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Framing American History: Introduction

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When Tom Bender announced his retirement in 2015, a group of his former students, led by Patrick Kelly, organized a symposium in his honor. An engaged public intellectual whose writing has generated much discussion and many questions, Tom challenged the group to move beyond the traditional encomiums and backward-looking celebrations and instead design a program that would reflect the intellectual currents of the past decades and move the conversation forward. With that challenge in mind, the symposium was broken down into three sessions over two days that focused on the broad themes Tom had identified and was associated with throughout his academic career: “The Significance of Synthetic Thinking in American History,” “Framing American History,” and “A Historians’ Historian and the Future of the Humanities.”

As moderators for the session “Framing American History,” we understood that “framing” is the foundation for much of what we do as historians. The choices we make, the ways in which we interpret the core chunks of the culturally rich, distinctly American story, and how we integrate the local within larger global processes directly impact the history we tell. Our personal intellectual trajectories reflect this attempt to think about US history in a wider interpretive frame, *not* to replace one narrative with another, but to make the transnational mean something more than inclusiveness and yet be a history beyond a strictly nation-bound and nation-centered narrative.

We were graduate students in the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, decades when the Americanists in history departments were thinking in terms of the New Social History and a still-uncharted women’s history and feminist theory. Elaine Abelson was writing a dissertation on the emergence of American department stores and middle-class female shoplifters in the late nineteenth century. Tom prodded her to push the boundaries of the thesis and look at parallel developments in other parts of the world, to understand that the American context, while singular in some respects, was not divorced from trends in Europe. A study of consumer culture and modern capitalist

society, technological change, class privilege, and gender roles, Elaine's dissertation and subsequent book, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store*, depended in large part on the feeling and texture of Emile Zola's novel, *Au bonheur des dames* (1883).¹ The materialism and moral implications of mass consumption manifest in the large French dry-goods bazaar was the model for commercial seduction found in such comparable American department stores as R. H. Macy and Marshall Field. The word "transnational" was not yet on the horizon, but Tom was already laying the groundwork with his graduate students for what is now conceptualized as "trans-border" history. Elaine's current research on homeless urban women during the Great Depression of the 1930s, *The Woman with Worn Out Shoes*, takes the shifting narrative one step further. By seeing the depression as the worldwide crisis that it was, writing about homeless American women of necessity pushes the interpretation into a frame more encompassing than simply thinking about US policies, politics, and actors.

A decade later, Daniel Kotzin's dissertation topic was a biography of Judah Magnes, a relatively obscure American Jew who helped found the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Daniel was initially hesitant about what seemed a narrow topic, but Tom encouraged him to see the transnational elements in Magnes's story. From dissertation to publication as a book, *Judah L. Magnes: An American Jewish Nonconformist*, Tom's guidance helped frame the biography, highlighting the ways in which pre-state Israel was as "entangled" in the history of the United States as it was in Europe. Daniel's current research on Irish American soldiers during the Civil War is still shaped by Tom's insight but also by a growing trend in American ethnic history to pay attention to immigrants' countries of origin and to compare the American immigrant experience with those in other nation states. He has found significant comparisons between Irish American soldier diaries during the Civil War and the writings of second-generation Irish immigrants to England.²

In the teaching of American history at colleges and universities over the last decade or so there has been a conscious, if cautious, move towards a more encompassing view of our past, one that integrates transnational perspectives. When studying urbanization in nineteenth-century America, Daniel places this process in an international context, spending a lot of time, for example, discussing events in Paris as an introduction to discussing the transformation of Buffalo in the late nineteenth century. The idea was inspired by Tom's graduate course, "City Culture," where students read David H. Pinkney's book, *Napoleon III and the Rebuilding of Paris*. When Frederick Law Olmsted designed the park system for Buffalo, instead of basing it on his design for New York's Central Park, he looked to Haussmann's Paris.³ This international context has been a distinct surprise for Daniel's students, prompting them to look at the city in which they live very differently. As the *Journal of Commerce* wrote in 1898, and students are now beginning to understand, "[w]e are part of abroad."⁴

The February 2015 issue of *The American Historian*, the journal of the Organization of American Historians (OAH), illustrates this new direction by focusing the entire

issue on “Internationalizing American History.”⁵ Yet, the extent to which the transnational “turn” has influenced history education is speculative at best. The K-12 curriculum for kindergarten through Grade Twelve education seems fairly resistant to changing the organizing schema, and reports from college classrooms suggest that integrating a more transnational framework into American history courses, particularly the US History survey, remains a challenge. Faculty struggle to reinterpret familiar material and to situate America in a global context when students lack even foundational knowledge of the nation state, not to mention the world.

