

ANOTHER WORLD HISTORY IS POSSIBLE

REFLECTIONS ON THE TRANSLOCAL, TRANSNATIONAL, AND GLOBAL

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Under the rubric of the global and transnational, contemporary historians are striving for a new type of history that links subnational specificities with supranational processes, extranational connections, and international institutions. In doing so, we are grappling with the viability and conceptual, epistemological, and empirical challenges of writing a truly international or global history self-consciously situated outside strictly national narratives. My engagement with transnational and global history originated as a venture into public policy terrain at the height of the debate over NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) in the early 1990s, a time when the word *globalization* was virtually unknown.¹ By 2000, when I had completed the draft of my manuscript's first four chapters, U.S., German, and Italian newspapers used the word *globalization* up to nine times more frequently than five years earlier.² Nor was its use restricted to journalists. The word now appeared regularly in scholarly monographs, specialized textbooks, and an array of edited collections; by 2005, the word (not its cognates) turned up in the titles or subtitles of sixty-eight English-language books, all but seven published after 2000. Based on abstracts in a Web-based index of scholarly articles, Fred Cooper discovered that the word *globalization* occurred nineteen times more often in 2002 than it had in 1993, a sure sign of its popularity and scholarly respectability.³

This article examines how globalization in the 1990s affected established scholarly conceptualizations, although only belatedly among historians. It clarifies key terminological debates while offering guidelines for a historically grounded approach to the global and transnational. In conceptualizing linkages and connections across

boundaries, I argue that *translocal and transnational approaches* offer the best avenue to create “another world history,” something not only possible but within reach as we enter a postneoliberal world.⁴

The impetus for a new transnational or global history sprang up in the aftermath of the “death of another world” in 1989–1991 when, with the fall of the Soviet Union, many were quick to proclaim “an end to history” and to celebrate or lament the unchallenged hegemony of liberal capitalist ideology. The abolition of a geopolitical framework that had lasted since 1945 ushered in a decade of unparalleled U.S. predominance, accompanied by a destabilization of entrenched intellectual, political, and even geographic understandings of the world. The same period also saw the culmination of debates within the North Atlantic intellectual sphere about a postmodern transition that many thought ended a modernist historical epoch that had begun in the early twentieth century. Antiquated institutions and old ways of thinking, it was suggested, were being swept away by historical transformations so profound that some even proclaimed the withering away of the nation-state, whether to lament its passage or to celebrate its demise. It was a global moment characterized, in Fred Cooper’s words, by the “Banker’s Boast” and the “Social Democrat’s Lament.”⁵

The debate about the local and the global, the particular and the universal, stood at the heart of this intellectual and political clash, with much of the journalistic and academic marketing of globalization presenting the local as “contained within, and thus defined fundamentally by the global,” in the words of anthropologist Carla Freeman.⁶ Such an “implicit but powerful, dichotomous model,” according to Freeman, codes the Global masculine and the Local as feminine, which explains the gendered metaphors of globalization as rape and its associated orientalist metaphor of globalization as juggernaut.⁷ The heightened prominence accorded universalistic theories, such as a neoliberal economics and an increasingly visible rational choice and game theory, compounded the sense of being besieged. These developments seemingly marked the definitive marginalization of those who specialized in “local knowledge” or a working class approached almost exclusively at the level of the community, region, and nation. Until the last five years, historians in almost all fields of history were reluctant to grapple with the contemporary challenge of the global, even as social scientists had opened up this debate in the 1990s.⁸ After all, this powerful discourse of globalization directly challenged the preeminence of the very narrative framework, the nation, that provides the primary if not exclusive domain of recognized disciplinary expertise. It is likely, as well, that this response reflects a tendency to hold our noses when confronted with fashionable buzzwords, although lamenting faddishness is an entirely inadequate stance on contemporary globalization, however defined.

