of America: The Excavation of a Norse Settlement in L’Anse aux Meadows* (New York, 2001).



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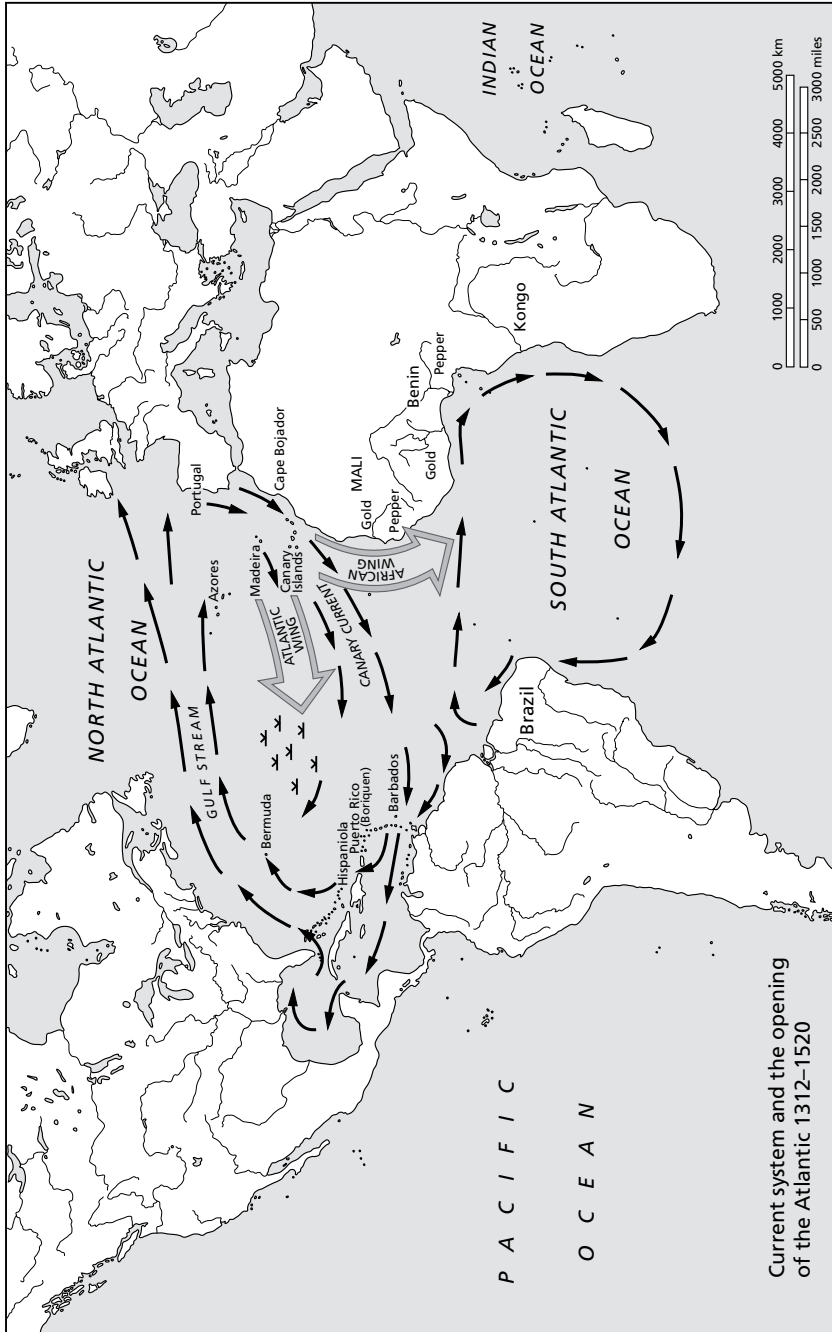
It would be surprising if Native American watercraft had not crossed the Atlantic in the opposite direction. The Caribbean in particular had an impressive tradition of building and using watercraft, and even inter-island voyages might go astray, thus resulting in accidental trans-Atlantic voyages. As early as the first century BCE, the Roman writer Pliny noted the shipwreck of some people whom he described, with strange unintended irony, as “Indians” who were wrecked in Germany, from, in his assessment, an ill-fated “trading voyage.” A medieval Spanish account notes the stranding of a man, “red and strange,” who arrived there from the east in a craft described as a hollowed out log. Unfortunately, he died before anyone could learn enough of his language to discover who he was or where he came from. When he was considering his own trans-Atlantic crossing, Christopher Columbus collected information about human travelers coming to Europe. He had learned of strange people arriving in Ireland from the west, while settlers in the Azores Islands of the central Atlantic told of boats with dead men in them washing up on their shores. One of these was an elaborate craft with a house on it. While none of this evidence is strong enough to confirm even accidental voyages from the Americas to Europe, it provides a circumstantial case.<sup>8</sup>

Africans may also have sought a highway across the Atlantic and not just used its shores. The celebrated case of Mansa Qu, ruler of the powerful medieval empire of Mali, is quite explicit. Mansa Musa, his successor to the throne, revealed the story of his mysterious predecessor’s Atlantic adventures to his host Abu’l Hasan Ali b. Amir Hajib, when staying in Cairo while the pious Muslim emperor took a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324. As they were chatting about succession to power in Mali, Musa revealed to his startled host that his predecessor “did not believe that it was impossible to discover the furthest limit of the Western [Atlantic] Ocean and wished vehemently to do so.” He equipped a voyage with 200 ships of men and provisions, and when it failed, he followed it with a second voyage. “Then that sultan got ready 2,000 ships,” Musa told the official, “one thousand for himself and the men whom he took with him and 1,000 for water and provisions. He left me to deputize for him and embarked on the Western Ocean with his men. That was the last we saw of him and all those who were with him.”<sup>9</sup> More than one scholar has wondered what might have become of such a voyage, and it certainly seems unlikely that at least some of these craft would not have made the trip safely, if the voyage did indeed take place as Mansa Musa related.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Forbes, *Africans and Native Americans*, pp. 7–14.

<sup>9</sup> Al-‘Umari, *Masalik al absar fi mamalik al-amsar*, text of 1337/38 (BN Paris, MS 5868, fols. 32b–33a [other MSS exist]) as translated in Nehemiah Levtzion and J. F. P. Hopkins, *Corpus of Arabic Texts of West African History* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 268–269.

<sup>10</sup> It is possible that the voyage was a means of covering up a coup d’etat by Musa, who was not in direct line to succeed, as was clearly related by shaykh ‘Uthman, a fakih of Ghana, who told ibn Khaldun during ‘Uthman’s pilgrimage in 1394 that a line of successors followed the founder of the dynasty up to Qu, “then after him his son Muhammad b. Qu. After him their kingship passed from the line of Mari Jata to that of his brother Abu Bakr in the person of Mansa Musa b Abi



Current system and the opening of the Atlantic 1312–1520

MAP I. Atlantic Currents.