

Transnational History from the Survey to the Dissertation

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When I arrived at New York University in 2003, I had never heard the term “transnational history.” In fact, I am not sure when I first realized that not all historians were interested in looking across national borders, and that doing so constituted a particular method or approach to historical inquiry. I had been a History and Russian Studies major as an undergraduate, and even though my thesis was on a quintessentially American subject (the Beat writers), I chose my courses by their thematic topics—writers, revolutions, social movements—rather than by national or regional focus. In my master’s program in historic preservation, my coursework focused on American architectural history and preservation practices, but my advisor spent much of his time working on preservation projects in India and Cambodia, so I never had the sense that what I was learning was relevant only in the United States. By the time I ended up at NYU, I knew I wanted to write about cities; I had applied to US history programs (my language skills were abysmal), but it frankly never crossed my mind that my graduate school courses might not be as geographically broad as my college courses had been. All of which is to say, while I might not have known what transnational history was when I began my PhD program, my education up to that point had prepared me to be receptive to it.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, NYU was an exciting place for anyone working on transnational, global, or comparative topics, and I was exceptionally fortunate to have Tom Bender as my advisor. It was during this time that Tom published *A Nation Among Nations*, Jane Burbank and Fred Cooper wrote *Empires in World History*, and faculty from different geographic specializations frequently team-taught courses.¹ My classmates, too, had wide-ranging interests in how people and ideas moved around and, even though we classified ourselves as Americanists or Latin Americanists or Africanists, we never felt intellectually constrained by those geographical boundaries. My view of what it meant to teach, and write, US history was

thus formed in what in retrospect may have been something of a unique historiographical moment, in the discipline and in my department. Unlike the other contributors to this symposium, I never had to give much thought to how the transnational turn might affect my already-crammed syllabi. When I started teaching my own courses, I simply designed them with transnational and global approaches in mind, because that was the way the courses I took as a graduate student were constructed.

Which brings me to my first topic: incorporating transnational approaches into the US history curriculum. During my first year at Wayne State University, where I am now an associate professor of history, I taught a general education course on the US since 1945. One day, I printed out my midterm exam—a standard example of the genre, which asked students to identify events and historical figures and write short essays—and when I retrieved it from the printer, I noticed that a colleague who taught the equivalent course on world history since 1945 had printed his exam as well. As I nosily skimmed his questions, I saw that with a couple of exceptions (the Bandung Conference was not on my exam), our exams were surprisingly similar. This was not because my colleague, a historian of China, was unusually focused on US history; it was because I had posed questions that asked students to draw connections between, for example, social movements in the US and around the world. The similarities between his “world” history exam and my “American” history exam raise, for me, the question of how transnational approaches affect what we might call the “core narrative” of US history.

The idea that there is a core narrative of US history seems to remain the most entrenched in the US history survey. A cursory review of history syllabi from a range of institutions suggests that when we teach survey courses we are most likely reproduce the chronology and topics from the syllabi we taught as graduate students and in the courses we took as undergraduates. Many of us explain Manifest Destiny in terms of settler colonialism. We might mention the Atlantic crossings of the Progressive era. We are quite likely to describe the global or transnational contexts of topics close to our own areas of specialization. By and large, however, we tell stories about things that happened within the borders of the contemporary United States, and we do so even when the lives of the people at the center of those stories were not circumscribed by geography. When we talk about Black Power in the survey, for instance, we do not necessarily follow Stokely Carmichael to Guinea. Transnational approaches typically show up later, in intermediate or advanced courses, and for good reason: there is still a tremendous amount of work to do to revise popular narratives of US history that remain overly focused on dead white men. Trying to rewrite those narratives and simultaneously move beyond the nation-state seems too ambitious for a survey course—how could we possibly fit it all in?

But the best transnational histories, or those that put US history in a global context, also help us think about the diversity of experience in American history, and they can do so without entirely dispensing with a national framework. Bender’s *A Nation Among Nations* provides an excellent example: While it is widely assigned in world

history courses, it is indisputably a work of American history. In it, the nation is decentered but not ignored. Columbus's "discovery" of America becomes one moment in an age of oceanic exploration; the American Revolution is merely one of many in an age of revolutions. In my survey course, I, too, try to decenter the nation-state without jettisoning it entirely. I assign a slim volume on the US since 1945 that presents a fairly standard, nationally-bounded version of postwar US history, and I use lectures and supplementary readings to situate the topics at hand in transnational or global contexts.² I assign texts such as Mary Dudziak's *Cold War Civil Rights*, Douglas Little's *American Orientalism*, and selections from readers on global 1968 or the revolutions of 1989.³ Students watch the documentary *Black Power Mix Tape* and parse the differences between interpretations of Black Power activists offered in Swedish news footage and US media coverage from the period.⁴ They read articles by Canadian scholars on topics such as why the US and Canadian approaches to providing government-sponsored health care, which emerged from the same Progressive-era debates about social welfare, diverged in the 1960s.⁵

My approach asks students to think of US history as part of world history and discourages tendencies to essentialize or exceptionalize it, and in my experience the students respond very well. This is in part, I think, because my students are incredibly diverse: many are first-generation college students and the children or grandchildren of immigrants or, increasingly, immigrants themselves. Wayne State offers discounted tuition to Ontario residents, which means that some of my students are not only Canadian, they commute to class across an international border. Contextualizing US history beyond the nation-state helps students who did not grow up in the United States see their history as part of American history. It seems to me that this approach does not, in fact, leave anything out—it merely represents a different way of framing the same topics that most of us address in a survey course. And when my students end up in intermediate courses on, for example, the Civil Rights movement or gender and sexuality, my colleagues find them just as prepared as students who took a more conventional version of the survey.

