

Situating Early America's Identities in the Atlantic World

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'We are all Atlanticists now', David Armitage declared—likely tongue-in-cheek—in 2002.¹ If such a statement seemed a bit exaggerated at the time, it seems only commonplace a decade later. The amount of scholarship that has appeared in the last few years that utilises a theoretical model of Atlantic history and establishes Atlanticism as its grounding framework demonstrates the fruition of the so-called 'Atlantic turn' in US historiography. What was once a trendy—if still peripheral—topic in the academy is now commonplace, and drives the American publishing and job market to an extent that likely surprises those who plead for the methodological adjustment.² This is especially the case for early American history, particularly during the period that immediately follows the American Revolution, commonly referred to as the early republic, and the political cultures and nationalisms produced therein. W. M. Verhoeven's proclamation in 2002 that 'the many revolutions that produced the national ideologies, identities, and ideas of state of present-day American and Europe' were shaped by a 'trialogue (between France and Britain and America)'—a statement designed to drive a radically new methodological model—now seems pedestrian, if not an understatement.³

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The previous few years have been an especially fruitful period for this approach. Particularly, a specific subtheme of this approach has drawn increased attention: the Atlantic world's relationship to the formation of American identities. Book after book have appeared that claim a new perspective on how Americans came to understand their national image, and often emphasise the role foreign influences played. British pundits, French Jacobins, Haitian slaves, Irish rebels, German revolutionaries, and even oriental imports, these books tell us, had a large influence on how citizens of the newly United States understood their own national character. Indeed, this reasoning implies, the American 'image' was created in direct *opposition to* these distinctive and foreign 'others'. The cover of Sam Haynes' book, which explores early American Anglophobia, reproduces a mid-nineteenth century political cartoon that could likewise serve as the standard image for this common narrative: a short, hooligan Jonathan (representing America) positions himself in a dramatic defensive pose meant to compensate for his incommensurate appearance in relation to the towering figure of foreign culture—in this case, an overly smug, pompous, portly, and rosy-cheeked John Bull (representing Britain). In the formation of American-ness, the 'other' played as distinct a role as the 'self'.⁴

With this emphatic push for a transnational perspective on early American identities, it is useful to take a step back and examine the state of the field and ask what the Atlantic framework offers the study of early American nationalism. This paper seeks to do three things in assessing this methodological movement. First, it engages the theoretical underpinnings upon which most of the recent literature operates. Much of this work, in tracing the development of an American 'identity' within the context of an

Atlantic world, must first consider what an ‘identity’ entails. Was it the same thing as the production and promotion of nationalism? Historical work on ‘nationalism’ and ‘identity’ from the last two decades have drawn from Benedict Anderson’s ‘imagined community’ thesis, yet elements of that framework have crumbled as a result of several recent historiographical trends.⁵ Where does American nationalism studies stand today, and how might an Atlantic framework both build upon and deconstruct those developed premises?

Second, this paper engages these studies by focusing particularly on a number of works since 2007 that focus on identity construction within the United States during the early republic period. By comparing these books’ Atlantic frameworks and postulating what types of benefits and pitfalls such frameworks represent, I hope to demonstrate broader historiographical trends of cultural transmission, intellectual genealogy, patriotic cosmopolitanism, and identity formation. As the broad umbrella of Atlantic history encompasses a broad range of methodologies and approaches, I will give an overview of the disciplinary fields upon which these recent books are built, and then organise them into two broad categories: first, those that attempt to trace physical bodies and tangible materials across the ocean, and second, those that attempt to trace foreign ideas—or, at least, perception of foreign ideas.

Finally, the third goal of the paper is to offer general observations on the task of viewing early United States history and culture within the framework of Atlantic studies, as well as contemplate some potential avenues for future study. Specifically, I will focus on the pitfalls of cultural translation across the ocean and between regions, and how the many (mis)appropriations on behalf of the Americans demonstrate the necessity of keeping a deep understanding of the American context even viewed within an Atlantic

scope. To what extent does the constant nagging of American exceptionalism during the early republic necessitate the limits of broader perspective? In short, is it more crucial to place America's identities within an Atlantic world or to incorporate elements of the Atlantic world within America's identities?

