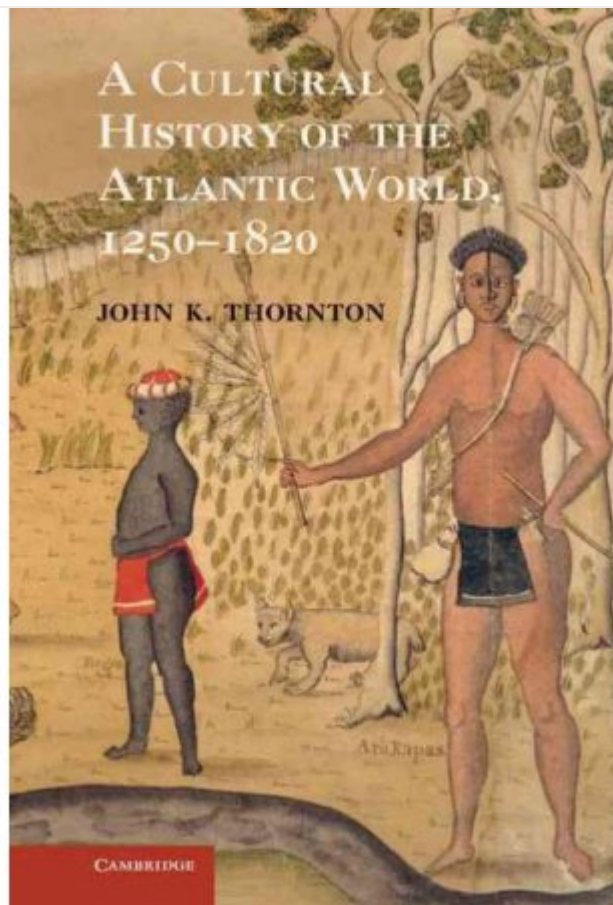


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A Cultural History of the Atlantic World, 1250–1820



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Reviewed Work(s)

A Cultural History of the Atlantic World, 1250–1820. By John K. Thornton (Cambridge University Press, 2012). Pp 558. Cloth, \$90.00. Paper, \$29.99.

As Professor of History and African American Studies at Boston University, John K. Thornton has done much to bring to light Atlantic African History.^[1] Thornton's new narrative stands out from other transatlantic histories because of the increased attention he gives to Africans and Native Americans in the larger story of European colonization. Thornton's ultimate purpose is to provide greater context for the relationships that developed between Atlantic cultures by illustrating how various beliefs and customs blended into unique American identities.

Thornton wants to change Americans' collective memory, which he argues is skewed by its narrow focus on Europeans and a few Euro-centric, key events. While these turning points are in themselves important to the interpretation of Atlantic history, they often are presented in their simplest forms, without many references to non-Europeans. He argues that historians have often overemphasized the effect of Europe in the Atlantic Basin, overlooking the extent to which the colonizers depended on and compromised with the indigenous peoples. This exchange affected not only the political structures that developed in western Africa and the Americas, but also the hybrid cultures that continue to exist.

In his endeavor to write "big history," Thornton attempts to identify broad themes without erasing situational complexities. Although he neatly packages his topics, he tries to allow the stories to speak for themselves and in so doing refrains from drawing any strict conclusions that might erase the intricacy. He does not presume to be a moral judge of his characters. Rather, as a social scientist, he attempts to bring readers to a better understanding of American heritage.

Developed originally as a guide to a course on comparative history of the Atlantic Basin, the book narrows the interactions of four continents over the course of 600 years into an intelligible 500 pages. What holds the text together is not so much chronology as topics of cultural development. Thornton's course notes, tested in the classroom and

enhanced by references to recent scholarship, retain elements of a college text. Yet, unlike a textbook, Thornton bases his work on his interpretation of primary sources rather than on secondary ones. As Thornton's scope is huge, he does not include a bibliography, but relies on footnotes which in themselves are useful as springboards to further research. Though a scholarly work, even a novice history student could enjoy the interesting anecdotes of *A Cultural History* without being bogged down by academic language and references.

Thornton divides his book into four sections. Part I, by far the shortest, briefly discusses the pre-Columbian Atlantic navigations, accidental crossings of Native Americans, purposeful attempts by Africans, and the more celebrated voyages of the Norseman. From the very beginning Thornton gives credit to non-European actors in the Atlantic world with the purpose of showing how the pre-Columbian world contributed and prepared for the maritime revolution.

Part II provides background for three major ethnic groups before they had any major contact with Europeans. Thornton's comparative summary of developing Atlantic cultures focuses primarily on politics and society. He contends that it is important to note the recognition of a common humanity shared by Europeans and Africans in the daily and annual cycles of agriculture and self-sufficiency. Thornton argues against the famous French historian Fernand Braudel, a leader of the Annales School, who stated that there was a gap between "developed" and "underdeveloped" areas of the world before the eighteenth century. Braudel's fault, according to Thornton, lies in his tendency to force modern statistics on the past, which in doing so, ignores the rough equality of life expectancies and infant mortality rates in the Atlantic world before the age of industry.

