

## Introduction: What is Transatlantic History?

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For centuries, people, ideas, and goods have been crossing the Atlantic Ocean and contributing to the creation of multicultural societies on its shores. *Traversea*, the name of our journal – a combination of the French term “traversée” (to cross) and “sea” – seeks to capture these encounters.<sup>1</sup> This brings us to the heart of the question: what exactly is transatlantic history? What is its beginning? What is its ending? Both questions are concerned with spatial and temporal aspects. Created in 1998, the doctoral program in transatlantic history at the University of Texas at Arlington has attracted students and professors interested in innovative ways of studying phenomena which did not fit traditional approaches of national(ist) history. The recent creation of a peer-reviewed graduate research journal aims at providing students and emerging scholars with the opportunity to publish their research and, thus, participate in and contribute to the ongoing efforts to define transatlantic history.

Transatlantic history seeks to move beyond the limitations established by national history. Compared to the more traditional and established Atlantic history, transatlantic history offers scholars a more inclusive approach. Whereas Atlantic history focuses on colonial/imperial history, transatlantic history embraces a timeframe that begins with the opening of the Atlantic world for Europeans in the early 1500s and extends into the present day. It also looks beyond the space of the North Atlantic, pointing to the importance of both Africa and South America for movements and exchanges across the Atlantic Ocean. Transatlantic history does not limit itself to the study of colonial history, and it emphasizes the importance of intercultural transfer and the construction of identities.

Despite efforts to reevaluate scholarly approaches to the study of the Atlantic, a division does exist between transatlantic historians. One group of transatlantic scholars emerged in England among specialists of the Cold War and international relations. These scholars focus on the period from 1945-1989 and beyond. Like Atlantic history, this subfield remained limited to the North Atlantic, particularly looking at countries involved in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Being inherently political, diplomatic, and chained to fields such as foreign relations and international relations, this approach depends upon the notion that nation states are the only historical actors. Framing transatlantic history in this manner makes the field even more limited and exclusive than Atlantic history.

A second group of scholars emerged at the University of Texas at Arlington. These scholars call for an inclusive approach to transatlantic history, which does not assume that empires and nation states are the only agents in history. Steven Reinhardt defines transatlantic history as a

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<sup>1</sup> This is a reference to Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998).

conceptual approach that is problem-oriented, interdisciplinary, transnational, and comparative.<sup>2</sup> This definition of transatlantic history advocates the removal of the nation state paradigm and instead calls for implementing a larger, global context for historical study. While geographically defined by the Atlantic Ocean, the emphasis of transatlantic history rests upon interpretation and method rather than the space, as it is in Atlantic history.<sup>3</sup> It examines events from 1492, and the opening of the Atlantic world, to the present. Daniel T. Rodgers states that the Atlantic serves as a connective lifeline, rather than a barrier, between nations whose borders are neither firmly established nor impermeable.<sup>4</sup> In the framework of transatlantic history, the Atlantic as a connecting space extends to all four surrounding continents, legitimizing all four as objects of study.<sup>5</sup> Transatlantic history is, foremost, cultural and social history. It draws on postmodern discourse and semiotics.

Transatlantic history is a subfield of transnational history, a counter-narrative to traditional national history that looks below and beyond the nation state. Debate over what the nation actually entails helps shape what transnationalism seeks to deconstruct. Ernest Renan's provoking and lasting question, "what is a nation?" provided an early assessment of the "nation" in the late nineteenth century, as nation states began to emerge. He stated that a nation is not self-evident, that its formation is accidental in nature, and that a nation exists only as a "spiritual principle."<sup>6</sup> In Benedict Anderson's evaluation of the nation, he argues that nations are imagined political communities. Through the perceived belief in common ties, people recognize shared similarities that lead to the creation of a national identity.<sup>7</sup> The construction of nation states established a means of identification, which early historians transplanted into their works.<sup>8</sup> From its earliest conception, history, as a profession, involved writing the history of nations. Political history and national history, formed by historians such as Leopold von Ranke, George Bancroft, David Hume, and Jules Michelet, dominated the historical perspective. This established an archetype in historical writing that grew increasingly entrenched throughout the twentieth century. A transnational and transatlantic approach seeks to break out of this mold and looks beyond definitions entrenched in the idea of the nation state.

Ian Tyrrell and Thomas Bender illustrate this concept as they argue against studying national history in isolation. Tyrrell, in *Transnational Nation*, suggests that nations are made transnationally and that historians must recognize influences on people that originated outside of

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<sup>2</sup> Steven Reinhardt, "Preface," in *Transatlantic History*, ed. Steven Reinhardt and Dennis Reinhartz, (College Station: Published for the University of Texas at Arlington by Texas A & M University Press, 2006), ix.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Adam, *Buying Respectability: Philanthropy and Urban Society in Transnational Perspective, 1840s to 1930s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossing*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> In this context it is particularly important to include North-South relations such as the relation between North and South America as in the case of Chicano studies, see Silke Hensel, "Weder Mexikaner noch US-Amerikaner? Die Historiographie über Chicanos im 20. Jahrhundert," in *Transatlantische Perzeptionen: Lateinamerika-USA-Europa in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Hans-Joachim König and Stefan Rinke (Stuttgart: H.-D. Heinz, 1998), 295-309.

<sup>6</sup> Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?" in *Nation and Narration*, edited by Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), 19-20.

<sup>7</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), 6-7.

