

New Approaches to Internationalizing the History of the Civil War Era An Introduction

Two decades after a series of important historiographical essays on transnational history and ten years after the publication of the influential anthology *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, it can still seem that there are more manifestoes for a “new transnational history” than clear examples of it. Addressing that persistent imbalance is one aim of this special issue of the *Journal of the Civil War Era*, which originated at a February 2009 symposium on “The South” and “the World” in the Civil War Era” held at Rice University. One of our collective aims there was to highlight some of the best recent examples of scholarship placing the American Civil War era in a global or transnational context. Our goal was less to reiterate the need for such scholarship than to spotlight various attempts to meet it.¹

Our focus on methodologies and outcomes rather than diagnosis stems partly from the recognition that the transnational turn in American historiography is not entirely new. One of our contributors has recently noted that placing the American South, in particular, “in broader national and international contexts” is a practice with a long history predating “the recent explosion of interest in comparative and transnational history.” Indeed, the many precedents and preexisting inspirations for examining “the South and the World” together were fully evident at our symposium, as presenters referred to the Atlantic history of Paul Gilroy’s 1993 book *The Black Atlantic*, audience members asked questions informed by Benedict Anderson’s 1983 book *Imagined Communities*, and attendees discussed D. W. Meinig’s multivolume historical geography *The Shaping of America*.²

Still, attendees and presenters also left the 2009 symposium excited by much that was new about the research under discussion. Though the methods of comparative history are well established in the history of slavery, presenters pointed to a wide horizon of possible comparisons still beckoning historians of emancipation, Reconstruction, and race relations. Framing concepts like “the Atlantic World” have long structured

histories of exploration, capital formation, labor exploitation, and transoceanic migration before the nineteenth century, but more historians than ever are now showing that “Atlantic history” need not be bounded by the late-eighteenth-century Age of Revolutions. Likewise, while concepts like “diaspora” and “empire” have been taken up by historians of Africans in America and of antebellum white American westward expansionists, several presenters showed that these concepts can offer important insights to historians of proslavery southerners as well.³

Most of all, although the symposium convened with a specific focus on one geographical region, many presenters implicitly or explicitly drew more attention to the symposium title’s chronological focus on the Civil War era. It was evident at the time and has become increasingly so since 2009 that the nineteenth century in general and the American Civil War era in particular are especially ripe for reconsideration from global, comparative, and transnational perspectives. In the first issue of this journal, Douglas R. Egerton reached a similar conclusion in a historiographical essay on the relevance of the Civil War in global history and the history of the Atlantic World. While noting an earlier admonition from David M. Potter to “internationalize the Civil War era,” Egerton observed that “there is much yet to do.”⁴

Internationalizing the history of the American Civil War remains challenging nonetheless. After all, extremely strong historiographical currents tend to direct students of the era through a deeply grooved trench of domestic events that James Huston has dubbed “the sequence”—Texas annexation, the Mexican American War, the Compromise of 1850, Bleeding Kansas, *Dred Scott*, the Harpers Ferry raid, the secession crisis, war, emancipation, and Reconstruction. In reality, contemporaries of these events often connected them quite naturally with events outside the nation’s borders; for Abraham Lincoln at Peoria, for example, the principle underlying the Kansas-Nebraska Act portended the prospective expansion of southern slavery outside the United States and was connected, in his mind, with the activities of the proslavery European diplomats of the Franklin Pierce administration. Nonetheless, the landmarks and trenches provided by the sequence have become so familiar to American Civil War historians that turning from them to the world at large may feel initially like a reckless charge across an open field.⁵

Perhaps for that reason, many initial forays into internationalizing the Civil War era have focused on questions that do not really disrupt the sequence. Historians have explored the global political and economic impact of the Civil War and emancipation. They have examined reactions to the Civil War and its leading figures by non-Americans. They have situated

the Civil War era as a whole within a larger, contemporaneous moment of violent conflict and nation-building that unsettled many regions of the globe simultaneously. They have begun to show the extent to which the American Civil War was, in C. A. Bayly's phrase, a "global event." But while this approach has yielded impressive results, more work needs to be done before the bulk of historians of the American Civil War will be convinced that global perspectives are necessary to answer the questions about the sequence that still animate a great deal of scholarship on the era.⁶