The truth is that nonhistorians, whether from the social sciences or the avant-garde humanities, have produced the most provocative and generative

studies to date. Yet historians in the United States would have benefited—even if only to boost our disciplinary self-esteem—from engagement with the non-historical “history” debates that swirled around these varied and peculiarly U.S. interdisciplinary fields of postcolonial, cultural, women and gender, Black, Latino, Native American, Asian-Pacific, and “American” studies. Although historians may indeed be “distrustful of or indifferent to work done in other disciplines,”⁹ I suspect that they are even more hostile when scholars from other disciplines fabricate their own stylized and emblematic “histories,” which inevitably fail to meet our professional standards of evidence, proof, and argument. In our misguided insistence on rigor, we have failed to contend with the impulse behind such projects, which speak to vital contemporary events, anxieties, and perceived needs from which we have maintained a fussy professional distance.

To recognize the fruitfulness of dialogue with other intellectual currents does not by any means require that we abandon our disciplinary moorings. It may be that the history profession was behind the times in the 1980s and 1990s, when the locus of intellectual innovation lay in fields beyond history that were better equipped to translate the contemporary into compelling intellectual quests. This was certainly the judgment of Africanist historian Fred Cooper, who over the past decades has tied developments within the discipline, such as the new imperial history, to broader interdisciplinary debates related to postcolonialism.¹⁰ As he noted in 2005, the cultural turn of the 1980s and 1990s produced “excellent research and valuable reflections,” while correcting “the excesses of a previous turn, toward social history and political economy in the 1970s.” But this was followed by a declining yield as “once provocative constructs” have now been impoverished by age and a tendency toward “conformism, gatekeeping,” a following of fashion, and a predictable politics of citation.

Grappling with globalization, the imperial, and the transnational in his 2005 book, *Colonialism in Question*, Cooper made a powerful case that “only a *more precise historical practice* will get us out of the involuted framing” of too many current debates regarding colonialism and postcolonial legacies (emphasis added). In a richly suggestive 2002 article on the colonial archive, anthropologist Anne Stoler already had called for a more uncompromising historicization if the ethnography of colonialism is to move beyond well-worn postcolonial gestures.¹¹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, another influential anthropologist, has rebuked even more directly the academic politics of marketing the new, here the global, in ways that speak to history as well as his own discipline. “While empirical data can never speak for themselves, anthropologists cannot speak without data. Even when couched in the most interpretive terms, anthropology requires observation—indeed, often field observation—and relies on empirical data in ways and to degrees that distinguish it as an academic practice from both literary and Cultural Studies.”¹²

To advance our understanding, Cooper suggests, now requires an exacting focus on “specific conceptual and methodological issues” as we “develop a [far more] precise and incisive vocabulary for analyzing affinity, connections, and change” across space and through time.¹³ In coming to terms with key concepts, the path forward depends upon “assessing the work they do, the blind spots as well as insights they entail, and the difficulties of using them to examine change over time.” Above all, we must stop a practice of operating with “vaguely specified temporalities” and avoid giving “explanatory weight to agent-less abstractions.”¹⁴ So what are the conceptual and methodological tools that are required if we are to historicize the contemporary?

My work on global phenomena, going back to the early twentieth century, suggests a renewed focus on the definitional and terminological issues that impinge so centrally upon this booming arena of scholarly investigation and political praxis. As is characteristic of rapidly developing frontiers of knowledge, historians who now grapple with the transnational and global have tended toward a plurality of vocabularies and conceptualizations whose rationales are seldom made fully explicit. Choosing from a broad circulating universe of terms, they make ad hoc choices based on pragmatic judgments as to whether a given term “works” in a particular context, for a specific subject, and in the sense intended by a particular author (even if not defined). The result of such an idiosyncratic approach is a certain analytical slackness in our thinking, since terms are treated as “more or less” the same based on “good enough equivalences” and a belief that “we all know what we mean” (or are gesturing toward) with the words we use.

Any project for a transnational or global history must puzzle directly over how we are to meaningfully conceptualize the enmeshment of the local, national, and global. Globally engaged scholars rightly reject the juxtaposition of the local and global; as Hopkins notes, such “dualisms are at best inadequate and at worst misleading,” even when factoring in the “asymmetrical relationships of size, structure and power.”¹⁵ Freeman also attacks this “binary logic of dichotomies,”¹⁶ although simple negation does not advance our cause, and we too often fall back on formulaic statements that things are “mutually constituted” (a problem with the term *glocal*, or *glocalization*). This gesture fails to gain analytical traction because it does not tell us how, in what ways or proportions, with what consequences, and at which point in time. As Cooper notes, these are the fundamental questions we face as historians, in addition to the further challenge specific to our craft: how to produce a compelling narrative capable of expressing these dialectical relations between the local, the national, and the global.

