

Making History and Making the United States

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In the Declaration of Independence Thomas Jefferson became the first American to put history to work to create a nation. He blazed a path that historians have been following ever since. Consider the difficulty Jefferson faced. Different events were happening in thirteen intensely local and isolated colonies among people with different traditions, languages, religions, and circumstances. Jefferson turned these scattered events into a national narrative. Behind these individual acts by agents of the British Crown aimed at different colonies was a single menace, Jefferson insisted, that should inspire these isolated individuals to discover and act upon what they shared as bearers of the traditional liberties of Englishmen. To introduce his stunning attempt to fit isolated events into a single narrative, Jefferson began by boldly declaring that it was “necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds that have connected them with another.” The colonists, Jefferson proclaimed, were “one people.” Jefferson knew that the colonists were not “one people.” But in order to invent one nation, Jefferson had to invent one people, and in order to invent one people Jefferson had to invent one history that might unite that “one people.” It has been hard work ever since.

From 1776 until sometime in the 1960s or 1970s, it was possible to believe – indeed, it was hard to question – that nations were, or even should be, the embodiment of people’s destinies – that nations could express their identities, solve their problems, and be entrusted with their dreams and fates. The modern practice of history was born a couple of centuries ago to serve this process, to invent narratives and persuade peoples to interpret their personal experiences within national terms and narratives.

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Now, as global developments seem to be eroding the familiar authority and identity of nations from both transnational and subnational directions, and as we are coming to question both the possibility and the desirability of entrusting our individual fates to nation states, we are led by those questions to interrogate the fundamental missions that gave birth and shape to the modern practice of history. Since interrogating nation-centeredness leads to interrogation of the authority of those who have promoted national perspectives, we need to revisit how and why professional historians have made the story of the nation state a crucial part of their claims to superiority as practitioners of history. As we question our confidence in the givenness of nations as a form of human organization, we create the opportunity, the necessity, to step back to ask how history – the story of change and continuity across time – came to be tied so completely to the fate of nation states and then to imagine whether it is possible, as Prasenjit Duara expressed it in the title of his book, to “rescue history from the nation.”¹ Can we imagine a new kind of history that would not be so completely intertwined with the nation?

To begin to sharpen these issues I want in this article to build from three of my experiences and concerns. In doing so I recognize that, like other inheritors of the Declaration of Independence, I conflate nation with nation state in peculiarly American ways. In the first of these experiences, as I have explored transnational processes and contents as editor of the *Journal of American History*, I have come to see basic themes in American history from wider perspectives than the nation-centered ones that had once seemed so natural. Second, as a citizen and historian of citizenship, I have been deeply troubled by how the government of the United States (like governments elsewhere) has come adrift from the experiences of our people and particularly how opinion managers have come to do the traditional work of history – defining agendas and missions and making up stories that connect people with nation. Since our civic task has been to find and assemble materials that connect individuals and their needs to nation, I want to understand how modern historians may have contributed practices that leave government beyond popular reach, leaving citizens feeling unempowered as they use their own experiences and try to bring history into the civic forum. And finally I want to report results from a national survey of popular uses of the past in the United States to suggest different ways of talking about history’s mission to explore change over

¹ Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago, 1995).

time that might lead us to imagine alternatives to history's nation-centered traditions.

Let me begin with an obvious starting-place. I do not know whether nations are going to fade away, an invention of the modern and modernist world, destined to be replaced by subnational or transnational units, or whether they will persist in some form as basic political assemblies. But I do know that events around the world now make it possible to see something that was impossible before: how constructed and fragile nations are, to see that they are not self-evidently inevitable or necessary or desirable. We can ask questions that were unthinkable a generation ago.

I

I used to think that I understood the history of the United States. That history began in rivalries between European empires. Inspired by visions of worshipping God or of obtaining wealth, Europeans sailed for the western hemisphere and established colonies. Moving from settled areas across a vast frontier, encountering indigenous peoples and strange patterns of nature, these Europeans naturally placed this frontier experience and contact with Indians at the center of their emerging national myths. After a couple of centuries as outposts on the western edge of an Old World empire, the colonies rebelled and established national independence. The new nation developed a federal form of government in order to accommodate conflicting pressures for locating political authority in local communities, states, or national level. Across the first half of the nineteenth century, champions of states rights fought promoters of national authority in one battle after another. States seceded and threatened to secede from the Federal Union. Finally, as a result of civil warfare, the nationalists won out over states' rights advocates, and, by the late nineteenth century, political power had centralized in the hands of the rich, nation-minded elites. But, by the turn of the twentieth century, popular uprisings sprang up all over the country that aimed to give power to the people in a vast array of movements and programs to redistribute wealth. In the 1930s, the most progressive and popular president established unprecedented federal initiatives to regulate business and create a security net. In the 1980s, the New Right came to power with policies to deregulate the economy, redistribute wealth upward, and generally encourage free trade. Now, in the 1990s, the central debate about national identity, reprising earlier twentieth-century debates, is

about what constitutes the core of national identity, whether the nation's central construction of itself as a melting pot any longer describes both the national culture and its people.

I just reported conventional narratives of the history of the United States. The official name of this country is the United States of Mexico, *Estados Unidos Mexicanos*.

And so my first questions emerged as I discovered that things I had assumed to define American history also defined the history of other places. The frontier experience was a defining feature not only of the United States of Mexico and America, but also of South Africa, Argentina, Canada, Brazil, Australia. Federalism not only centered constitutional debate in both United States, but also in Switzerland, Yugoslavia, Germany, Canada, Nigeria, indeed most of the world, as the makers of nations tried to balance their parts with a whole. And the United States of America was not the only country to have a civil war over these issues. Populism and progressivism had their early twentieth-century counterparts as movements for social and political democracy not only in the local movements that we remember as the "Mexican Revolution," but also on all continents. Lázaro Cárdenas and Franklin Roosevelt, in the 1930s, and Carlos Salinas de Gortari and Ronald Reagan, in the 1980s, were not the only national leaders to propose redistributory changes in relations between government and corporations.

So, what happened to the American exceptionalism that I had been taught had marked our history? First, I learned from Joyce Appleby that American exceptionalism was not even American, that it was invented in Europe.² And then I learned that the Germans had a *Sonderweg* of German exceptionalism, and that there was Mexican exceptionalism, and a professor from Montevideo told me about Uruguayan exceptionalism. I soon became interested not in whether (let alone how) the United States was exceptional but why people in so many countries wanted to invent exceptionalisms and to tell stories that were patently not unique to their countries as if they were unique.