This special issue highlights some examples of work that may help do just that. While each of these essays approaches the Civil War era from a self-consciously international perspective, collectively and individually they still address questions of long-standing interest to American historians of the sequence and the era generally: What caused the Civil War? What accounts for the rising interest in emigration among some white and black antislavery reformers in the 1850s after abolitionists had rejected colonizationism in the previous two decades? How revolutionary was Reconstruction? How did former Confederates psychologically and institutionally manage their transition from rebels back to American citizens? Although such questions have often been considered without much explicit reference to the world outside the United States, the four authors featured here argue that looking beyond the nation's borders helps answer them.

Our intent in collecting these essays is not to provide a comprehensive survey of the work currently being done to put "the world" back in the history of the American Civil War era and vice versa. But these essays do provide examples of several methods being used by historians committed to this effort; they run the gamut from comparative history to *histoire croisée* to the history of connections across national lines.⁷

By sometimes diverging from the usual periods and fields in which these methods are employed, these essays also bring their own methodologies into sharper focus. For example, whereas the Caribbean often provides a locus for retrospective comparison with the United States, Edward Rugemer stresses connections between the Caribbean and the United States in his account of the coming of the Civil War. Gale Kenny's contribution also moves between the Caribbean and the continental United States but focuses on comparisons that historical actors themselves made between the two places, while simultaneously setting those comparisons against a broader transatlantic backdrop of conversations about citizenship, masculinity, and nationhood. Although comparative historians of the United States have most often examined antebellum slavery, racial regimes, or economic development relative to similar institutions and processes elsewhere, Peter Kolchin calls for more rigorous comparative

studies of emancipation and Reconstruction that move beyond the familiar American-Caribbean axis. Finally, whereas historians of the Civil War who have compared the conflict with wars in Europe have been most interested in questions about the relative destructiveness and “totality” of the war, Susan-Mary Grant suggests that placing the American Civil War within a broader context of mid-nineteenth-century people’s wars can address debates about the war’s aftermath that have been overshadowed by studies of Civil War memory that focus on the dead instead of the living.

In short, these essayists not only join Egerton in proposing that much research remains to be done on the entangled histories of the Civil War era and the modern world; they also establish signposts for researchers wishing to proceed into this field. If they do not sound the bugle call to “charge” as loudly as earlier manifestoes for transnational, comparative, and global history, they may instead provide historians of the Civil War era with something more useful in the long run: models for how to break ranks and advance across new terrain, as well as evidence that new ground can be gained thereby.

NOTES

1. See David Thelen, “Of Audiences, Borderlands, and Comparisons: Toward the Internationalization of American History,” *Journal of American History* 79 (September 1992): 432–62; Ian Tyrrell, “American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History,” *American Historical Review* 96 (October 1991): 1031–55; Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Participants in the 2009 symposium included Susan-Mary Grant, Matthew Pratt Guterl, Walter Johnson, Martha Jones, Peter Kolchin, David Quigley, and Edward Rugemer. Special thanks are due to John B. Boles and the Museum of Southern History for help with the organization and funding of the symposium. On the disproportion of manifestoes to examples of transnational history, consider that two very recent exchanges on transnational history in the profession’s flagship journals both still warn of the danger of transnationalism becoming a buzzword. See “Interchange: Nationalism and Internationalism in the Era of the Civil War,” *Journal of American History* 98 (September 2011): 455–89; and “AHR Conversation: On Transnational History,” *American Historical Review* 111 (December 2006): 1441–64.

