Foreign-Language Scholarship and the Teaching of United States History

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In recent years I have spent a good deal of time examining the transnational turn in American History, on which I have an uncommon perspective.[1] It is a particular pleasure for me to discuss the subject with reference to the work of Thomas Bender, first because Professor Bender has been a central figure in developing this approach to the nation's past (or I should say in redeveloping it) and also because I have been regularly exposed to his ideas over the past several years as a fellow member of the editorial board of the *Journal for Transnational American Studies (JTAS)*.

It might be useful to start by recalling the circumstances behind Professor Bender's joining *JTAS*. I should explain that our editorial board members are asked to read all submissions once they pass through outside review. As the sole historian on the original editorial team, I had the heaviest burden in reading through selections, as I was singlehandedly charged with identifying historical errors or suggesting further readings. Because of this I repeatedly complained to my colleagues, American literature and culture specialists all, about the need for greater historical expertise on the board. My colleagues finally told me that they were prepared to add another historian, and they asked who might be available to join. I suggested Tom Bender. My colleagues were well aware of his formidable scholarly reputation, and agreed that he would be a dream candidate, but they asked, "Do you really think he would agree to join?" I replied that I had no idea, but I explained that I knew him—though without revealing that he had once been my PhD advisor—and offered to invite him on behalf of the board. I added that if our dream candidate declined I would then seek to recruit a lesser scholar. (I actually said, "I will swing for the fences on the first at-bat," an expression that may have perplexed some of my foreign colleagues not schooled in baseball metaphors.) To my surprise, Tom Bender quickly accepted the invitation. During his time on the board, he was a model colleague. He took on an equal share of work, and

despite his heavy schedule he was often the first to respond to other board members' queries. He was always insightful in his comments.

But to bring forward the Bender/ *JTAS* connection, I am often asked how I got interested in transnationalism, as a means of determining its relation to my own work. Interestingly, the 2014 book *Historians Across Borders,* produced by a collective of Americanists from across Europe, includes a section (cowritten by the outstanding French Americanist Nicolas Barreyre and the distinguished German scholar Manfred Berg) that discusses the distinctive way in which historians in the United States, unlike those in Europe, tend to bring in their personal narratives in order to clarify their own positionality in regard to their subject.[2]

While this is not in fact how I usually approach my historical writing, I must beg leave here to fall into the perceived national style. My positionality is vital in this case because I did not become engaged in the question of transnational viewpoints as a disinterested scholar. Rather, my interest in the question grows organically out of my personal experience, as a US-born and -educated Americanist teaching in a French-language institution outside the United States.

In 2001, I joined the History Department at l'Université du Québec à Montréal (UQÀM). They needed a specialist in United States history who could teach in French, the main language spoken in Quebec. Before contacting me they had apparently conducted an initial search among Canadian historians, to whom they were required by law to grant preference, but had been unable to locate a qualified candidate—at that time there were few French-speaking Canadian researchers who focused on US history. As a result, they reopened the search to international scholars, and I was selected. It was a perfect job for me. I had loved the French language since my early years, and had enjoyed several leisure trips to Montreal. As an undergraduate I had been a double major in History and French and had spent my junior year studying in Paris and acquiring a level of fluency in the French language. Although my French had grown rusty in the following years, it was sufficiently serviceable to get me the job (well, that plus the fact that I was the only candidate who made it to the final round).

Once I arrived in Montreal, the language question hit me squarely in the face. UQÀM is a very proudly francophone institution, which means not only that all classes are conducted in French, but that required course readings are generally in French as well, at least at the undergraduate level. True, English-language texts are allowed when there is no French alternative available, but I was given to understand that it would be *mal vu* to use them, and even graduate students (who can be required to read English texts) sometimes complain when they have to go too much outside their comfort zone of French-language material.

As I started to prepare my classes, I realized with a growing sense of panic that I had no idea how to compile a course syllabus in French. Some English books were available in translation, of course, but there were wide gaps in the literature. For example, C. Vann Woodward's book *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, often described as the most-cited volume in US history writing, has never been translated.[3] Indeed,

Woodward's only work to appear in French translation is his study of the Battle of Leyte Gulf![4] Although I had done some primary research during my graduate school years in foreign-language sources produced by immigrant communities, I had read virtually no US history books in any language other than English. There were no foreign-language works on the reading list for my history comprehensive exams, and it never occurred to me to investigate whether foreign scholars might have anything to contribute to the field.