To a far larger degree than desirable, the term *global* (even more so than the flatter *world*)¹⁷ begins with the disadvantage, in English at least, of automatically suggesting its antonym (the local or national). This is precisely the reason the term *transnational* has certain advantages because of the ambiguities of the prefix (“on the other side of, over or across” and “above and beyond, transcending”) and

the fact that the term *nation* is not erased but qualified. Yet the term *transnational* does suffer from historical anachronism, since nations and nation-states are a very recent historical development that quickly became, as Trouillot notes, “one of the most powerful and pervasive fictions of modernity, an essential part of the North Atlantic narratives of world history.” In a very real sense, the current vogue for things global originates in the anxieties occasioned by our realization, in the core of the world system, that this fiction had “become suddenly less persuasive, though we are not entirely sure what, if anything, should replace it . . . [And if] changes in the functions and boundaries of national states generate confusion even among social scientists,” this is precisely “because globalization now produces spatialities—and identities—that cut through national boundaries more obviously than before.”¹⁸

In addition to decrying linear and teleological narratives of the nation-state, Trouillot denies exaggerated claims about its weakness, much less its demise (especially in the case of the world’s great powers and hegemonic regions). From there, he goes on to suggest that scholars need to give up their inherited illusions by recognizing that “the national state was never as closed and as unavoidable a container—economically, politically, or culturally—as politicians and academics have claimed since the nineteenth century.”¹⁹ Yet Trouillot’s sound and stimulating observations do not go far enough in terms of the critique being offered, in part because, as a critic of contemporary globalization, he is committed in effect to a foreshortened chronology that treats capitalism as synonymous with the global over the past five hundred years.²⁰

Yet there is a price to be paid for treating the two as coterminous. While the critic can thus repudiate globalization and its associated forms of transnationalism as a return to untrammelled capitalist greed, colonial rapacity, and imperialist diktat, it ignores the fact that processes similar to transnationalism long have characterized world history. In the words of anthropologist Lorand Matory, we not only should reject this facile equation of transnationalism with the recent but can do so through elaborating on the concept of the translocal. Like Trouillot, he, too, doubts scholarly prophecies that treat transnationalism as inevitable, while observing that such claims minimize “the enormous power of certain territorial nations over their residents’ lives by pointing out clearly demonstrable gaps in any territorial nation’s ability to monopolize the loyalty of and control over its residents.” Like Cooper, Matory also observes that even modern transnationalism neither is shapeless nor does it embrace “all regions equally or simultaneously.”²¹

More important, Matory moves beyond these established criticisms through emphasizing the hierarchy implied by the term *transnational*. He argues for an alternative formulation of history in which “the isolation of local cultural units has long been the exception rather than the rule, and territorially bounded social groups have never monopolized the loyalty of their members.” Such territorial jurisdictions—whether nation-states, “kingdoms, empires, religions, acephalous

republics, . . . [or] fiefdoms”—never existed as “the sole fonts of authority and agents of constraint in such people’s lives.” Our modern conceptual blinders instead lead us to ignore or diminish the “translocalisms that preceded the nation-state,” as well as to neglect momentous developments “structured by forces other than ‘capitalism’—such as Islam and international socialism—[that] are cast outside of this new monocausal grand narrative” of capitalism and the nation-state.²²

Matory’s sketch of the implications of the translocal does more than resolve the anachronism of the term *transnational*. Our neglect of “translocal forces should not be mistaken,” he suggests, as proof for the following propositions: (1) that “before the late 20th-century, most societies functioned in an entirely local field,” (2) “that every present-day society is equally enmeshed in transnational forces,” or (3) “that the entire world is becoming a boundary free whole.” Matory ends with an even broader and more daring hypothesis: that translocalism, “far from emerging from the death throes of the nation-state . . . long predated nationalism everywhere in the world. Indeed, translocalism was a founding condition of nationalism,” as well as a multitude of other cross-cutting forms of identity and identification.²³

The historian of China Arif Dirlik, a prolific theorist regarding contemporary globalization, also stresses the looming importance of the translocal for our discussions of global processes and connections. His paring of meaning suggests what we might gain from a translocal *and* transnational approach to global (worldwide) history.

