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The United States in World History: Transnationalism v. Exceptionalism

Transnational approaches to American history are older than we tend to realize, and exceptionalism is more recent than one might appreciate. In the nineteenth century, American historians and foreign scholars of the United States (most notably Alexis de Tocqueville) brought transnational perspectives to the study of the United States, on the assumption that the United States was in world history. After World War II, Tocqueville's great *Democracy in America* was thought to be an exceptionalist analysis. In fact, Tocqueville used "exceptional" only once, and he made it clear that it was temporary and circumstantial. His understanding of modern history was based on the emergence and expansion of individualism (a word he coined). It was a universal for him, and the United States exemplified it. In fact, his equally notable history of the French Revolution identified the emergence of individualism and growing equality as the fundamental causes of the revolts (Tocqueville [1835, 1840] 1945, I,5-15; Tocqueville [1856] 1955; Bender 1981, xiii-xix, xxvii-xxxix).

Once history became an academic discipline, the tendency in universities was to support more or less exclusively the study of the national history. The study of the larger world to the extent it was incorporated into academe was located in regional study centers focused on their empires. There were, therefore, few opportunities to study the United States in the twentieth-century European university. But there were certain kinds of connected history – immigration history, for example. It connected the sending nation with the receiving nation. Diplomacy enabled similar connections, as did the study of Atlantic reform movements from anti-slavery to women's rights and temperance (Bender, 2014 166-68).

The case of literature was similar. Literary studies were national and, like history, intended to make national citizens or patriots in the newly

formed nation-states (Weber, 1976). Comparative literature emerged only in the 1930s, partly by way of exiled German scholars, most notably Eric Auerbach, whose classic *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, published in 1946, was largely written while in exile in Istanbul, escaping the German racial laws. The humanities (history, literary studies, musicology, art history) were agents of the nation state and Eurocentric. As Henry Lewis Gates long ago pointed out, they excluded Africa and the colonial world, those people not organized in nation-states. Not until after 1945, when they became nation-states, did studies of their history, literature, and arts gradually find a place in the humanities disciplines, as opposed to anthropology.

But there was one path in European universities for historians and literary scholars interested in American history and literature. Often they were located in practice-oriented English language centers, again mostly after 1945. This location had implications for scholars in American studies: they lacked the status of being in the research-oriented disciplinary departments. It was a form of marginalization. But wherever they were located in the structure of European universities, they took advantage of these units in a way that advanced transnational approaches to literary and historical studies.

This professional strategy was to link their national field to its American counterpart. Whether poetic forms or social reform movements such comparative or transnational studies opened the way to studies of America. They were pioneers of American Studies in Europe; they wrote transnational history *avant la lettre*. This strategy pointed toward particular themes: immigration from one's own nation to the U.S., foreign relations with the U.S., or Atlantic reform movements, whether anti-slavery or women's rights and other movements for change. Frank Thistlewaite, who would found the British American Studies Association in 1961, used this approach in his book, *The Anglo-American Connection in the Early Nineteenth Century*.

More recently and more influentially, the Australian scholar Ian Tyrrell, began his career with studies of international women's reform movements and then went on to write a transnational environmental history (Tyrrell 1991, Tyrrell 1999). Once again, he published an important interpretation

of what he titled *The Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective Since 1789* (Tyrrell 2007). In the past two decades there has been an explosion of transnational approaches to American history by European scholars. *Historians Across Borders: Writing American History in a Global Age* provides a rich history and analysis of such recent scholarship. Each chapter is jointly written by an international group of European scholars.

There is also a pre-history of transnational historical studies in the United States. The famous nineteenth-century literary gentlemen who wrote the magnificent multivolume archive-based histories that still warrant reading were transnational in approach. These “men of letters” – George Bancroft, Francis Parkman, and Henry Adams – all used archives on both sides of the Atlantic and wrote transnational narratives.