Deconstruction 'Nationalism'

Before engaging the recent books, it is important to trace the theoretical and historiographical models upon which they are patterned. The study of 'nationalism' and 'identity' has a long history itself. Benedict Anderson's highly influential *Imagined Communities* argued that the advent of print culture in the mid-eighteenth century introduced 'unified fields of exchange and communication below Latin and above the spoken vernaculars', a development that laid the foundations for modern conceptions of nationalism. 'The convergence of capitalism and print technology', he wrote, 'created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation'. The American Revolution was the first movement to take advantage of this development, serving, as Anderson put it, as a 'Creole pioneer' for the rest of modernity to follow.⁶ This connection of print culture and nationalism, what Anthony Smith has termed 'classical modernism', has become the standard framework for understanding the rise of nationalist sentiments in the western hemisphere.⁷

Yet this general thesis has been challenged of late, on several fronts. While many recent theories share Anderson's presupposition concerning the importance of print, there is increasing doubt that such interconnectivity can produce broad consensus. Instead of understanding nationalism as a 'result', an interconnected nation sharing a general

framework of values and ideals, many now argue that nationalism should be seen as a 'process'.⁸ For instance, Prasenjit Duara has written that 'to see the nation as a collective subject of modernity obscures the nature of national identity'. Instead, it is more fruitful to 'view national identity as founded upon fluid relationships; it thus both resembles and is interchangeable with other political identities'. Any conception of 'nationalism', Duara continued, is 'rarely the nationalism of the nation, but rather represents the site where very different views of the nation contest and negotiate with each other'. It is only through the comparison of localised 'national identities' and the broader 'nation-state' that we can distinguish the uniqueness and significance of various nationalisms.⁹ Similarly, Rogers Brubaker has argued that 'we should refrain from only seeing nations' as 'substantial, enduring collectivities', but instead 'think about nationalism without nations' in order to see 'nation as a category of practice, nationhood as an institutionalised cultural and political form, and nationness as a contingent event or happening'.¹⁰ Nationalism, then, is a form of 'practice', not a result. Such a revised framework forces historians to examine individual and local particulars on their own terms rather than as examples of a universal whole.¹¹

A second challenge to Anderson's thesis attacks the standard belief that nationalism itself originates with print culture, an association that has dominated the study of print culture. Karl Deutsch's foundational *Nationalism and Social Communication* presupposed that the first step toward a national identity was a public utterance by elite figures whose words then trickled down to mass culture through print and messengers.¹² More recently, Miroslav Hroch further elaborated on this process by presenting three 'phases' of nationalism, the first of which involved 'initial agitation' on

the part of a few elite figures in hopes of correcting and transforming the larger culture.¹³ Yet these perspectives, rooted in the ‘classic modernist’ that presupposes a radical break from previous cultures, have been charged with overlooking the continuity throughout nationalist formations. Growing interest in a scholarly approach labelled as ‘everyday nationalism’ has called for a closer analysis of how cultural sentiment predates print culture. In the most systematic defence of the approach, Jon Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idress have argued, ‘to make the nation is to make people national’, which implied more focus on the on-the-ground nationalist practice. Nationalism is produced through ordinary actions and milieus, in at least four central ways: ‘talking the nation’ (the discourse citizens invoke), ‘choosing the nation’ (individual choices and decisions), ‘performing the nation’ (arts, literature, and performance), and ‘consuming the nation’ (material and consumer goods).¹⁴ This broadens the base for what is to be considered in national formation, both in concepts and in possible subjects: it shifts the emphasis from elite print producers to average citizens from all walks of life.

The final challenge to Anderson’s thesis is found in the growing literature of postcolonial theory. While most work in postcolonialism has focused on areas like the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—colonies of exploitation, occupation, or domination, and therefore has received little attention from American scholars—the recently emerging literature on ‘settler societies’ is significantly relevant. Defined as ‘societies in which Europeans have settled, where their descendants have remained politically dominant over indigenous peoples, and where a heterogeneous society has developed’, settler societies have been defined by several key arguments: the continued dominance of institutions and societies of European inheritance, the perpetuation of cultural and social forms, the

tensions complicit with those that were once colonised now becoming colonisers themselves, and the importance of provincial polities and identities.¹⁵ Rather than an abrupt break with past colonial conditions, postcolonial theory emphasises resilience in cultural, social, and political structures, often maintaining the power and privilege bequeathed from their colonising ancestors.¹⁶ This often means acknowledging a fractured response within new nations, as various communities are left to interpret, absorb, and perpetuate nationalist tensions according to experience and lived realities.¹⁷