While comparative history interrogates the nation-centeredness of historical narratives by identifying similar processes in many nations, it challenges the assumption of national uniqueness even more deeply by looking first at variations in those similar patterns and second at how people in one country situated their experiences in processes they saw not as isolated but as transnational conversations and exchanges. In the early

² Joyce Appleby, "America's Historic Diversity: Beyond Exceptionalism," *Journal of American History*, 79 (September 1992), 419–31.

1920s, Mexico's minister of education, José Vasconcelos, drew on earlier ideas to develop the concept of *mestizaje* as an ideological symbol and narrative of identity for the new revolutionary regime's nationalism, a way of combining Indian and Spanish traditions in a Mexican version of the melting-pot that Israel Zangwill had proclaimed a few years earlier to describe how different peoples mixed to make American identity. We can compare the history of Vasconcelos's and Zangwill's constructions. While Americans questioned the melting pot metaphor early and have only recently begun to conclude that the United States may indeed be a melting-pot – “Mestizo America,” Gary Nash calls it – Mexicans accepted the *mestizaje* label at first and only later came to question it.³

Continuing to explore the border between the United States and Mexico, I began to see that nation-centered traditions of history were leading me to define cultures and institutions and texts in national terms, as American, when the much more interesting questions had to do with how texts and products and institutions and cultures were embraced, rejected, and reshaped in borderlands between nations. I became fascinated first by how people around the world translated and transformed materials that originated in one country through creative processes of mediation, negotiation, and creolization. I became equally fascinated by how people and institutions and governments used the concept of nation (and its resources) to try to retard, advance, and control processes of transnational exchange. While television programs, diseases, consumer products, propaganda, tourists, guest workers, tastes, advertising, ideas, web sites, fashions, and languages themselves move across borders and are engaged by people in different countries, those people remake what they receive while nation states through military force, tariffs, boycotts, programming restrictions, and propaganda seek to shape these transnational processes. Reinhold Wagnleitner has shown how Austrian teenagers in the 1950s remade Elvis Presley into an urban folk hero whom they could use to rebuke their elders for supporting Naziism. The United States has historically been a powerful source and symbol of transnational processes

³ I have picked up ideas from sources that come at these issues from different directions: Alan Knight, “Racism, Revolution, and *Indigenismo*: Mexico, 1910–1940,” in Richard Graham, ed., *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870–1940* (Austin, 1990), 71–113; Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, *Mexico at the World's Fairs: Crafting a Modern Nation* (Berkeley, 1996); Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, *México Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization* (1987; trans. by Philip A. Dennis; Austin, 1996); Nash, “The Hidden History of Mestizo America,” *Journal of American History*, 82 (December 1995), 941–62; Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge, 1991); interview with Carlos Monsiváis, 2 May 1998.

– some call it imperialism – from military to commercial and popular culture – and so borderlands are filled and contested with words like “Americanization” or anti-Americanism.⁴

By looking at what individuals create in the spaces between nations, I began to reconceive history. The United States government in 1944 erected what it hoped would be an impenetrable barrier to keep nations apart by strictly prohibiting any fraternization between occupying American soldiers and German civilians, but individual American GIs and German women, two by two, illustrated that there was some historical force stronger than nationality. They created 90,000 illegitimate occupation babies in a single year.⁵ What individuals do between cultures – tensions between rhythms of intimate life and imperatives of nations – seems more basic to me now than how cultures keep individuals apart.

Now we can see that while the world’s leaders were dividing the globe into nation states bound together in ideological alliances, the world’s peoples were making their own fundamental historical development: the migrations of people, often in search of work, in processes that blurred the boundaries between nations and challenged how and where nations excluded and included migrants from participation in the nation’s life. Viewed as diasporic processes, the story of Italians becomes the story of Americans, French, Argentines, Australians, and Canadians as individuals from the same place encountered resistance and acceptance, tamed and were tamed by, different host societies. And the stories of migrants were also stories of how individuals, families and communities sustained their lives in circuits they constructed across national borders that at once blurred, faded, and defied nation-centered perspectives as they left behind hybrid cultures and institutions. In processes that transform rural Mexico and the southwestern United States we see that the geographically situated idea of nation is almost meaningless to explain the forces that move people or even the languages like Spanglish in which they communicate. The cultural and intellectual exchanges blacks have created between continents turn stories of the African diaspora into stories of the Black Atlantic.⁶

⁴ Wagnleitner, *Coca Colonization and the Cold War* (1991; trans., Chapel Hill, 1994); Rob Kroes, *If You’ve Seen One, You’ve Seen the Mall: Europeans and American Mass Culture* (Urbana, 1996); Rob Kroes, Robert Rydell, and Doeko F. J. Bosscher, eds., *Cultural Transmissions and Receptions: American Mass Culture in Europe* (Amsterdam, 1993); Richard Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II* (New York, 1997), for examples.

⁵ Reinhold Wagnleitner, “Propagating the American Dream: Cultural Policies as Means of Integration,” *American Studies International*, 25 (April 1986), 75.

⁶ Donna Gabaccia and Fraser Ottanelli, “Diaspora or International Proletariat? Italian Labor Migration and the Making of Multi-Ethnic States, 1815–1939” (unpublished

These massive migrations of people in search of work, Yasemin Nuhoglu Soysal has argued, have forced states – in Europe with Turkish or Senegalese migrants, in the United States, with Vietnamese or Mexican – to grant civil and social rights to newcomers before making them citizens, a dramatic reversal of traditional patterns in which the state first saw people as citizens and then bestowed rights on them. The ferocious conflict in California over Proposition 187 – to extend civil rights to undocumented migrants – typified new struggles over what citizenship will mean in transnational perspectives. The movements for human rights, to reconceive citizenship and rights and to rewrite constitutions so that rights are things people carry by virtue of their humanity or personhood, bring into view a fundamental challenge to traditional responsibilities of nations as the historic creators of citizenship.⁷

Finally, what once seemed to be themes in American history now seem part of global processes. The story of how the RCA electronic corporation built a plant with a thousand workers to assemble color television sets in Bloomington, Indiana, was clearly a piece of American history. But then RCA was taken over by a French conglomerate and the new French owners decided to move the plant to Mexico. The history of this same plant now

paper presented at International Commission of Historical Sciences, Montreal, 1995); Bruno Ramirez, *On the Move: French-Canadian and Italian Migrants in the North Atlantic Economy, 1860–1914* (Toronto, 1991); Robin D. G. Kelley, “The World The Diaspora Made: The International Context of Black History” (forthcoming *Journal of American History* article); Kelley and Sidney J. Lemelle, “Introduction: Imagining Home: Pan-Africanism Revisited,” in Lemelle and Kelley, eds., *Imagining Home: Class, Culture and Nationalism in the African Diaspora* (London, 1994), 1–16; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London, 1993).