Among the transnational aspects in Bancroft’s history of the American Revolution – which have been missed in all the important United States scholarship on the American Revolution since World War II – is his account of the contribution of Fredrick the Great to the American cause in 1776. This Prussian king secured for the Americans the crucial provision of an open European port that was essential for military and other supplies as well as markets for American exports. Even more remarkable, Bancroft’s transnational or Atlantic conception of the era’s revolutions moved him to incorporate the rebellion of Tupac Amaru in Peru (IV,233, X, 456). This revolution, which coincided with the creole revolt in Buenos Aires and the River Plate region, almost brought down Spanish rule. One of the Spanish king’s ministers later wrote that the “entire vice royalty of Peru and Part of the Rio de la Plata was nearly lost” (qtd. in Bender, 2006 76). Along with Haiti, this South American revolution in the age of revolution had been overlooked by twentieth century professional historians of the age of democratic revolutions. That is changing.

Professional historians have recently recognized the existence of the Haitian Revolution, including its importance for the United States. Yet Henry Adams, to my mind the greatest historian of the United States, grasped it long ago, in the 1880s. He claimed that the Constitution and the Louisiana Purchase were the two most important events in United States history, and for the latter he gave credit not to Jefferson, the usual attribution, but to Toussaint L’Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution.

Louisiana was envisioned as the source of foodstuffs for Haiti, which had become per square mile the richest agriculture economy on earth. Without the sugar island, the foodstuffs produced in Louisiana were of no value to Napoleon's empire, so he unloaded it to the Americans. For the new American republic it opened the possibility of a continental nation. Adams insisted that the "prejudice of race alone blinded the American people to the debt they owed to the desperate courage of five hundred thousand Haytian negroes [sic] who would not be enslaved" (I, 311, 334-5). Francis Parkman made transnationalism the very point of his epic history, evident in its overall title, *France and England in North America*.

The early American academic historians of the United States were equally attentive to its transnational and global dimensions. Herbert Baxter Adams, who created in the United States the first modern Ph.D. program based on the German seminar system when Johns Hopkins was founded in 1876, deeply believed that American history should be addressed in transnational and comparative fashion. In fact, he refused the Chair in American history, demanding a Chair in Institutional History, so he could connect and compare American history with other histories (Holt 146).

His student, Frederick Jackson Turner, learned the lesson. In 1891 – a year before his famous frontier address at the Chicago World's Fair – he spoke to a convention of Wisconsin teachers of history. He urged upon them that idea that "in history there are only artificial divisions" of time and space. "No country," he explained, "can be understood without taking account of all the past; it is also true that we cannot select a stretch of land and say we will limit our study to this land; for local history can only be understood in the light of the history of the world." "Each [nation] acts on each... Ideas commodities even, refuse the bounds of a nation." He added: "This is true especially in the modern world with its complex commerce and means of intellectual connection" (20-21).

Turner was not alone in this line of thought. Albert Bushnell Hart of Harvard insisted to his students (in the first of seven rules he imposed on them) that "no nation has a *history* disconnected from the rest of the world: the United States is closely related in point of time, with previous ages, in point of space, with other civilized countries" (qtd. in Higham 161). No historian better exemplified such histories than Hart's own student W.E.B.

DuBois, who brought a global perspective to history and contemporary affairs.

In 1932, Herbert Bolton, a Berkeley historian who had been a student of Frederick Jackson Turner, used his presidential address at the American Historical Association in Toronto, the only time the Association met outside of the United States, to promote transnational history. He urged historians to recognize the expansive history he called “The Epic of Greater America,” referring to the western hemisphere (448-74). Others of Turner’s students linked the Caribbean with United States history. Studies of Latin America and the United States have grown since Bolton’s generation, and they are becoming increasingly important. But, strangely, to this day almost no United States historians cross the northern border – and Canadian historians are just as hesitant to look south.

Given what I have said so far, two questions seem to be before us: If American historical writing was transnational since the mid-nineteenth century, when and why did it stop? And, why did it start again?

Daniel Rodgers has dated the emergence of American ideology of exceptionalism to the 1940s, when, not wholly incidentally, American Studies as a field was institutionalized with the American Studies Association and the establishment of the *American Quarterly*. Rodgers has also made the amusing point that the precise term “exceptionalism” was a gift from Joseph Stalin dating from the 1920s. He held to a universalist theory of history and of revolution, and he used that theory, as Rodgers put it, as “a club to beat deviant national communist parties into submission,” including the leaders of the American Communist Party, whom he charged with that heresy. They had sought to explain to Stalin that their limited progress was the result of distinctive conditions in the United States, a point also made by Karl Marx. That excuse amounted to ideological “deviationism.” It challenged Stalin’s universalist conception of history. For their resort to “exceptionalism,” he sacked them. With this lineage, one might not have expected the idea of “American exceptionalism” to penetrate so deeply into the postwar political culture of the United States. But a strong thread of Protestantism in American culture – much stronger than communism – was also at work. It carried with it a strong notion of a

chosen people and paved the way to exceptionalism. This religious tradition slid into the secular notion of “exceptionalism” (Rodgers 21-24).