If the barrier to reframing the way we teach American history is in many ways an intellectual one—trying to decide which valuable real estate on our syllabi to cede to transnational approaches—the barrier to expanding research on transnational topics may be largely material. This brings me to my second topic: graduate student research, which seems a fitting way to contribute to a symposium inspired by Tom Bender's academic career. When I talk about Tom to colleagues and students, I find myself most often speaking about his generosity as an advisor and his deep commitment to graduate education—to his own students, of course, but also to those in the department and profession more broadly. A host of new books and recent dissertations demonstrates that graduate students (and certainly not just Americanists) have shown substantial interest in transnational and global dissertation topics. Job postings, too, reflect a demand for Americanists to teach well beyond the geographical borders of

the nation-state. But in a period of relative austerity within the academy, financial support can be hard to come by for graduate students who want to pursue these kinds of projects. It used to be that Americanists could get away with writing transnational histories primarily from English-language sources in US archives. As the field has matured, that is no longer true. Even among Americanists, who can be somewhat provincial compared to scholars studying other parts of the world, ideas have changed about what constitutes a legitimate transnational research agenda. We now expect students to conduct multilingual, multiarchival research, but as Lara Putnam has written, “[y]ou should not have to use archives in five countries to get a job.”⁶

If combating a certain provincialism was the major challenge facing a first and even second generation of scholars working on transnational topics, the institutional and economic barriers facing graduate students who set out to pursue transnational topics pose a trial for the next. I see three primary constraints on Americanists who want to conduct international research as graduate students (constraints that are operative for students in other geographical specializations, as well, though to varying degrees). First, archival research in multiple countries can significantly extend the dissertation process at a time when most universities are trying to shorten time-to-degree, which can in turn create an unmanageable financial burden in terms of tuition, fees, and research travel costs. Second, transnational projects are not always legible to the grantmakers who provide major external fellowships, particularly when the projects involve research on more than one continent, in countries that do not share a border, or that did not have a colonial relationship during the period of study. Third, Americanists often come to graduate school without the ability to conduct research in a second language, and institutional support for language training has almost disappeared in recent years. This can leave students in the position of having to learn a language on their own, or on their own dime, a prospect that may not be tenable for all (or most) students. The net result is that transnational projects, with multiarchival research in multiple languages, have largely remained the purview of students at elite institutions, because the barriers to entry are too high and too expensive for students elsewhere.

In her *AHR* essay, Putnam extends these concerns further, and wonders whether or not graduate students should be encouraged to pursue transnational topics at all. Transnational histories used to be written only by senior scholars, she points out: by people who had accumulated decades of knowledge about the historical and historiographical contexts in which their topics were situated. “Can deep familiarity with multiple place-specific historiographies be gained as quickly as the profession now seems to demand of its young?” Putnam asks. “And if not, is sending ABDs off to collect a globe-trotting plethora of primary sources that they can at best read with a tin ear really the best use of their energies?”⁷ These are provocative questions and useful cautions. They do not have easy answers. There are trade-offs for individual scholars and for American history as a collective enterprise. But if one goal of that collective enterprise is to deprovincialize and deexceptionalize the United States, to truly depict

it as a nation among nations, transnational history has to happen at all scales: the secondary school classroom, the survey course, the graduate seminar, the dissertation, the first book, the fifth book. The intellectual rewards of doing so, as this and the other essays collected here suggest, are tremendous for students and faculty alike.

Notes

¹ Thomas Bender, *A Nation Among Nations: America's Place in World History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006); Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

² H. W. Brands, *America since 1945* (New York: Pearson, 2011).

³ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Padraic Kenney, *1989: Democratic Revolutions at the Cold War's End: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Bedford St. Martin's, 2009); Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Jeremi Suri, *The Global Revolutions of 1968* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007).

⁴ Directed by Göran Hugo Olsson, with Annika Rogell, Erykah Badu, Harry Belafonte, Shirley Chisholm, Stokely Carmichael, Angela Y. Davis, Louis Farrakhan, Taleb Kweli, Huey P. Newton, Abiodun Oyewole, Robin D. G. Kelley, Bobby Seale, Joslyn Barnes, Danny Glover, Axel Arnö, Questlove, Om'Mas Keith, et al., *The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975: A Documentary in 9 Chapters* (Orland Park, IL: MPI Home Video, 2011).

⁵ Antonia Maioni, "Parting at the Crossroads: The Development of Health Insurance in Canada and the United States," *Comparative Politics* 29, no. 4 (1997): 411–31.

⁶ Lara Putnam, "The Transnational and the Text-Searchable: Digitized Sources and the Shadows They Cast," *The American Historical Review* 121, no. 2 (April 2016): 401.

⁷ Putnam, "The Transnational and the Text-Searchable," 394.

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