Many pioneering studies have focused on Mexican-Americans and borderlands between Mexico and the United States: Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, 1987); Roger Rouse, “Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism,” *Diaspora*, 1 (Spring 1991) 8–23; Carlos González Gutiérrez, “The Mexican Diaspora in California: Limited Possibilities for the Mexican Government,” in Abraham F. Lowenthal and Katrina Burgess, eds., *The California-Mexico Connection* (Stanford, 1993); José David Saldívar, *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (Berkeley, 1997); Nestor Garcia Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (trans. by Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. Lopez; Minneapolis, 1995); David Avalos with John C. Welchman, “Response to the Philosophical Brothel,” in Welchman, ed., *Rethinking Borders* (Minneapolis 1996), 87–99; Carlos Fuentes, *The Crystal Frontier* (1995, trans. by Alfred Mac Adam; New York, 1997); Diana Marcum, “The Busboys of San Miguel,” *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, 14 Dec. 1997, 34ff; “Finding a ‘Muy Friquiado’ Way to Speak,” *Los Angeles Times*, 28 Aug. 1997; “Home for the Holidays,” *Los Angeles Times*, 25 Dec. 1997.

⁷ Y. N. Soysal, *Limits of Citizenship: Migrants and Postnational Membership in Europe* (Chicago, 1994).

seems a piece of French or Mexican history or the history of capitalism. Modern transnational corporations, as Masao Miyoshi has noted, promote loyalty to themselves and their shareholders, ahead of loyalty to the country of origin. The result is to sap the authority and autonomy of nation states and to leave no substitute agency to do things states have done: define citizenship, control currency, impose law, protect public health, provide general education, maintain security, guide the national economy.⁸ The story of how capitalism and its agents – particularly multinational corporations – move across national borders and challenge traditional authorities of nation states is paralleled by transnational circulations, say, of religion or art or ideas.

II

When I began to see how familiar phenomena of American history made better sense in transnational perspectives than in familiar nation-centered terms, I wanted to explore how and why historians had created nation-centered narratives to persuade Americans to understand their experiences. The squeezing of people's experience into nation-centered forms that had seemed so natural to me in graduate school in the 1960s now seemed a very difficult task. In this section I will look at five moments when self-conscious groups of historians promoted national narratives in order to assume authority over alternative storytellers and perspectives on the past. These five groups and their moments might be called Federalists, Romantics, Professionalizers, War Mobilizers, and Progressives.

The challenge of persuading colonists to identify their experiences with the fate of the new Federal Union was enormous. For one thing, some eighteenth-century historians still looked to the past for signs of the laws of God or of nature, not for secular guidance. When they looked at the course of human events, not only did many colonists oppose the Revolution, but many others considered the conflict a culmination of local experiences. For Rhode Islanders the British Parliament might be made into an enemy but historically the real enemy was Massachusetts. As thirteen independent states, Americans fought the British and confederated with each other in a weak union. The revolution stimulated a tremendous grassroots interest in local and state history that by the first

⁸ M. Miyoshi, "A Borderless World? From Colonialism to Transnationalism and the Decline of the Nation-State," *Critical Inquiry* (Summer 1993), 726–51.

part of the nineteenth century led to the creation of state and local historical societies and libraries. Experiencing life and remembering the past primarily in local and state terms, the new Americans were skeptical, divided, and ambivalent about entrusting a national government with power over their lives. Moving their national capital thirteen times in the first fifteen years, not counting the time they later abandoned it for the British to burn, Americans were far from united in creating a history that would culminate in a strong national government.

Dreamers tried to invent a history that would inspire Americans to think in national terms and give their loyalties to a nation state. The first nation-minded historians joined other mercantile elites in promoting a stronger national government that could suppress local popular rebellions like that of Daniel Shays in western Massachusetts. David Ramsay wrote a *History of the American Revolution* (1789). Jedediah Morse wrote *The History of America in Two Books* (1790). Noah Webster wrote *An American Selection of Lessons in Reading and Speaking* (1787) in order to encourage “habits of obedience,” in Webster’s words, to the new Federal Constitution and a strong national government. Ramsay, Morse, and Webster tried to cover what they were really trying to do – turn a revolutionary movement into one for stability – by defining the revolution as a nation-making experience that reached inevitable fulfillment in the Constitution and a strong national government thirteen years later. Morse solved the problem of explaining the ferocious debates about the best way to fulfill the Revolution by not talking about them at all and skipping directly from military victory in the Revolution to the Constitution in hopes that the outcome would seem inevitable.⁹

The second great moment when historians created the nation grew from the romantic nationalism that swept across Europe and America in the first half of the nineteenth century. In the United States the work of nation-building ran up against major challenges: the increasingly explosive issue of slavery that repeatedly threatened to split the nation; the persistence of local and state pride that in its political extreme encouraged secession from the union (at Hartford in 1815 as much as at

⁹ David D. Van Tassel, *Recording America’s Past: An Interpretation of the Development of Historical Studies in America, 1607–1884* (Chicago, 1960), Chs. 3–6 trace persistence of local orientation, with quote from Webster on p. 44; Arthur H. Shaffer, *The Politics of History: Writing the History of the American Revolution, 1783–1815* (Chicago, 1975), esp. Ch. 7 and pp. 41–8, 143–6. For migration of capitol see Olynthus B. Clark, “The Bid of the West for the National Capitol,” *Proceedings of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association*, 3 (1909–10), 214–15.

Charleston) and that tended to focus popular historical interest in state and local historical societies; and finally fear that expansion and war with Mexico, like slavery, would destroy the moral core of national identity. It was hard to make nation the defining narrative in an age when the Union was patched together by increasingly desperate compromises whose failures ended in civil war. But historians took that charge as their mission.