The quiet slide from “special” to “exceptional” was enormously consequential. There can be more than one special nation. But exceptional has different implications. The literal definition of “exception or “exceptional” is *against or not conforming to the norm or rule*. There can be only one exception. This logic universalizes every other nation and thus separates the United States from them. That is the problem. It provides a logic that allows the United States to deny global norms, even international law. And it has readily done that since the 1940s.

The issue of global norms and American law was raised several years ago when I was at the *Centro Studi Americani* in Rome, in November, 2006. The occasion was a public event co-sponsored by the *Centro Studi Americani* and the United States Embassy. The purpose was a public discussion the day after the mid-term Congressional elections in the United States – an election that unexpectedly turned out to be a disaster for the Republican Party. There was a lively panel discussion about the election returns that evolved into a broad discussion of politics in the United States. At this point, there was a question directed particularly to me. Why had the United States refused to join the International Criminal Court?

That question put exceptionalism on the table. My response was that the refusal was an important example of American exceptionalism at work in American law and politics. One of the implications of exceptionalism is that no foreign judges, organizations, or even the community of nations can judge the United States or an American citizen. Global norms do not apply to the United States and its citizens. Today, we identify this position with the political Right, but it is more pervasive than that. In fact, it was president Bill Clinton’s decision not to join the International Criminal Court that prompted the question.

At about the same time there was an exchange between two Supreme Court justices that again revealed the exceptionalist logic on the right and a rejection of it from the left. The issue was the case of *Roper v. Simmons* (2005). The crux of the case was the constitutionality of execution as a punishment for minors (under the age of 18) who were convicted of serious crimes. The point of law concerned whether such a punishment should

be banned on the basis of the provision in the Constitution of the United States prohibiting “cruel and unusual punishment.” Would executing a minor amount to such? The most obvious metric for determining whether it was “cruel and unusual” was to turn to global practices. In fact, the global norm is clearly against such executions (only 22 nations then allowed it).

The Court’s 5-4 decision banning such executions was written and read by Justice Anthony Kennedy, and he specifically referenced global condemnation of the practice as a reason for rejecting it as cruel and unusual. Justice Antonin Scalia immediately followed by reading his angry dissent. The *reading*, rather than simply filing a dissent, from the Supreme Court bench is highly unusual; Scalia’s decision to read it was intentionally a provocative gesture. Scalia insisted that global standards had no bearing on our system of justice. In short, we are exceptional. Later, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who was in the majority, publicly challenged this line of thought. She cited the *Federalist Papers*, pointing out that the authors stressed the “high importance” of observing the “laws of nations.” And she noted that the Declaration of Independence was addressed to the “opinions of mankind” (qtd. in “A Respect for World Opinion,” A22). More recently, Justice Stephen Breyer, who was also in the majority in the case of *Roper v. Simmons*, published an important book stressing the importance of attending to global legal practices and norms. Yet, exceptionalism is still a broadly held ideology among Americans, particularly on the Right.

The problem of exceptionalism is that it universalizes all other nations and separates the United States from that norm. There is the United States and a global “other,” and that global other has no moral or legal claims on the American state.

Whether to be one among many, or claiming to be exceptional became a disputed public issue in the summer of 2014 on the Right in the United States. The issue emerged when the College Board issued an updated and revised set of guidelines for Advanced Placement U.S. High School History. It was the work of roughly a decade with contributions from dozens of university and high school scholars and teachers as advisers. And, among many other substantive and pedagogical improvements, it made a modest gesture of recognizing the United States as a nation among nations.

The AP framework, whether in history or any other subject, creates

a high school curriculum and examination in various disciplines that is supposed to be similar in content and difficulty to an undergraduate survey course. A strong score on the test allows students to submit this high school class for college credit.