In Part III, Thornton divides pre-Columbian America into political-social organizations—from "free associations—to complex states, to better understand how European conquest was influenced by the indigenous administrative structures. According to Thornton's definition, "conquest" implies the takeover of an established government in which Europeans often maintained the old state system out of convenience. Thornton attempts to discredit arguments that "developed" civilizations always had superior military forces, citing the defeats of Europeans by Africans and Native Americans. Military

preeminence through firearms, horses, and steel were not enough to account for conquest. In Thornton's narrative, even European diseases take second place to alliances made with indigenous peoples.

Thornton contends that native peoples had agency in assisting with and even in benefiting from European conquests. This argument contradicts those authors who characterize all indigenous groups as victims of Europeans (see David Stannard's *American Holocaust* and Kirkpatrick Sale's *The Conquest of Paradise*). Thornton's more balanced approach not only better expresses the political associations of the early modern Atlantic World, but also describes uniquely American customs. Portugal's reliance on Kongo to help establish the colony of Angola, along with the Portuguese practice of intermarrying with African ruling elites to maintain their authority, reveals how Europeans and natives worked symbiotically to establish or maintain power.

Unlike "conquest," "colonization" took place where there was no powerful state to conquer, and the process of colonization consisted of moving settlers alongside indigenous groups where European law and order could be more directly imposed on the natives. In these areas, Europeans could not use indigenous structures to rule. This was especially true in Brazil and the Caribbean, where complex situations developed. Europeans were forced to work closely with natives to gain control and develop slave-worked sugar plantations. Eventually Europeans would dominate, but initially they were required to make concessions.

"Contact," Thornton's third process of encounter, describes those situations where there was no change to the existing state and Europeans were forced to coexist as equals—even as inferiors. Examples of this can be seen in Africa and the New Mexican frontier, where little substantial change was effected by Europeans. Certain areas were never fully conquered or colonized, but remained borderlands. Most of the African coast was negotiated as centers of business transactions where European-controlled ports depended on the benevolence of African kingdoms or at least on good trade agreements. Even in the Americas, European maps more often portrayed claims to rather than clear dominance of the Pampas in Argentina, Mato Grosso in Brazil, or northern frontier of New Spain. These areas were governed by what Thornton calls "free associations." The real problem for would-be European colonizers was

that decentralized political and economic power meant that though they were victorious in battles, absolute conquest lay out of reach.

In Part IV, which contains the last and most original chapters of the book, Thornton explores cultural transitions from liminal states into new national expressions. Thornton divides this part into three sections based on “hard” culture (language), “soft” culture (aesthetics) and that culture that is in-between (religion). Although Thornton criticizes (along with other scholars) many of the specifics of David Hackett Fisher’s “germ theory” of the perseverance of English identity in North America, he agrees that the concept of “England” as conserved through the English language kept the English culture intact, despite Englishmen’s frequent interactions with non-English speakers. In contrast, the African diaspora divided linguistic groups. The slave trade separated African natives from their kinsmen, and forced African men and women into new cultural settings. African slaves who settled in multilingual communities lost their indigenous languages within one or two generations. Native Americans could choose to reject European languages, but had to suffer the economic and political consequences of separation. If they decided to embrace it as a tool for advancement, this often meant a linguistic and perhaps cultural sacrifice.

Unlike language, art and music can change quickly. Thornton posits that art can be appreciated without a long process of training. Aesthetics can be mixed to create a transition of power, so that despite linguistic differences, art can act as a unifying force. Europeans were shocked by the colors and risqué dresses of Spanish Peru and Portuguese Brazil. Non-elites, both in Africa and the Americas, tended to accept non-traditional clothing and music—interchangeable with indigenous garb depending on the setting—as they developed more contact with European society. Thornton argues that the soft nature of music and dancing mixed African, European, and Indian styles into a new dynamic American version. .

Religion falls in between the softness of art and the hardness of language and in its own way preserves, produces, and changes both. At the time of colonization, Christian Europe splintered, allowing for the development of a variety of religious expressions throughout the Atlantic World. Thornton discusses how the theological debates of sixteenth century

Europe translated into American forms of Christianity that developed through the eighteenth century.

The final summary builds upon the previous chapters' discussions of how unique cultures developed in different areas of the Americas and on how that translated, after contact with Enlightenment arguments for self-determination, into revolutions and new nations. Just as the original Atlantic conquests could be partially seen in terms of local civil wars, so too the wars of independence echoed not just external struggle but also internal tension that would make or break the revolutionary attempt. This meant that marginalized people could tilt the scales in one direction or the other, again forcing the elite to compromise in order to gain or maintain supremacy.

The power of Thornton's text is in the scope of his examples, and the contrast that emerges between politics and society in Atlantic cultural integration. The most important contributions of this book are Thornton's acknowledgment of non-European agency and his discussion of the transformations of language, art, and religion as backdrops for modern American culture. Through these comparisons, Thornton shows not only how these cultures have evolved, but also the natural connection between the peoples of five hundred years ago and those who inhabit the Atlantic World today.

Zachary Wingerd

Baylor University

[1] John K. Thornton, *The Kingdom of Kongo: Civil War and Transition, 1641-1718* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983); John K. Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa, 1500-1800* (London: University College of London Press, 1999).



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