The most compelling answer came from the towering figure of nineteenth-century nationalist historiography, George Bancroft, whose *History of the United States from the Discovery of the American Continent* appeared in ten volumes between 1834 and 1874. Inspired by the German romanticism of Herder and Hegel, Bancroft and other American romantic nationalists presented American history as the story of the fulfillment of a spirit or Geist of liberty that began in the Saxon forests, developed in England, and then migrated with colonists westward to reach its final destiny in the United States. “In the cabin of the Mayflower,” Bancroft wrote in the introduction to the first volume, “humanity recovered its rights and instituted government on the basis of ‘equal laws’ enacted by all the people for ‘the general good.’” Guided by faith in progress, Bancroft believed that history should reveal “the spirit of the age” as it unfolded according to the all-pervasive plan of God that “humanity is steadily advancing, that the advance of liberty and justice is certain.” Bancroft differed from earlier Federalist historians in that he sided with “the people” and believed that nationality would be fulfilled not when Americans identified with a strong government but when they identified with an irresistible destiny. For all their differences, however, Bancroft’s Jacksonian history resembled the Federalism of Ramsay, Morse, and Webster in its confidence that nationality provided the highest fulfillment of a people and in its refusal to listen to people talk about their own experiences in their own terms. The failure to listen to experience also separated Bancroft from both American antiquarians and European nationalists of the period, who ransacked folkloric materials from the past and emphasized common language, territory, and hereditary enemies, all of which could have been sources to listen to experiences.¹⁰

¹⁰ For background on historians and challenges of defining national identity and history in antebellum United States, see Van Tassel, *Recording America’s Past*, Chs. 9–14; H. G. Jones, ed., *Historical Consciousness in the Early Republic: The Origins of State Historical Societies, Museums, and Collections, 1791–1861* (Chapel Hill, 1995); Leslie W. Dunlap, *American Historical Societies, 1790–1860* (Madison, 1944); Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right* (New York, 1995), 20–1, 28, 46–7. Bancroft quotes from Bancroft, *The History of the United States from the Discovery*

The new professional historians of the 1880s and 1890s created a third moment when historians promoted national narratives to claim the authority to explain change over time against competitors and alternative visions. The new professionals waged war on the popular writers – like Bancroft – who were interested in selling books to a market-driven popular culture that valued “color” and literary qualities (by 1876 the first volume of Bancroft’s *History* had passed through 26 printings). Popular writers blurred into a second group of enemies – the privileged gentlemen – businessmen, lawyers, public officials like Theodore Roosevelt – who wrote history as an avocation, perhaps as a point of identity for the new urban middle classes. But the real enemies were the hordes of people who identified history with their families and local communities. Indeed, for the first century of American life, state and local historical societies were the sole promoters of historical study. Interested in collecting, preserving, and studying the activities and relics of those who went before them, the real historians of nineteenth century America were not interested in national trajectories but in the local and immediate. It did not matter what it was as long as it belonged to the family or community – Indian relics, passenger pigeons, diaries of settlers. Their tastes were very broad – and very local.

The very breadth of topics and experiences that engaged Americans posed a real challenge to the new professionalizers. In the ancient tradition of antiquarian concern with an incredible range of subjects, the popular *Magazine of American History* in the 1880s carried articles not only on political and military history, but also on the origins of New Year’s Day as a holiday, the Van Cortlandt Manor House, the history of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* newspaper, the burial of Black Hawk, a writer’s trip to Canada with former Confederate President Jefferson Davis, “How President Lincoln Earned His First Dollar,” an earthquake in Charleston, Running Antelope’s Autobiography, ballads, and folk poems. These wonderful topics and sources were featured not only in popular magazines but also in the local and state historical societies where families could trace their ancestors.¹¹

of the Continent (1876–79 edn; as edited by Russel B. Nye [Chicago, 1966]), pp. xi, xiv, 24. See also David W. Noble, *Historians Against History: The Frontier Thesis and the National Covenant in American Historical Writing Since 1830* (Minneapolis, 1965), Ch. 2.

¹¹ Anthony Grafton argues that the antiquarian movement that blossomed in the sixteenth century not only covered a broad range of topics, but also provided important methodological inspiration for subsequent historians. Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), 171–89.

In developing the new American Historical Association in 1884 to claim the authority to interpret the past, the new professionals seemed to bring few advantages. The first center of graduate training had been created at Johns Hopkins only eight years earlier. There were only eleven professors of history in the United States. And in its early years the new organization attracted nuisances like ex-President Rutherford B. Hayes, Senator George F. Hoar, US Civil Service Commissioner Theodore Roosevelt, Secretary of State William Maxwell Evarts, plus dozens of people from state and local historical societies and libraries who had not yet realized that they were a menace to the future of history.

The new professionals sought to turn what historians did from acts of artistic or literary creativity, of family and community recognition and pride, of antiquarian love for pieces of the past for their own sakes, into tiny building blocks that were each a “contribution” to something that was so immense that individual workers had trouble seeing it whole. By promoting a new base for scholarship in which individuals did “painstaking research in very limited fields,” as Harvard’s Albert Bushell Hart explained it, they placed their faith in discipline and organization which would turn history into a co-ordinated effort of many individuals, driven by the same rigorous training and methods. So trained with special skills, the new professionals could wrest the authority to practice history from amateurs, gentlemen, authors trying to sell books, literary stylists, genealogists looking for family recognition, and local and state historians.¹²

J. Franklin Jameson, the most energetic of the new professionals, proclaimed: “The rise of professional or professorial history-writing coincided with...a discontent with rhetorical and imaginative presentations of human life, bred in the mind of a generation to which Darwin and his fellows had taught the cogency and pervasiveness of scientific laws... After an age of brilliant amateurs history loses her unchartered freedom and is sent to school, to learn how to read and interpret documents, how to sift and weigh evidence, how to avoid the blunders of amateurs and the vagaries of rhetoricians.” For the growth of professional history “it is the spread of thoroughly good second-class work that our science most needs at present; for it sorely needs that improvement in technical process, that superior finish of workmanship, which a large number of works of talent can do more to foster than a few works of literary genius.” Becoming the founding editor of the *American Historical*

¹² Hart, “The Historical Opportunity in America,” *American Historical Review*, 4 (October 1898), 11.

Review in 1895, Jameson defined the challenge as the creation of a discipline, with boundaries and hierarchies and rules: “To evoke originality, to kindle the fires of genius, is not their function; but to regularize, to criticize, to restrain vagaries, to set a standard of workmanship and compel men to conform to it” was the purpose.¹³

Watching this spread of second-class work, the brilliant dilettante Theodore Roosevelt observed: “After a while it dawned on me that all of the conscientious, industrious, painstaking little pedants, who could have been useful in a rather small way if they had understood their own limitations, had become because of their conceit distinctly noxious. They solemnly believed that if there were only enough of them, and that if they only collected enough facts of all kinds and sorts, there would cease to be any need hereafter for great writers, great thinkers.”¹⁴ The “painstaking little pedants” carried the day, imagining a national whole that was too complex and required too much “objectivity” for the epic grandeur of Bancroft or Roosevelt. But the professionals resembled Bancroft and the Federalists in one crucial way: the point of history was to build a nation, to focus stories of change over time on the nation, to dismiss subnational or transnational visions of experience.