Historical scholarship in recent decades has produced a very different understanding of American history than many parents and public officials learned in school. One of the differences has been the muting of exceptionalism by academic historians. When the new guidelines for the curriculum were announced, there were complaints about too little attention to the founders and too many obscure people – that is, too many were non-elite and people other than white males. No actual tests have so far been created (or at least none have been made publicly available), but a couple of the guidelines (out of dozens) of this “framework” document suggested acquaintance with the transnational aspects of U.S. history. This inclusion prompted concern on the Right, who feared that the idea of American exceptionalism might be diluted or wholly lost. That worry produced an immediate critique from conservatives that briefly flooded the right-wing media. One of the most active critics was a retired high school teacher for whom American exceptionalism was the core theme of his teaching. He told a *Newsweek* reporter that he looked forward to his first class meeting each year because he always began “with the story of John Winthrop ... who famously called the new colonies a “city upon a hill.” That moment, he explained, “sets the theme of American exceptionalism” (qtd. in Levy).

These critics on the right, ever more powerful in recent years, deeply believe in American exceptionalism. In their minds introducing transnational and global aspects would distort and diminish the whole meaning of American history. It would make the United States just one nation like other nations. That would undermine the freedom of the United States to do what it pleases in respect to international law, and it would weaken the justification of our undernourished social net.

The uproar was prompted by an article by Stanley Kurtz in the *National Review*, a respected conservative magazine founded seventy years ago by William F. Buckley. The article provided ammunition for a flurry of condemnations of the College Board’s guidelines. I became aware of the

fuss when several people forwarded copies of Kurtz's critique to me. The article denounced an NYU historian, who in the author's view, had caused the College Board to corrupt American history. I am that historian. I admit that by means of conferences, lectures, articles, and books I had some role in changing the way history might be taught. But I was not a member of any of the committees of historians or consultants who constructed the guidelines. But the article does reveal that someone out there is reading what we say and write, which we should appreciate.

The article pointed to the four summer conferences at Villa La Pietra, NYU's Study Center in Florence. I had organized the conferences and edited the results in a book, *Rethinking American History in a Global Era*. But Kurtz dug much further: he doubtless searched the web to track both articles and lectures related to this project. He particularly focused on an evening lecture I delivered on a small college campus in Texas. The audience of teachers had worked all day scoring the AP Tests. They often had outside lecturers after dinner, and Kurtz pointed to the lecture I gave to those hundreds of teachers who had been individually grading thousands of the US history exams, which are essay exams. Fortunately for me –and the U.S. Department of Education –Kurtz seems to have missed my lecture under its auspices to three thousand or more teachers in Washington. Several state legislatures, Texas being one, were discussing legislation to ban the “AP US test” (Massey; Levy).

The point of this little story is not the bad or good press I got. It is about the persistence of notions of American exceptionalism and awareness that teaching transnational and global dimensions of American history undermines claims to American exceptionalism.

The Executive Director of the American Historical Association had judged the result to be good – for its teaching methods as much as for the content. Professional opinion was of little moment in the minds of the critics, and resistance built outside of academe. More attentive to that development than to the approval by the American Historical Association, the College Board announced they would revise it. Here is the tragedy of the commercialization of textbooks and tests (Bender, 2009). Rather quickly, a committee was organized to revise the matters at issue. Over-ruling ten years of academic collaboration in a matter of months, the College Board

announced a new version – more founders were in and anything likely to undermine exceptionalism, or anything suggestive of it, was out. To my mind – and what makes this episode particularly tragic – is that it was clearly a commercial decision, not a scholarly one. A boycott of the test in conservative states could cost the non-profit College Board millions. Non-profits may not earn profits, but they can and often do pay very nice salaries and offer other perks.

It means that in our schools the best students –those who take the AP exam –are expected to separate United States history from World History. More importantly, of course, there is likely to be a worrisome divergence between professional historical scholarship and the public's notion of a proper presentation of American history. This has happened before. Early in the 20th century, leaders in the profession favored a transnational approach for understanding our national history. But in the 1940s, that approach was challenged, and American history was taken out of the world.

The context and circumstances were World War II. A survey of college students and their knowledge of American history is part of the story. In that context there was an extensive public discussion about how much American history was taught and how it should be framed –as part of the world or separate, exceptional or not.