These new approaches to nationalist and identity theory have slowly crept into American historiography. Until the last few decades, historians viewed the concept of an ‘American’ character as an objective fact that could be identified and traced; as one historian wrote, American nationalism was ‘an independent variable’ detached from historical contexts.¹⁸ Yet recent scholarship has done much to collapse this myth. While emphasising the divisive, fragmented, and disputed environment of America’s society, the cultural turn in US history similarly revised the concept of a national identity into a nebulous and contested principle that was always on the move. Americans, this new scholarship argued, were divided by region, class, gender, and race, and conceptualisations of ‘America’ depended on who was being questioned. Thus, studies of nationalism took a much broader and inclusive approach. David Waldstreicher examined national celebratory rituals and argued that understanding nationalism ‘in terms of its practices as well as its ideas’ helps better to comprehend ‘the everyday interplay of rhetoric, ritual, and political action that permitted the abstractions of nationalist ideology to make real, effective, practical sense’.¹⁹ This type of approach better encompassed how

nationalism was lived and experienced by more than just the founding fathers or public figures.

Works on American nationalism came to emphasise components that had previously been on the periphery of the field and included violence, geography, speech, and gender.²⁰ Literary scholars have latched on to the potential of postcolonial theory when examining early American texts, as the dynamic tension between isolation and dependence prove fertile ground for the study of cultural anxiety.²¹ Historians have recently ventured similar work, though it has primarily remained within the political sphere.²² And finally, materialist examinations of print dissemination in the early republic have blasted the myth of a nation connected through published letters, thus further crumbling the idea of a cohesive national identity.²³

Yet the role of an interconnected Atlantic world in the formation of these fractured American identities remained, until recently, understudied. The ‘cultural turn’, and its concomitant focus on the lived realities of societal transformations, constructed a framework that emphasised the local over the national—let alone the international. Thus, the ‘Atlantic turn’, when applied to theories of nationalism, was forced to confront a serious problem: how does the historian maintain the lessons of cultural diversity while broadening geographic scope? Attempts to address this problem have been both broad and dynamic, as frameworks seek to apply the depth of cultural practices to the breadth of an oceanic context.

Transatlantic Materials

For there to be a transatlantic perspective on early America, there must first be transatlantic interaction. These interactions can come through several different forms, including through workers migrating across the hemispheres, statesmen moving throughout the countries, pioneers fleeing persecution, or slave bodies being transported against their will. These types of confrontations are the most concrete type of connection, for they can be more easily identified, examined, and quantified. The physical presence of an exotic individual or transportation to a foreign climate forces retrospection and differentiation, as it is more tangible and threatening than a caricatured ‘other’ displayed and imagined through print. A historical approach that engages these interactions emphasises the mobile nature of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, where not only ideas but actual persons were transported from port to port, and large masses of people uprooted themselves and their families in ways that were previously inconceivable. While numerous causes of these movements were widely diverse—flights from disease-ravaged homelands, quests for new found wealth, searches for religious freedom, business travels in an increasingly interconnected economy, or forced relocation through the slave trade—the results were the same: scores of people encountered populations from foreign lands, which forced them to determine what, if anything, made them different.

Nowhere was foreign interaction more tangible than American citizens who lived abroad and both witnessed and took part in foreign cultures and movements. Philipp Ziesche’s study of ‘cosmopolitan patriots’ explored the experience of Americans living in Paris during the beginning, duration, and aftermath of the French Revolution. From this vantage point, Ziesche argued, one is able to gain a better understanding of how

cosmopolitan ideologies—which he assumed were held by all Americans living abroad—merged with notions of particularism and locality, and thus helps us better understand America’s strenuous nationalist relationship with France. ‘Historians have often told the story of the United States and France in the late eighteenth century as one of inevitable disenchantment, in which exclusionary yet realistic nationalisms supplanted a well-meaning yet utopian cosmopolitanism’, he wrote. ‘But looking at the age of revolution from the vantage point of Americans in Paris suggests that nation-building and universalism were complementary rather than competing forces during this period’.²⁴ Ziesche’s fascinating text focused on how these American expatriates balanced their cosmopolitan zeal with what they came to see as local concerns and circumstances.

Such a framework forces the historian to rethink what these foreign encounters meant to those who experienced them. The characters that fill Ziesche’s narrative include many notable figures—Thomas Jefferson, Gouverneur Morris, Thomas Paine, James Monroe, and Joel Barlow—yet they are now seen as strangers in a foreign land forced to understand their surroundings, rather than founders in the homeland they helped establish. This revised framework makes them understand and conceptualise their native country in new ways. These individuals, like many other Americans at the beginning of the French Revolution, came to the audacious conclusion that ‘political doctrines could spread across frontiers; nations existed independent of states, and peoples independent of their rulers’. Part of being an ‘American patriot’, this reasoning continued, ‘meant being a cosmopolitan, as the promise of America was realized abroad as much as at home’.²⁵