Paralleling the centralizing drive by businessmen to create and control national markets, the professionalizers tried to overwhelm competitors and turn the focus of history from local pride to national identity. The first president of the American Historical Association – President Andrew White of Cornell University – proclaimed that “all history must be rewritten from an American point of view.” In order to give history an “American point of view” in practice, professionals needed to recruit individuals from scattered local communities and to instill in them loyalty to national networks and vision. Promoters of the new historical association called for “a national association of active workers from many local centers of academic learning and corporate influence.” Personal contacts among former strangers would also subordinate individual difference and prejudice to the development of what chairman Justin Winsor called in 1884,

a new spirit of research ... The spirit requires for its sustenance mutual recognition and suggestion among its devotees. We can deduce encouragement and

¹³ J. F. Jameson, *The History of Historical Writing in America* (1891; reprinted, New York, 1961), 132–3; Jameson, “The Influences of Universities upon Historical Writing” (1901) in Morey Rothberg and Jacqueline Goggin, eds., *John Franklin Jameson and the Development of Humanistic Scholarship in America* (Athens, Ga., 1993), I, 270, 271, 272.

¹⁴ Quoted in John Higham with Leonard Krieger and Felix Gilbert, *History* (Englewood Cliffs, 1965), 7–8.

experience stimulating by this sort of personal contact. Scholars and students can no longer afford to live isolated. They must come together to derive that zest which arises from personal acquaintance, to submit idiosyncrasies to the contact of their fellows, and they come from the convocation healthier and more circumspect.

To overcome individual and local idiosyncrasy they tried to make the study of the past into a discipline with standards of evidence, conventions of what voices and sources to let speak and under what circumstances, with rules that allowed scholars to read sources on their terms instead of the terms of authors. To accomplish such a monumental change in how the past could be approached, they needed every individual they could recruit. The best thing about the AHA, observed AHA founder Herbert Baxter Adams in *The Nation*, was “the widening of acquaintance and good fellowship among workers in the same field. It is not so much the reading of papers that advances science – it is the association itself. It is the meeting of men and the exchange of ideas.” Of his dreams for the new organization Adams confided “we shall form a very happy family and have a very good time.” What set Adams and other professional pioneers apart was not their brilliance, but their indefatigable capacity to create new means and opportunities for ambitious young scholars to make careers as the first generation of specialized academic historians. In order to fulfill the enormous challenges they assumed for themselves, these individuals developed a strong sense of themselves as individuals who knew each other well – and would be regarded by others as “insiders” – as they lectured at each others’ universities, lived in each others’ homes, and advanced each others’ interests and those of their students.

Trying to create in university departments and specialized monographic research the means to seize authority for history from the popular marketplace and local historical societies, professionals defined their mission as the capacity to see the whole history of the nation, not its local communities and parochial prejudices. Promoting the vision over three decades as editor of the *American Historical Review*, J. Franklin Jameson complained that much writing on state and local history was “hopelessly provincial and unscholarly.” The new scientific practices of the age, wrote Jameson in 1891, were irrelevant to the concerns that animated local history: “The tendencies of many of our numerous local historical societies form a counter-current, or, better, an eddy, in which chips of ancient timber float placidly round and round in the same little circle, quite unaffected by any general currents whatever.” Since their basic claim to authority was the capacity to identify the “national” significance

in events and documents, the new professionalizers ceaselessly promoted the nationalization of historical perspective, writes Peter Novick. Jameson lectured local and state societies that their subjects were too local, that the societies encouraged patrons to study their families and sponsored genealogy when the history of the nation was a patently more worthy goal. The local and state societies were “feeble mostly, and myopic,” Jameson recalled in 1934.¹⁵

To overcome the local and from their point of view indiscriminate orientations of popular historymakers, the new professionals – like the German pioneers they praised – called for the close examination of original and official primary sources. In embracing official primary sources (and promoting their preservation and dissemination), they developed scholarship in close association with the modern nation state, making the fate of the nation, not experiences of people, the topic of history.

Instead of making history the story of the spirit of liberty or the destiny of people, the new professionals tried to rebind the nation by creating national narratives that could be embraced by those who had fought for blue and gray alike. The Civil War, they insisted, was not a story of conflict between two societies or between two sets of values but was the story of human courage and bravery exhibited by all. Reflecting the fragility that many observers have identified as a hallmark of nationalism, professional scholars gradually assimilated the Civil War into a national narrative. The new professionals asserted a national narrative that drained moral content as it sought to supplant local loyalties. They narrowed history’s content from an interest in a vast range of experiences that marked popular historymaking to the political and military story of nation state.

The central struggle has persisted since the 1880s because most

¹⁵ *Papers of the American Historical Association 1885*, I:1, 11; I:2, 22; *The Nation*, 39 (4 Sept. 1884), 201; Adams to Daniel Coit Gilman, 8 Aug. 1884, in W. Stull Holt, ed., *Historical Scholarship in the United States, 1876–1901: As Revealed in the Correspondence of Herbert B. Adams* (Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, 56:4 (1938), 464; Jameson, *Historical Writing in America*, 145; Jameson, “The Present State of Historical Writing in America” (1910), in Rothberg and Goggin, eds., *Jameson*, 297; Jameson, “The Functions of State and Local Historical Societies with Respect to Research and Publication,” *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1897*, 53–9; Jameson, “Early Days of the American Historical Association, 1884–1895,” *American Historical Review*, 40 (Oct. 1934), 2; P. Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), 73. For more background on the formation of the AHA, see David D. Van Tassel, “From Learned Society to Professional Organization: The American Historical Association, 1884–1900,” *American Historical Review*, 89 (Oct. 1984), 929–56.

Americans, then and now, understand history in local and family terms. In 1890, six years after the AHA had been founded, when the AHA had fewer than 600 members, the Pennsylvania Historical Society had three times that many members. By 1900 the popular historian Edward Eggleston complained that the AHA “discusses subjects I have no interest in” and “seems to be run in the interests of college professors only and to give those of us who are not of that clan the cold shoulder.” In 1940, the AHA finally conceded failure in its half-century struggle to “professionalize” state and local historymaking by expelling local, amateur, and genealogical historians who responded by creating the American Association for State and Local History.¹⁶ Even today many state historical societies rival the American Historical Association in the number of their members and subscribers to popular magazines devoted to the history of their states.