In 1943, the *New York Times* published a survey of 7,000 college students that tested their knowledge of American history. As typically happens with these occasional surveys, the results produced a panic. Allan Nevins, a publicly prominent Columbia University historian with the strong support of Iphigene Sulzburger, the wife of the owner of the *New York Times*, used the pages of the paper to argue the importance of sound knowledge of American history and “national identity” during the war. Without such knowledge, Nevins argued, soldiers would not know what they were fighting for. To ensure that commitment, he argued for the teaching of more American history. With this concern, the *Times* ran many stories about history teaching and Americanism, and it prompted a national discussion of history teaching. The reporter who followed the issue, Benjamin Fine, won a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage.

At the same time, there were two efforts to rethink the study of American history, both of which would urge paying more attention to its

global context and connections. First, the Office of Higher Education in the Office of the President of the United States contacted The American Historical Association about producing a report on the “Adjustment of the College Curriculum to Wartime Conditions and Needs.” A committee chaired by Bessie Pierce of the University of Chicago prepared the report. Pierce was a natural for the chair; she had a joint appointment in history and the School of Education. The other members were all from the University of Chicago history department.

The report made the point that introducing courses on world history would be appropriate to the growing power and responsibility of the United States in the world. The curriculum should give more “attention to the hemispheric and world setting of our history,” which should “serve as an antidote to our traditional isolationism and provincialism.” The teaching of such a course, the report argued, should “provide a world-wide frame of reference to our domestic as well as our foreign problems” (qtd. in Tyrrell, 2003 32-43).

Almost simultaneously, there was another project prompted by the *New York Times* survey. With funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, the American Historical Association and other leading historical organizations collaborated on an examination of the teaching of American history. There were two key findings: first, enough U.S. history was being taught, but it was badly done (memorization rather than historical thinking), and, second, the teaching was too “isolated” and should be taught with a “keen consciousness of the world beyond the United States” (Fine).

The Federal government sent the first report to the president of every American college and university. Two thirds of them rejected such a transnational approach to American history. So did National Association of Manufacturers, The General Society of the Mayflower Descendants and the Daughters of the American Revolution, among others. The two sets of proposals died. Edgar Wesley of the University of Minnesota, who chaired the second project, felt that this response “sentenced American boys and girls of the atomic age to close their eyes to the rest of the world” (qtd. in Tyrrell, 2005, 139).

In fact, exceptionalism was at the center of the American Cold War ideology, and it was incorporated into the new field of interdisciplinary

American Studies. Formal programs were established in American universities, the professional journal, *American Quarterly*, was founded (1949), and in 1947 the Salzburg Seminar for international scholars and intellectuals was inaugurated. The idea for the Seminar was germinated at Harvard University and made possible with United States government funding. Beginning in the late 1940s at Salzburg, American scholars showcased American history, literature, and democracy within the exceptionalist framework of the American Studies programs being developed in the United States. The project was directed to scholars from secure allies, like France and Britain, and to those whose countries had strong left parties, including the Communist parties, like Italy. This was part of a larger showcasing of American culture abroad. American art forms, particularly distinctive American forms of innovation in the arts – Jazz, Abstract Expressionism, Modern Dance – circled the world, sometimes with CIA support, always cared for by the diplomatic corps (von Eschen; Saunders; Guillbaut).

In scholarship, the exceptionalism argument or assumption was built upon a particular widely read text at home and abroad. American studies and American history honed in on John Winthrop's lay sermon, "A Model of Christian Charity." It was supposed to have been delivered at the time of the arrival of the *Arbella*, the ship that landed the Puritans in Massachusetts Bay in 1630. But this important text has its own mysteries. The manuscript was not discovered until the nineteenth century and there is no contemporary reference to its actually being delivered (Widmer).

Until the 1970s, when American historians turned away from intellectual history to social history, this text was everywhere. But in the larger society Ronald Reagan gave the sermon a new life on the Right, first in 1974, in an address entitled "We Will Be A City Upon a Hill" at the First Conservative Political Conference, and then, again, in his "Farewell Address" as president in 1988, when he closed with a paragraph on John Winthrop and his "shining city on a hill."

Yet all along, Reagan and a couple of generations of postwar scholars as well seriously misconstrued Winthrop's meaning. Winthrop did not indicate that the Puritan journey to America was outside of world history. Their "commission" was to live as a loving community following in their

material and spiritual lives God's precepts while being witnessed by the larger, even global, society that was their worldly surround.