This cosmopolitan zeal, however, was soon tempered by parochial concerns. Even Jefferson, the foremost Francophile, came to see the particular circumstances of French

culture as necessitating a different form of government. Like the more conservative Morris, whom Ziesche posited as a helpful counter-example, Jefferson realised that French citizens were, in a very important way, *unlike* those who lived in America. Though this did not temper his love of France and continued support for the country's republican transformation, it does, as Ziesche rightly noted, highlight how 'local differences in the age of revolution' still played a major role in how even elite members of society viewed and understood a perceivably universal democratic movement.²⁶ This makes America's later turn to exceptionalism much more understandable: if Jefferson, the proud cosmopolitan, couldn't equate American culture with the French, the average citizen could not fare much better.

This type of narrative, where Americans are found abroad, is superb in reconceptualising the theoretical boundaries of nationalism, and more fully explains the specific people and contexts involved. But it is still limited in what it can tell us about American society at large during the period, let alone the cultural differences bred from divergent backgrounds. Ziesche's narrative admittedly focused on a small number of elite expatriates, none of whom can be seen as strikingly representative of the larger American culture; it is more an examination of the theoretical construction of elite cosmopolitanism than of American identity. In fact, as Ziesche rightly notes, as the 1790s progressed the distance between Americans in France and Americans at home only increased. By the end of the decade, most American citizens came to see those expatriates in France as unreliable and sullied by their French connection and in possession of many of the same traits prevalent in the now-decrepit Europe: disloyal, selfish, libertine, and greedy.²⁷ Even from the vantage point of those in France, America's turn to exceptionalism in the wake

of the French Revolution is still the traditional narrative found in the historiography of Revolutionary America, for the revision cannot encompass broad swaths of people.

But citizens of the American republic did not have to travel across the Ocean to encounter the Atlantic world; rather, starting in the 1790s, an influx of refugees from Saint Domingue brought both the people and the ideas of a foreign revolution directly to their doorstep. Ashli White's study of Haitians in the early republic is only one of a handful of studies that examine the presence of Haitian refugees during the period of Haiti's revolution. (And, in general, it breaks the common Atlantic narrative that focuses on British encounters.) By embodying a physical representation of both national and racial otherness, these refugees forced Americans to reconsider what made their own revolution both influential to and unique from other rebellions. Most especially, the presence of their foreign, black, and free bodies brought issues of race to the forefront of identity and, in the end, confirmed their self-conception of the American nation as a white republic.²⁸

White successfully examined the influence of both white and black refugees from Haiti, and she devoted half of her text to each vantage point. While the Haitian Revolution brought a myriad of issues to the American public, discussions were 'usually limited to the politics of the white population'. With large numbers of white slaveholders being evicted from the island and settled in America, citizens heard stories of 'revolt' and 'chaos' that forced them to sympathise with the ousted slave-owners rather than the newly freed slaves. The revolution was depicted as a ruthless 'rebellion' based on, ironically enough, 'aristocratic' inclinations that were associated with Britain's monarchy and France's old regime. Rather than questioning the racist conceptions that had been at

the root of Western societies, most American commentators on Haiti ‘insisted that the slaves were the pawns of white and coloured colonists who marshalled, for their own political and military ends, the raw and unthinking manpower of the enslaved’.²⁹ Such a depiction enabled ideas of white supremacy to remain and further refused blacks their own political motivations.

Perhaps White’s greatest achievement came in her ability to not only negotiate the fears Americans held when confronted with the Haitian slave revolt—a theme that has dominated the literature of Haiti/American relations—but also to explore how American slaveholders sought to diffuse potential dangers that came with the revolution. This she accomplished through an extended examination of the metaphor most Americans associated with the Haitian Revolution: a contagion. ‘Slaveowners were [both] reactive and proactive during the Haitian Revolution’, White explained, because they, like the many doctors seeking to discover and mitigate epidemic diseases during the same period, sought to find solutions to future problems.³⁰ Though a small number used the events to press abolitionist agendas, and made explicit the relationship between American and Haitian Revolutions and the universal ‘rights of men’, a majority came to justify America’s continued practice of slavery by congratulating their own ‘humane’ treatment of slaves in comparison to the barbarity found in Haiti. Moral codes for slaveholders were reemphasised to lessen the chance of revolts—John Adams considered implementing formal trade regulations with Toussaint Louverture in hopes to prevent slave uprising—and other measures were taken in a defensive posture to better prepare the nation for the possible ‘disease’ Haiti carried; thus, progress was made, but the basic foundations of a racial hierarchy and white superiority remained unquestioned. Only

amongst America's black population did the revolution bring actual change, for it ignited ideas of freedom and emancipation—even if their white masters continually stifled those very ideas.