Rejected in the market-place of popular culture and by local and state history enthusiasts, the nationalizing professionals next sought an audience that could not fight back: students. In grade schools, high schools, and universities, students should be made to learn through formal curricula and textbooks the national history that professionals were creating and stitching together. In 1898 the AHA created a Committee of Seven to guide creation of a national history curriculum for the schools in an initiative that professionals have re-enacted since then, most recently in national history “standards” for public schools. The original Committee of Seven recommended that the final year be given over to American history with “its chief object . . . to lead the pupil to a knowledge of the fundamentals of the state and society of which he is a part, to an appreciation of his duties as a citizen, and to an intelligent, tolerant patriotism . . . to impress upon the learner a sense of duty and responsibility” so as to know the “principles and fundamental character of his government.” For this reason, the Committee insisted that economic and social history not be permitted to water down the centerpiece, political history. The histories of families or work or society might be popular, but they were marginal; the history of the nation state was the

¹⁶ *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 21 (No. 4, 1897), 518; Eggleston quoted in Van Tassel, “From Learned Society to Professional Organization,” 964. For a wider perspective on this conflict see David J. Russo, *Keepers of Our Past: Local Historical Writing in the United States, 1820s–1930s* (Westport, Ct., 1988) and for a later conflict with similar roots, Roy Rosenzweig, “Marketing the Past: *American Heritage* and Popular History in the United States,” in Susan Porter Benson et al., eds., *Presenting the Past* (Philadelphia, 1986), 21–49.

defining work of professional history.¹⁷ By justifying their national curriculum and national narrative as a means to teach civics, the new professionals imprisoned their stories in political and military narratives that were alien to the more social interests of popular historymakers.

The embrace of the nation by professionals culminated in the fourth moment: the promotion of World War I. In partnerships between the new professional associations and the state, historians contributed to conscripting students and other individuals into the state's armies and to conscripting all experience behind a single narrative that would advance the state's needs. Historians hastily abandoned the narrative of the United States as a story of unfolding democracy, because that story culminated in the demand by anti-war progressives for a popular vote before the United States would enter the war. They jettisoned narratives that told of Irish-American or German-American or transnational American identities, for these pointed toward neutrality – or worse – in the war. They abandoned progressive narratives about workers or socialism or social justice and local narratives about Missouri or Texas or Wisconsin, where citizens overwhelmingly opposed the war. And they abandoned narratives that centered on the family. Each of these loyalties led Americans to resist participation in World War I. Instead, historians worked up an elaborate story about why national honor was offended when Americans were killed by a German submarine instead of a British mine, about why the British government that had suppressed the Easter Rising in Ireland was a friend of democracy while the German government was a menace to civilization. Hard work, this making of national narratives.

“At no time in our history has the historian been so obviously called to the immediate service of the Nation,” the National Board for Historical Service wrote in a circular letter to 225 historians. The Mississippi Valley Historical Association urged that “means be taken by the Government of the United States to facilitate the sound historical instruction of the people of the United States to the end that a correct public opinion with full knowledge of the facts that have made for our freedom and democracy in the past may stand stubbornly in our struggle for the maintenance of those principles in the future.” Historians developed and required courses on American War Aims: “The colleges became nuclei from which radiated the influences necessary to sustain the war spirit and in which were carried on the scientific activities essential to the prosecution of a modern war,” wrote Special Historian of the Michigan War Preparedness Board, Charles

¹⁷ “The Study of History in Schools,” *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1898*, pp. 467, 468, 469.

Landrum. Eager to “develop some enthusiasum among the hyphenates” and on guard against traitors, Professor Laurence Larson of the University of Illinois pored over 20 daily and weekly German-American newspapers in Illinois and summarized their contents for the Committee on Public Information. He exemplified the type of “service which historical training contributed to the winning of the war.” Appalled that an American senator, Robert La Follette of Wisconsin, opposed American participation in the war, Professor James G. Randall of Roanoke College assisted the war effort by scouring the German press for favorable mentions of La Follette and reporting what he found to the Committee on Public Information.

To read reports from the state boards and their county units working to mobilize history for the war is to hear the fear of being judged a slacker, failing to use every skill or document or drop of energy a historian had to demonstrate loyalty and commitment to the cause of war. “Disloyalty and intrigue are abroad,” came a warning from the Texas co-ordinator of wartime history activities, “and Americans should one and all so understand our part in this war that no doubt or faint heartedness can turn us aside from what we have undertaken to do.” Professor Larson believed that the challenge for history professors was not so much to instill right thinking as to whip up enthusiasm: “The country is loyal, but the loyalty is rather passive” and “it will take every agency at the disposal of the government to get the populace to the proper point of determination to see the war through to the bitter end.”¹⁸ As Bancroft had invented the spirit of liberty to power history through time, leaving people the destiny of being swept along by this imaginary spirit, professional historians in World War I invented equally abstract narratives about democracy and civilization and required Americans to commit their lives to these trajectories that seemed equally remote from the experiences of most Americans.

The transformation of historical scholarship over the past generation – the fifth period – has not fundamentally altered patterns that began earlier even though in its content it has become more critical of state policies and attentive to subcultures. Professional historians still ground their claims to authority on the latest research done by other academics. The “history wars” that seemed to break out across American culture in

¹⁸ *Annual Report of the American Historical Association...1919*, I, 162, 171, 217, 242, 275. Randall to Victor S. Clark, 16 Feb. 1918, Box 4, Larson to Carl Russell Fish, 19 May 1917, Larson to Federick Jackson Turner, 16 May 1917, Box 34, National Board for Historical Service Papers, Library of Congress.

the 1990s were on one level an attempt by professionals to assert their authority to define the nation based on academic research. Paul Boyer called the *Enola Gay* controversy an “angry struggle over who would finally determine the meaning of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: historians or ‘the people.’” In 1994, the OAH executive board condemned the Smithsonian governing board for changing “interpretations of history for reasons outside professional procedures and criteria.”¹⁹

Like the first progressive historians in the early twentieth century, the new social historians who blossomed during and after the 1960s identified with the experiences and struggles of those who challenged dominant American institutions, policies, and cultures. Even as they reported local conflicts and transformations in work, class, gender, race, ethnicity, or sexual preference, historians usually presented the local stories as implicit case studies of national patterns and assumed that the sites for making a more just society would be in American politics and American culture.²⁰