It soon dawned on me that if I wanted to compile a reasonable syllabus and reading list, then I would have to learn the French-language literature. Thus I began several years of catching up. I consulted reviews of French-language books, and began to look through syllabi of older courses, on library shelves, and in online catalogues. Most of all, I made it my business to go through a great many used bookstores in Montreal (and even more in Paris, during a series of work trips I made to the French capital) and collect all the relevant books I could find there. I did this not just to have material for my course syllabi, but also so that I would have available volumes on American history written in French to lend to my students for their course papers, given that our college library had a less than complete collection in the field. I bought so many books that I could not store them easily at home. Thus, I made a Solomonic decision of sorts. I opted to keep my English-language books, including those needed for my research projects, in my library at home. My French books, in contrast, I elected to store in my university office, which soon became a kind of mini-lending library. At the start of each term, I tell students of the collections in my office and invite them to come borrow books for course assignments.

The reading lists for my courses are composed of both translations of American books and works written originally in French (generally produced by people from France, with a smattering of authors from Quebec and elsewhere). Even in my graduate-level courses, where students are expected to read English fluently and where I may assign English-language readings freely, I now try to maintain a roughly equal ratio of English to French works in the syllabus. I find that teaching the French-language historiography entails special advantages for students in Quebec. As long as people in the larger society seek the bulk of their information about the United States in French, French-language works represent a special tool to reach this particular public more directly. Having access to a dual historiography will give students a more rounded education, plus (I hope) an advantage on the job market.

Still, beyond any question of specific social responsibility or professional advantage to my students, it has been a source of great joy for me to integrate foreign-language scholarship on the United States into my own research, and to share it with others. It must be said that in any number of subfields, whether it is African American history, history of Louisiana, history of immigrant groups (notably from France) or Native American history, French and other foreign scholars have made signal contributions to US historiography.

More broadly, foreign scholars naturally have a different point of view on the United States.[5] For one thing, they bring to bear a detailed knowledge of their own societies, and their work often integrates a useful comparative dimension. If we understand the international mission formed under the leadership of Great Britain for the interdiction of the African slave trade in the early nineteenth century, and how that body clashed with the United States over sovereignty, we might gain some perspective on the problems that international peace missions led by the USA have nowadays. Or if we examine the international contacts and networks forged by Black writers such as William Wells Brown, Alexander Crummell or Victor Séjour (or Alexandre Dumas père, himself a mixed-race Black author whose semiautobiographical novel, *George*, appeared in the US as early as 1847), it may allow us to see in a new light the life of Barack Obama, a Black president of the United States who moved between such "exotic" places as Hawai'i, Indonesia, Africa, and Chicago.

In sum, United States historians have much to learn from foreign colleagues, both because the latter explore less-studied aspects of America and because their distance from their subject of study affords them a broader field of vision. The power to build cross-border dialogue and to benefit from shared insights seems to me a vital aspect of any transnational turn.

Notes

1 Greg Robinson, "Transnational American Studies," in *Encyclopedia of American Studies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), view online at https://eas-ref.press.jhu.edu/view?aid=792&from=browse&link=browse%3Fmethod%3Dalpha%26letter%3DT%26type%3D; Greg Robinson, "Francophone Historians of the United States: A Voice in the Wilderness?" *Perspectives on History* 53, no. 3 (March 1, 2015): 37–38, https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/march-2015/francophone-historians-of-the-united-states.

2 Nicolas Barreyre, Michael Heale, Stephen Tuck, and Cécile Vidal, eds., *Historians Across Borders: Writing American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 79–81 et passim.

3 C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955).

4 C. Vann Woodward, *La bataille de Leyte* (Paris: Les Deux Sirènes, 1947).

5 On the ways in which Canadian scholars see United States History differently, see Greg Robinson, "The Culture of Transnationalism," in "Transnationalism in American History: An International View," Marco Mariano and Ferdinando Fasce, eds., special issue of *Rivista di Studi Americani/RSA Journal* 25 (2014): 148–53.

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