Transnational is not the same as worldwide. . . . What makes transnational radical in its implications is its emphasis on processes over settled units. More importantly, perhaps, the other side of challenging national history from supranational perspectives is to bring to the surface subnational histories of various kinds. The radical challenge of transnational history itself lies in its conjoining of the supranational and the subnational (or intranational), which calls forth an understanding of transnational as translocal, with all its subversive implications historiographically and politically. If national history serves as an ideological “strategy of containment,” the containment of the translocal—as process or structure—is of immediate and strategic importance as it bears directly on the determination and consolidation of national boundaries.²⁴

Latin American historian Heidi Tinsman and anthropologist of the United States Sandhya Shukla make a forceful appeal that “the paradoxes of globalization and power—the ‘accelerated migration of goods and peoples’ alongside deepening inequalities—compel us to rethink conventional categories of knowledge.”²⁵ As they observe, the twenty-first century is marked by both a “more

profound sense of global connection and a more acute experience of national and regional division.” These “twinned imperatives” should challenge historians to craft an adequate response to the challenges of today: “to contend with contemporary globalization’s intensity and to understand globality’s historical depth.”²⁶ In recognizing “how ‘local’ and ‘global’ dynamics thoroughly inform one another,” they insist, we will find new and “innovative ways of telling stories from multiple perspectives: comparative, transnational, and global histories that transcend conventional boundaries of region and nation.”²⁷

As we survey the contemporary world politics of the last decade,²⁸ it is clear that the labor question occupies a central position, in new and more complicated global ways. The cycle that began with the Seattle World Trade Organization (WTO) protests of late 1999, climaxing during the July 2001 Group of 8 (G8) summit meeting in Genoa, Italy, dramatized the social and democratic deficit in the world economy and polity. Whether in China or the United States, the problems facing working- and middle-class people in a global political economy will never be resolved on a purely national basis. Even in the best of circumstances, enhanced trade union organization within a given country, even with new political and legislative conquests, is not enough unless one addresses the governance of the global political economy.²⁹ Intermestic (*international/domestic*) problems demand international as well as domestic solutions, and the challenge of the new millennium is to integrate these very different praxes in response to the ever deepening integration of the domestic, the transnational, and the international. Our labor histories in the future will gain relevance precisely to the degree that we place them more consciously within the context of a transnationalized world economy and a lopsided world geopolitical structure characterized by complex economic, political, and ideological conflicts and cross-currents. There is much to be done.

NOTES

1. For more information on this 1991–1994 project dealing with labor in both NAFTA and the Common Market of the South (Mercosur), see Russell E. Smith and John D. French. “Labor, Free Trade, and Economic Integration in the Americas: A Conference Report,” *Latin American Labor News*, nos. 12–13 (1995): 3–4; Smith and French, *Labor, Free Trade, and Economic Integration in the Americas: National Labor Union Responses to a Transnational World (a Conceptualization and Agenda for Future Research)*, Latin American Labor Occasional Paper #21 (Miami: CLRS, Florida International University, 1995).
2. See the tables on usage in the *New York Times*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and *La Repubblica* in Neil Smith, *The Endgame of Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 125. On appearance of the word *globalizzazione* in an