While there have been attempts by social historians to imagine history beyond national borders – Marx long ago appealed to “workers of the world” – most scholars assumed that the nation was the natural arena in which struggles would be resolved. “That even the best social historians do not find themselves challenging the assumption that the nation is the master subject of history or theorizing an alternative to the already-always nation space is testimony to the complicity of history and the nation state,” writes Prasenjit Duara. While Duara’s judgment overlooks exciting recent explorations of Mexican–American borderlands and queer theory and practice, I think he is basically right. George Sanchez has suggested that scholars on all sides of the debates over multi-culturalism – Michael Lind, Gary Gerstle, David Hollinger, for examples – are essentially trying to mobilize history to create yet another new nationalism, not to create alternatives to the assumptions of nation at the core of experience and destiny. Observing that historians were more comfortable borrowing ideas and methods from people in other disciplines than from historians of other countries, John Higham in 1985 saw relations between specialists

¹⁹ Boyer quoted in Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, eds., *The History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (New York, 1996), 131. For a case study of how many professionals interpreted conflict over content as conflict over professional authority, see “History and the Public: What Can We Handle? A Round Table about History after the *Enola Gay* Controversy,” *Journal of American History*, 82 (Dec. 1995), 1029–115.

²⁰ For a variety of perspectives on the impact on historical practice of the new social historians, see “What Has Changed and Not Changed in American Historical Practice: A Round Table,” *Journal of American History*, 76 (Sept. 1989), 393–478.

in American history and European history in the United States as inhabiting “a house in which inhabitants are leaning out of many open windows gaily chattering with the neighbors [from other disciplines] while the doors between the rooms stay closed.”²¹

III

From this brief look at attempts by American historians to impose national narratives on alternative visions of the past, I am left with some troubling conclusions. Part of the problem is that professional history as a discipline grew up everywhere with the nation state; all histories tend to be nation-centered. From this perspective we need to interrogate history and historical practice everywhere. Can we develop other methods, sources, and narratives for exploring change over time that do not place the nation state and national audiences at their core? Can we imagine history departments that are not organized along national and regional lines?

But I have come to agree with an Israeli colleague, Ilan Troen, that it will be harder to create transnational perspectives on history in the United States than in other countries. There are reasons why some of the best historical and theoretical work in the area of nation-building does not originate in the United States. What is it about American historical practice that makes it so hard for American historians to question nationality, to explore transnational approaches?

The starting-place for my answer is that Americans inhabit a kind of nation-centeredness, if not nationalism, that is so powerful that, as with the powerful everywhere, Americans do not easily recognize it. Although historians have explored sources of national division from ethnicity to civil war, we still do not have a Quebec, Lombardy, Catalonia, Chiapas, or Scotland to force us constantly to interrogate what the nation means, how it has been constructed. The United States “won” the Cold War, whatever that means, and McDonalds, Coca Cola, Hollywood, and rock’n’roll reach all corners of the planet. American hegemony seems natural, not something to be questioned. We Americans continue to be haunted by habits of empire as a way of life, as William Appelman

²¹ Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*, 28; George Sanchez, “Creating the Multicultural Nation: Adventures in Post-Nationalist American Studies in the 1990s,” Ohio-Indiana regional meeting, American Studies Association, Bloomington, Ind., 8 March 1997; “John Higham, Paleface and Redskin in American Historiography: A Comment,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 16 (Summer 1985), 112.

Williams defined the problem,²² which extend to an unwillingness, for example, to learn other languages. Those habits lead us to spend \$300 billion for a military budget without a debate in Congress and without a visible enemy and while millions of citizens go without adequate housing or medical care.

The driving force of American professionalism, its hothouse self-referentiality, tends to reinforce the imperial habit of not listening to others and their questions. Americans are excessively proud of our scholarly traditions: the very scholars who question American foreign policy assert that American Scholarship is the best in the world. Why should we pay attention to questions that arise in countries with less “professional” scholarship? During the year I spent in Manchester, in 1973–74, I was struck by the great respect of English people for amateurs – birdwatchers, doctors, historians – and returned with a new perspective on the obsession of Americans with professional credentials and the expertise they imply. The British journal is called *Nature*; the American journal, *Science*. The American profession is so large that it generates lively controversies that delude us into thinking that we are dealing with the big issues. Careers are made in great contests to establish one’s originality in what we consider a great diversity of perspectives so that we cannot see how narrowly, in fact, these issues are being framed. Confusing the fashions and politics of history departments and scholarly journals with conflicts for power in the world beyond the academy, we think we are interrogating authority and experiences more fundamentally than we are. Mauricio Tenorio has brilliantly observed that this self-referential and excessive specialization creates the core imperialism of American scholarship, leaving it hard for us to imagine other agendas and narratives for historical scholarship.²³

IV

Where should we turn for alternatives? My answer is to people who practice history differently than we do. As an American professional, I have found answers in two kinds of places. The first places are inhabited

²² W. A. Williams, *Empire as a Way of Life: An Essay on the Causes and Character of America’s Present Predicament Along with a Few Thoughts About an Alternative* (New York, 1980).

²³ Maurice Tenorio, “Alien Excursions: Viewing American, Searching America through the Other, the Latin, America,” unpublished paper, Catholic University of America, March 19–21, 1993.

by professional historians who practice history in a different way from American academics. These might be either in professional cultures throughout the world, including the United States, that are not shaped primarily by academic rhythms, or academic cultures outside the United States with different traditions, audiences, and challenges than those faced by American academics.

The other kinds of places will require American professionals to retrace our steps and strike up new conversations with the amateur Americans against whom professionals have defined their authority over the past century. Since professionalization has shaped our nation-centered perspectives on the past, I believe we can generate alternatives by listening to everyday perspectives on the past that Americans have developed as they have lived their lives. In a 1994 random telephone survey of 1,400 Americans,²⁴ Roy Rosenzweig and I found that three times more people considered the past of their families to be more important than the past of their nation than the reverse. Asked to identify where they felt most “connected” to the past, respondents ranked “studying history in school” last among seven alternatives, feeling much more closely connected with the past when gathering with relatives or celebrating holidays. The most common single word they selected to describe their experience with history in school was “boring.” They associated learning history in school with passive memorization of meaningless dates and facts. “It was just a giant data dump that we were supposed to memorize ... just numbers and names and to this day I still can’t remember them,” a 36-year-old financial analyst from California told interviewers. For most students national narratives have had little to do with experience they can recognize.