Significantly, our contributors focus their attention on the question of teaching, and deal with research questions only in a cursory way, if at all. There are many ways to understand this, but we see it as a response to the themes of this symposium and particularly the original panel: “Framing American History.” Tom powerfully demonstrated to us the value of bringing history to the public in multiple ways, and teaching was the primary venue. We all thus left graduate school as historians with the ability and interest in conducting high-level historical scholarship *and* being effective classroom teachers. In this respect, it makes a lot of sense that the panelists focused on teaching—Tom taught all of us the value of teaching and the importance of bringing history to the widest possible audience.

John S. Baick, a professor of history at Western New England University, a small private institution, teaches both undergraduates and teachers in a master’s degree program in elementary education. With his graduate classes comprising non-traditional students, Baick’s goal is to inspire these teachers of our youngest students to think more carefully about history and see the world through a broader, “more nuanced” lens than the state-mandated narratives decree. As with so many of Tom’s students, Baick took seriously Tom’s mantra about the crucial role of the public intellectual and the need to remind people that the past is never past. He readily gives local media time and access in an attempt to make history “part of public conversation.” Engaging the public—listeners, readers, watchers, and teachers—is to both advance the profession, he writes, and to continue Tom’s legacy.

Andie Tucher, a professor of journalism at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, focuses her essay, “The Transnational Turn and the Dilemma of the ‘phenomenal mix,’” on how she teaches the history of American journalism in the professional Master of Science degree program. In her essay, Tucher explains how, with mixed success, she recently revised an American-centered history of journalism course she had been teaching for years. The students enrolled at Columbia’s Graduate School of Journalism are increasingly international, and she felt the need to make the course more “global.” This has been both an intellectual problem and a demographic one. The ongoing challenges of teaching a transnational course of only seven sessions to students with little preparation in history of any era or region were, she says, immense, and the results thus far have been uneven.

Tracy Neumann, an associate professor of history at Wayne State University, offered a very different perspective on integrating transnationalism into teaching. As

the only contributor who worked with Tom after the publication of *Rethinking American History in the Global Age*, integrating transnationalism into the history classroom came naturally to her. She does not concern herself with issues of “coverage” when it comes to integrating a global history perspective, but explains that she is actually just telling a different story of American history by offering a wider approach. Neumann teaches the American Revolution, for example, as “one of many in an age of revolutions.” Her real concern is the challenge many graduate students in American history face when they want to do research in transnational topics. Financial support can be difficult to come by at all but the most well-endowed institutions, and multilingual, multi-archival research can significantly extend the dissertation process.

In “Foreign-Language Scholarship and the Teaching of United States History,” **Greg Robinson** discusses the challenges of teaching American history in Canada. A professor of history at l’Université du Québec à Montréal, his undergraduate courses are taught exclusively in French, which means he assigns only French-language texts. Since very few works by American historians have been translated into French, he uses texts mainly by French and French-Canadian historians—historians who have their own perspective on America. While Robinson’s obvious need to integrate transnationalism into his teaching is unique in relation to the other commentaries presented here, even in the context of a foreign university he has found transcending the nation state not without its difficulties.

Marc Aronson, a children’s book editor and author, and assistant teaching professor in the Rutgers School of Communication and Information, offers a different perspective on the question of framing how we teach American history. Aronson bemoans the fact that global history is not integrated into the public school curriculum, particularly at the primary school level. The vast majority of children’s books focus primarily on narrowly defined, endlessly repeated topics and events and US-centric themes. Of great concern is the fact that history has become social studies and, because it is not included in national testing programs, is widely understood to be less important. Aronson is not entirely pessimistic, however. The proliferation of the International Baccalaureate programs is one venue for broadening curricula. Other opportunities exist but will mean teachers, who often have little control over what they teach, being very proactive and intentional in designing their curriculum. Some states have adopted the book he coauthored with Marina Budhos, *Sugar Changed the World: A Story of Magic, Spice, Slavery, Freedom and Science*, which offers possibilities for thinking about ways to integrate transnationalism into the world of K-12.⁶

Notes

¹ Elaine S. Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Émile Zola, *Marine*

Wisniewski, and Valérie Lagier, *Au bonheur des dames* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012).

² Daniel P. Kotzin, “Writing Their Lives During the Civil War: The Diaries of Irish-American Soldiers in the Union Army,” in *Diary as Literature*, ed. Angela Hooks (Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2019), 15–27.

³ David H. Pinkney, *Napoleon III and the Rebuilding of Paris* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958). For a very recent example of how what Tom was doing in the 1990s has profoundly influenced the field of urban history, see A. K. Sandoval-Strausz and Nancy H. Kwak, *Making Cities Global: The Transnational Turn in Urban History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

⁴ Quoted in Thomas Bender, “Introduction,” *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, ed. Bender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 6.

⁵ “Internationalizing American History,” special issue of *The American Historian* (February 2015).

⁶ Marc Aronson and Marina Tamar Budhos, *Sugar Changed the World: A Story of Magic, Spice, Slavery, Freedom and Science* (Boston: Clarion, 2010).

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