- Italian and German newspaper in the 1990s, see table 1.1 in Massimiliano Andretta et al., *Global, Noglobol, New Global: La Protesta Contro Il G8 a Genova* (Roma: GLF editori Laterza, 2002).
3. Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 7–8, 244.
 4. The title of the paper, “Another World (History) Is Possible,” consciously echoes the slogan of World Social Forum (WSF), an annual civil society gathering that began in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2001; in 2004, it was held in Mumbai, India, and in 2009 in the Amazon. José Corrêa Leite and Carolina Gil, *World Social Forum: Strategies of Resistance*, trans. Traci Romine (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005); Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The Rise of the Global Left: The World Social Forum and Beyond* (London: Zed Books, 2006). I would like to thank my Duke colleague Jocelyn Olcott, who suggested the title during a brainstorming session in December 2007.
 5. Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 93–94.
 6. Carla Freeman, “Is Local: Global as Feminine: Masculine? Rethinking the Gender of Globalization,” *Signs* 26, no. 4 (2001): 1008–9.
 7. *Ibid.*, 1012, 1015; Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 92.
 8. Georg G. Iggers, Q. Edward Wang, and Supriya Mukherjee, *A Global History of Modern Historiography* (Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2008), 391.
 9. Bruce Mazlish, “Comparing Global History to World History,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 28 (1998): 394.
 10. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
 11. Ann Laura Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 87–109.
 12. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 118, 128.
 13. Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 6, 11.
 14. *Ibid.*, 12, 17.
 15. A. G. Hopkins, “Introduction,” in *Global History: Interactions between the Universal and the Local* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 2.
 16. Freeman, “Is Local: Global,” 1008–9.
 17. Mazlish, “Comparing,” 389.
 18. Trouillot, *Global Transformations*, 84–85.
 19. *Ibid.*
 20. Janet Abu-Lughod’s 1989 book on precapitalist circuits and nodes within multiple world systems that antedated the rise of Europe was a direct challenge to this conflation of world systems theory with capitalism. She offers a pioneering exploration of what would now be glossed under the terms *translocal* or *transnational*; as she observed in her introduction, she was interested in “looking at the connections between geographic entities that are usually treated by separate sets of specialists” in the hope that it might “yield enough to compensate for the hubris

- of taking so global a view." See Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), ix.
21. James Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 3, 271, 268. A similar observation is offered by Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, 32, where she observes that "no world system is global, in the sense that all parts articulate evenly with one another, regardless of whether the role they play is central or peripheral. Even today, the world, more globally integrated than ever before in history, is broken up into important subspheres or subsystems. . . . And each of these subsystems may have its own core."
 22. Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*, 4, 8.
 23. *Ibid.*, 9.
 24. Arif Dirlik, "Performing the World: Representation in the Making of World Histor(Ies)," *Journal of World History* 16, no. 4 (2007): 33.
 25. Sandhya Rajendra Shukla and Heidi Tinsman, eds. *Imagining Our Americas: Toward a Transnational Frame* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), viii. That only a single contributor, coeditor Heidi Tinsman (a Latin Americanist), is in a history department reinforces my point about the discipline's reluctance to embrace these challenges. In the case of this volume, the overwhelming preponderance of contributors are from literary, American, and ethnic studies programs.
 26. *Ibid.*, 1, 3.
 27. *Ibid.*, 18, vii. See also the thoughtful reflections on transnationalism research offered by two young Latin Americanist scholars: Micol Seigel, "Beyond Compare: Comparative Method after the Transnational Turn" *Radical History Review* 2005, no. 91: 62–90; and Lara Putnam, "To Study the Fragments/Whole: Microhistory and the Atlantic World," *Journal of Social History* 39, no. 3 (2006): 615–30. For an annual seminar dedicated to this U.S.–Latin Americanist configuration of discussion of the transnational, see Pamela Voekel and Elliott Young, "The Tepoztlán Institute for the Transnational History of the Americas," *Social Text* 25, no. 3 (2007): 9–18; David Kazanjian and María Josefina Saldana-Portillo, "The Traffic in History," *Social Text* 25, no. 3 (2007): 1–7.
 28. John D. French, "From the Suites to the Streets of Seattle: The Unexpected Re-Emergence of the 'Labor Question,' 1994–1999," *Labor History* 43, no. 3 (2002): 285–304.
 29. John D. French and Kristin Wintersteen, "Crafting an International Legal Regime for Worker Rights: Assessing the Literature since the 1999 Seattle WTO Protests," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 2009, no. 75: 145–68.

WORKERS ACROSS THE AMERICAS

The Transnational Turn in
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