<sup>8</sup> Maria Grever, "Plurality, Narrative and the Historical Canon," in *Beyond the Canon: History for the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Maria Grever and Siep Stuurman (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 31-47.

the nation state.<sup>9</sup> National boundaries are artificial, porous in nature, and constantly changing.<sup>10</sup> Thomas Bender in *A Nation Among Nations* argues that a nation cannot be its own historical context. It must, instead, be studied in a frame larger than itself, and he exemplifies this by placing five major themes in American history into a global context to show that American history is neither unique nor exceptional.<sup>11</sup> While Tyrrell and Bender discuss the porous nature of national boundaries, Rodgers presents a slightly altered argument: that nations are semipermeable containers.<sup>12</sup> While people and ideas can cross the Atlantic and enter a different nation, the state can selectively decide on the admittance of certain individuals or ideas. Transatlantic history seeks to reevaluate the role nation states played in history.

In addition to reevaluating the role of the nation state, transatlantic history is distinct in its analysis of intercultural transfers. Working against the one-way cultural imposition favored by Atlantic historians, transatlantic scholars instead examine a reciprocal process of exchange that occurred in multiple directions. Utilizing the concept of intercultural transfer and the concept of transnationalism, transatlantic history provides an inclusive approach to the study of connections that span across the Atlantic. Thomas Adam has applied the notion of intercultural transfer to the interactions of societies and cultures across the North Atlantic space.<sup>13</sup> According to Adam, travelers between the continents were agents of intercultural transfer as they took ideas and models from “the other side” to appropriate them for themselves in a two-way process. Dirk Hoerder has strongly influenced migration studies by advocating the study of migrants as part of a language diaspora and emphasizing the continuous connectedness within the many diasporas that constitute the North Atlantic space.<sup>14</sup>

Providing a more flexible framework than either Atlantic history or (transatlantic) NATO history, our broader interpretation of transatlantic history does not restrict historians to a specific time or constructed space. Use of the comparative method also allows scholars to examine multidirectional transfer, breaking away from the notion that culture simply moved in one direction as a force imposed by one group on another. Ultimately, the greatest benefit of transatlantic history is its determination to remove the nation state and empire as a determining actor from historical analysis. By taking a transnational approach, scholars can look beyond and below the nation state, focusing instead on the qualities of individual communities or individuals rather than framing them as mere extensions of their nation states. This break away from the nation state makes transatlantic history clearly distinct from the other, more restrictive, fields, and it significantly advances the study of history beyond the limitations of the nation state.

Transatlantic history is a cultural approach to history, drawing on transnationalism, comparative and transfer studies, sharing the geographic focus of Atlantic history and merging the temporal confinement of both Atlantic and World history. Transatlantic history is also a conceptual approach, which allows for the non-Eurocentric and transnational study of the interactions of people, goods, and ideas among any of the four continents surrounding the

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<sup>9</sup> Ian Tyrrell, *Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective Since 1789* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Ian Tyrrell, *Transnational Nation*, 2-3.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Bender, *A Nation Among Nations: America's Place in World History* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2006), 7.

<sup>12</sup> Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Adam, *Buying Respectability*.

<sup>14</sup> Dirk Hoerder, “The German-Language Diasporas: A Survey, Critique, and Interpretation,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 7-44.

Atlantic basin between the time of the European “discovery” of the Americas and the present time.

The first issue of our journal *Traversea* features three research papers written by former and current doctoral students in the transatlantic history program at the University of Texas at Arlington. Bradley J. Borougerdi discusses the transatlantic hemp trade and the significance of an often-overlooked commodity. Jefferson Dillman’s study examines nineteenth-century German travelers and their role as agents of intercultural transfer. Research by Gene Rhea Tucker highlights the important role of German explorers in the New World, and the impact of their experiences on the construction of German identity in early America. The fourth piece is an English translation of Gabriele Lingelbach’s article on comparison and intercultural transfer undertaken by Isabelle Rispler in collaboration with Karen Beasley, Lana Rings, and Jacqueline Zeledon.<sup>15</sup>

We, the editors, would like to thank the professors involved in the founding of *Traversea*: Thomas Adam, who supervised the creation of this journal, guiding the graduate students involved from the earliest of stages; Stanley Palmer, who helped establish the transatlantic history doctoral program, and is the current advisor for the Transatlantic History Student Organization (THSO); and John D. Garrigus, who provided immense help with the construction of the journal’s website, as well as with other technical problems. Further, we would like to thank those professors from around the Atlantic who agreed to serve on our Editorial Board: Thomas Adam, Jeremy Adelman, Imre Josef Demhardt, John D. Garrigus, Pilar González Bernaldo, Annick Lempérière, Gabriele Lingelbach, Carol Loar, Anke Ortlepp, Douglas Richmond, Steven Reinhardt, Axel R. Schäfer and Andrew Zimmerman. We also extend our thanks to Jay Goldin for his assistance with the copy editing process.

The objective of *Traversea* is to give emerging scholars the opportunity to publish their research in the field of transatlantic history, and we look forward to such studies as transatlantic history continues to develop. We hope for continued growth in the scholarship as the journal progresses through future issues, and we are excited about the possibilities it presents.

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<sup>15</sup> Gabriele Lingelbach, “Erträge und Grenzen zweier Ansätze: Kulturtransfer und Vergleich am Beispiel der französischen und amerikanischen Geschichtswissenschaft während des 19. Jahrhunderts,” in *Die Nation schreiben: Geschichtswissenschaft im internationalen Vergleich*, ed. Christoph Conrad and Sebastian Conrad (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002), 333-359.