Winthrop's words were a warning. The world as well as God would judge us, he warned, if we do not live up to our promises to God. In fact, Winthrop's speech was a strong argument against exceptionalism. His point was that the people of the world would be watching them, and they would also judge them. Both God and the world would be their judges. The key oft cited phrase "we shall be as a City upon a Hill" appears after many scripturally grounded, tightly argued pages urging love, charity, and humility. The paragraph at the close of the sermon, seldom quoted in its entirety, is very clear. Even alone, the key sentence repeatedly quoted but misconstrued makes the point unambiguously.

wee must Consider that wee shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eies of all people are upon us; soe if we shall dele falsely with our god in this work wee have undertaken ... we shall be made a story and a by-word throughout the world" (Miller and Hutchinson, I,199).

This is not a statement of exceptionalism. Winthrop was radically misinterpreted. Generally, it is a good idea to read the whole sentence, even if it is a long one, to understand any particular part. In fact, it is even better to read the whole text before claiming its meaning.

In short, contrary to the exceptionalist argument, this key text acknowledges the moral standing of the larger community – of Christians and others – to which the Puritan settlers quite self-consciously still belonged for all of their specialness. Even if they were not exceptional, it is, however, plausible to read this – and other texts – as *aspirational*, which is a far nobler as well as a humbler ambition. This aspirational phrasing is an ambition we can associate preeminently with Abraham Lincoln. There are many instances, but one is in his annual address to Congress in 1862: We must disentrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of earth (Lincoln, II,415).

The "last best hope" phrase is widely known, but the first sentence is just as important as the second.

Every aspect of American history has been entangled in a larger history, more often than not global in extent. The so-called discovery of America was not so much an American event as a global one. Before Columbus and Magellan, the world was the Afro-Eurasian land mass. This is the world of the Old Testament, the world of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The ocean was the outer boundary of this world. The really important discovery was that the ocean long thought to be a barrier turned out to be instead a connector of all of the continents. Global history began, and so did modernity – and capitalism. These were bigger events than the discovery of America. Adam Smith and Karl Marx agreed on this.

In the *Wealth of Nations* Smith declared that:

...the discovery of America, and that of a passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope, are the two greatest and most important events recorded by the history of mankind ... By uniting...the distant parts of the world, by enabling them to relieve one another's wants ... and to encourage one another's industry, their general tendency would seem to be beneficial. To the natives, however, both of the East and West Indies, all the commercial benefits ... have been sunk and lost in the dreadful misfortunes which they have occasioned (II, 626).

In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx channeled Smith, but without the concern for the fate of native peoples: “The discovery of America, the rounding of the Cape opened up fresh ground for the rising bourgeoisie. The East-Indian and Chinese markets, the colonization of America, trade with the colonies, the increase in the means of exchange ... gave to commerce, to navigation, to industry, an impulse never before known...” (204). Without much effort, one can discover the global and transnational dimensions of American history – whether in the era of initial settlement, that of the Revolution, the Civil War, the world of slavery and emancipation, trade, empire, and social liberalism, among others (Bender, 2006).

I close with what may be three obvious but important thoughts about how we as historians manage our relationship to notions of exceptionalism and transnationalism. Exceptionalism still seems to haunt us and a transnational sensibility may limit its influence. But it is like a Jack-in-the-Box. We continually push it down and close the top, but suddenly it

pops open again. This often happens, I suspect, because of careless usage of words. Sometimes we unwittingly slide from “unique” or “special” into “exceptional.” That is a mistake. These are not synonyms. Exceptional excludes, while special is generous, as is unique.

My second point is that “exceptionalism” is an *ideological* construct, not a *method* or a *historical* finding. Transnational, by contrast, is a historical *process*. I do not see it as ideological. It is an empirical and interpretive challenge. It opens new space for humanistic studies of the United States.

Finally, for graduate students especially – and I hope this does not introduce confusion in my very last point – I think historical inquiry begins with a question, not a method or approach. That question should deeply interest the scholar, both intrinsically and in relation to the state of scholarship in one’s discipline or across disciplines. I urge students not to begin by searching for a transnational topic. Instead, they should find the domain of interest that engages them, and then explore it and ask questions about it. If the topic that emerges includes implications that cross national boundaries, definitely follow them. But if a transnational framing is a minor dimension of the study, let it be so.

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