2. Peter Kolchin, “The South and the World,” *Journal of Southern History* 75 (August 2009): 565. See also Kathryn McKee and Annette Trefzer, eds., “Global Contexts, Local Literatures: The New Southern Studies,” special issue of *American Literature* 78 (December 2006): 677–867. For questions about the newness of the new transnational history, see Michael McGerr, “The Price of the ‘New Transnational History,’” *American Historical Review* 96 (October 1991): 1056–67. One reason for these questions, perhaps, is the lack of firm agreement about the differences among, say, “comparative” and “transnational” and “world” history—an issue beyond the scope

of this introductory essay. For works mentioned in this paragraph, see Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); and D. W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History*, 4 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986–2004). Soon after the symposium, many other examples of scholarship on “the South and the World” began to appear, including Brian Schoen, *The Fragile Fabric of Union: Cotton, Federal Politics, and the Global Origins of the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Timothy Mason Roberts, *Distant Revolutions: 1848 and the Challenge to American Exceptionalism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009); Don H. Doyle, ed., *Secession as an International Phenomenon: From America’s Civil War to Contemporary Separatist Movements* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010); and Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010). The symposium has also been followed by others of a similar nature, including “The Civil War—Global Conflict,” Conference of the Program in Carolina Lowcountry and Atlantic World, Charleston, S.C., March 3–5, 2011, <http://spinner.cofc.edu/atlanticworld/civilwar/>; and “The Transnational Significance of the American Civil War: A Global History,” Friedrich-Schiller-University, Jena, September 15–18, 2011, <http://www.gcw.uni-jena.de/Program.html>.

3. For overarching surveys of the persistence of the Atlantic World into the nineteenth century, especially as a zone of cultural and economic exchange, see Donna Gabaccia, “A Long Atlantic in a Wider World,” *Atlantic Studies* 1 (April 2004): 1–27; Aaron Spencer Fogleman, “The Transformation of the Atlantic World, 1776–1867,” *Atlantic Studies* 6 (April 2009): 5–28; Jürgen Osterhammel and Niels P. Petersson, *Globalization: A Short History*, trans. Dona Geyer (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 57–80; and José C. Moya, “Modernization, Modernity, and the Transformation of the Atlantic World in the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Atlantic in Global History, 1500–2000*, ed. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra and Erik R. Seeman (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson, 2007), 179–98. See also the account of nineteenth-century transatlantic connections as one of interplay between the continued “flow” of some connections and the “closure” of others in Charles Bright and Michael Geyer, “Where in the World Is America? The History of the United States in the Global Age,” in Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, 63–99, esp. 76–77. On the migrations of proslavery southerners, see Matthew Pratt Guterl, *American Mediterranean: Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008).

4. Douglas R. Egerton, “Rethinking Atlantic Historiography in a Postcolonial Era: The Civil War in a Global Perspective,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 1 (March 2011): 91. See also Thomas Bender, *A Nation among Nations: America’s Place in World History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 116–81; and “Interchange.”

5. James Huston, “Interpreting the Causation Sequence: The Meaning of the Events Leading to the Civil War,” *Reviews in American History* 34 (September 2006): 324–31.

On Lincoln's connections between the Kansas-Nebraska Act and proslavery imperialism at Peoria, see Caleb McDaniel, "New Light on a Lincoln Quote," *Offprints* (April 2, 2011), <http://mcdaniel.blogs.rice.edu/?p=126>. For a telling example of the difficulty of breaking out of the sequence, consider David Potter's own posthumously published history of the sectional crisis, which opens with a prefatory chapter placing American nationalism within a broad transatlantic context shaped by the Revolutions of 1848 before turning to the usual sequence with only a few glances outward thereafter. See David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

6. C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004), 161-65. Examples of the kinds of work mentioned include Sven Beckert, "Emancipation and Empire: Reconstructing the Worldwide Web of Cotton Production in the Age of the American Civil War," *American Historical Review* 109 (December 2004): 1405-38; Michael Geyer and Charles Bright, "Global Violence and Nationalizing Wars in Eurasia and America: The Geopolitics of War in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 38 (October 1996): 619-57; Bender, *Nation among Nations*, 116-81; Richard Carwardine and Jay Sexton, eds., *The Global Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Egerton, "Rethinking Atlantic Historiography in a Postcolonial Era."

7. On *histoire croisée*, see Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, "Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity," *History and Theory* 45 (February 2006): 30-50. For a thoughtful reflection on some of these different methods, see Pierre-Yves Saunier, "Learning by Doing: Notes about the Making of the *Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History*," *Journal of Modern European History* 6 (September 2008): 159-80.