By placing nation at the center historians have not only created unrecognizable abstractions but have fallen into the practice of viewing individuals as interchangeable examples of larger realities they privilege as “history.” By focusing on conflicts and changes in the larger circumstances, institutions and cultures, historians tend to emphasize that individuals and families are shaped by these larger categories – which are usually about power – and that they are typical examples of Irish Catholics who lived in the Great Depression or of production workers on an assembly line. Certainly in order to move beyond nation-centeredness we need more rigorous investigation of how the nation was experienced and constructed and of transnational dimensions that have existed throughout

²⁴ R. Rosenzweig and D. Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York, 1998) report the results described in this section.

American history.²⁵ But our survey suggests a different starting-point. Americans told us that they screened larger changes through personal experience which followed very different rhythms and narratives which at once reflected, defied, transformed, and ignored larger contexts. They talked about needs, ambitions, dreams, love, and fears, and they reflected on the past to learn about how to treat other individuals and how to make a difference in the course of their lives. They used terms like pride, shame, guilt, commitment, and trust. Their narratives were about aspiration, tragedy, and irony that have often been better presented by poets and novelists than historians because they are about human dilemmas that transcend time and place. In fact, it is precisely in the ways that individuals make and remake their larger circumstances and cultures and institutions that we can begin to see a new history that is recognizable to others, one in which people can be participants, not spectators, and can use the past to explore their agency as human beings.

My case for starting an exploration of the past with individuals instead of nations begins with the fact that individuals can experience, interpret, revisit, reinterpret – in short, can remember and forget. Nations, cultures, and institutions cannot, although politicians and pundits pretend that they can. Even more important, individuals can see, recognize, ignore, engage. Nations cannot. To turn the focus from history and its textbooks to the interpreter is to turn history from a spectator sport into something created by participants. A Florida fund raiser reported “being force fed [history]” in school and disliking it, but finding history “more interesting when it was done on my terms” after leaving school. Better yet, by comparing their experiences and interpretations with those of others, individuals bring something else nations do not have – empathy – to permit them to enter into the experiences of people at other times and places and from other backgrounds. By focusing on how individuals participated in the past we also focus on how individuals participate in creating those pasts.

Listening to the stories of our respondents, I have been reminded of Norbert Elias’s point that individuals are larger than groups because individuals contain within themselves so many different identities. An individual could identify with any one or combination of her experiences as a woman, lawyer, Republican, Chicagoan, lesbian, or Irish-American. To describe any one of these group identities is to fall far short of

²⁵ Strong cases for these approaches are John Higham, “The Future of American History,” *Journal of American History*, 80 (March 1994), 1289–307, and Ian Tyrrell, “American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History,” *American Historical Review*, 96 (Oct. 1991), 1031–55.

describing this individual. In describing Mexican-Americans, George Sánchez has presented his subjects as “betwixt and between,” Mexican and American, in a vision of border crossings that echoed W. E. B. DuBois’s classic picture of African Americans as feeling a twoness, African and American, both pulling inside them.²⁶ While there are undoubtedly individuals and group leaders who draw circles around poles of identity and try to keep members from straying and strangers from entering, there are also many people who cross borders, who feel “betwixt and between,” between Mexican and American, Republican and Democrat, gay and straight. Like borderlands between cultures, those between groups or poles of identity offer wide terrain for individuals as they make individual choices about where to live, whom to marry, what schools to attend. And identities do not come with ready-made narratives of where a culture or identity came from and where it is heading; individual members construct their own meanings for those identities. Scholars vigorously debate whether identities are inherited or chosen. Even as individuals negotiate multiple social identities, borders, constructions, circumstances, they remain individuals who may identify more with individual uniqueness, at the one extreme, or basic humanity or personhood, at the other. With such rich and difficult choices it is not surprising that very few of our respondents identified with the loyalty that historians placed at the center of their narratives: as Americans. And, since they made their choices in circumstances not always of their own making, the focus on what individuals create should include tensions they felt with larger historical circumstances of culture and institutions in which they find themselves.

Our respondents often sounded as if individuality were larger than groups or nation as they explored and invented pasts that explained who they were and whom they wanted to be. The sites of negotiation began at birth and were shaped by rhythms of childraising and marriage. A 24-year-old Brownsville, Texas, woman told us: “My husband is an Anglo, and I am a Mexican. Our child may like both of [our cultures] or neither of them. That’s up to him or her. It’s very beneficial for the children to learn both.” We were told by so many respondents that “my family has a lot of intermingling,” that we were struck that the United States really is for many a melting pot, that Gary Nash was right in his OAH presidential address to speak of the general direction as toward “Mestizo America.”

²⁶ Elias, *What Is Sociology* (New York, 1978 edn); G. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900–1945* (New York, 1993); DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago, 1903), Ch. 1.

An Oglala Sioux bus driver from South Dakota's Pine Ridge reservation described how "the main thing is trying to blend both sides, the Indian and the Anglo, and taking the best of each and applying it to yourself." But the choice was not only between cultures but also between individuality and humanity. A black retail manager from Baltimore told us that "the fact that I'm a different individual makes my past very different from everyone else's." And a black baby photographer from Memphis identified with what everyone shared: "We all are human. We all was born of a mother. We all have similarities. We all experience hurt, pain, financial burden, joy, disappointment." A dietician from Brooklyn, who reported that she had both black and Indian roots, emphasized: "We are all human. If you cut me the blood is the same color." Far from the passive experiences with the past they recalled from school, respondents worked hard to figure out where they came from, drew on a vast range of historical and cultural materials to create identities that ranged from the individual to the human. This individual quest which people made at different times and with different partners and in different contexts can problematize the connection of the individual with history.

History was invented and has largely served to provide stories that link individuals to the nation – to make the nation seem a logical or desirable or inevitable fulfillment of experiences for diverse individuals. This has been hard work. It has called forth great creativity and produced a vast array of wonderful and diverse scholarship. But, at least from the standpoint of respondents to our survey, it has been largely unsuccessful work. Although Americans participate deeply in the past, they do not recognize themselves in either the content or practice of professional history. We talk with ourselves.

And yet I find grounds for encouragement. With the aid of transnational lenses that allow us to step further back, on the one hand, and focus on individual experience that allows us to step closer up, on the other, we can yet create alternatives to nation-centered stories. Like our respondents, we may create narratives that help us to recognize ourselves and our possibilities as individuals or members of groups. We may create narratives that help us to derive moral lessons on how to live or to see how we can shape the course of events. We might even discover that historians can replace opinion managers in making it possible to see and hear real individuals, in identifying experiences that can shape public agendas. We may help to provide perspective in solving problems of poverty, disease, and intolerance that are not confined to any nation.