So while works like those by both White and Ziesche demonstrate the extent of foreign, Atlantic “encounters” during the age of revolutions, it remains to be seen how much these external sources legitimately influenced the broader American culture or transitioned their imagined—let alone lived—communities. In both cases it appears that the Americans in France and the Haitians in America merely confirmed assumptions that were already present and deepened the American sense of uniqueness. Those people who were actually influenced—the American elites living in Paris and the slave population in the American republic—remained on the peripheries of American society, and were further portrayed as the anti-types of the national ideal. Once again, Americans primarily encountered their own prejudices and presuppositions.

Yet recent research has emphasised that human beings were not the only things transferring across the ocean. Along with people there were also material products as Americans took part in a vibrant international trade market that transported physical merchandise across the continents. A close study of material culture, then, promises to highlight the narrowing distance between America and the rest of the world. Kariann Yokota, in her illuminating study of America ‘unbecoming British’, argued how the ‘importation of material culture, ideas, and experts from the mother country was an integral part of a provincial people's attempt to construct a ‘civilised’ nation on the periphery of the transatlantic world’. The importation, dissemination, and appropriation of these foreign goods reveals much of how Americans understood themselves, their

nation, and their world, for it reveals cultural taste disseminated throughout a broad society.³¹

Material culture has received growing interest in early American studies and offers much for both Atlantic history and identity construction.³² Some have rightfully argued that it was an obsession over the Atlantic consumer marketplace that led to the Revolution itself.³³ As Yokota noted, this production and consumption of objects were ‘expressed by the social relationships these economic and intellectual exchanges fostered’, and ‘embodied culturally’ the tensions and issues swimming across the Atlantic.³⁴ It was through the exchange of these goods that most Americans interacted with a transatlantic marketplace within the confines of their own homes. But at the centre of this material culture was a deep anxiety: by relying on foreign markets, Americans neglected their own national production. When they entered international trade, Americans were constantly disappointed in the lack of interest from other nations; and in seeking respectability from other countries, especially Britain, Americans were implicitly admitting their denigrated status. The recent emphasis on material culture promises great and important insight into these tensions of identity formation.

But while material culture offers a crucial lens into how citizens exchanged and expressed their sense of nation and culture, it would be a mistake to assume these goods held the same meaning in different settings. Though broader lessons remain possible, historians must be careful not to assume that the same experiences were shared throughout the early republic. In New England, for instance, British products remained in vogue longer than in the central colonies, and communities separated from port towns were unable to take part in these same types of transnational exchanges.³⁵ This doesn’t

imply that circum-Atlantic history has limited relevance on early America—indeed, tracing the physical and literal exchange of peoples and goods across the ocean is the most direct and concrete way to examine how America related to the broader Atlantic—yet most Americans did not experience these direction connections, and thus a more broad and eclectic approach to American interactions with the foreign is necessary.

Transatlantic Ideas

Even if a majority of citizens during the early republic period never directly interacted with foreign emissaries, they indirectly encountered them through a vibrant print culture. Several recent books expertly focused on the oblique, slippery influence that transnational tensions played during the era, as Americans did not *encounter* as much as *perceive* foreign culture in their quest for cultural autonomy.³⁶ These fascinating and important works, however, demonstrate both the potential and limits of this ‘perception’ approach to early US history. How tangible do these connections have to be to justify the larger chronological scope? How accurate were the ‘perceptions’ of foreign influence that animated early Americans—and at what point are they truly ‘foreign’? How strong were these Atlantic ‘connections’ when the resulting ideas hardly resembled the original source?

It is common in early American history now to stress how much citizens yearned to be part of this broader community: ‘Early national citizens viewed themselves as participants in a transnational community, drawn together by sinews of trade, migration, and information’, wrote Rachel Hope Cleves in her study of French Jacobinism in America. The expansive and imposing Atlantic Ocean, therefore, was ‘not...a barrier that

cut them off from Europe but...a concourse that connected them to the Old World'. Cleves wrote that 'when American readers sought out the news from France, they were seeking news of their own world. The streets of Paris led directly to the streets outside their doors'.³⁷ But the question that is often left unasked—and when asked, often goes unanswered—is this: what limit did their lack of actual knowledge of the broader Atlantic World place on the usefulness of these broader frameworks? If the foreign information and influence early Americans encountered, adapted, and, as in the case of several monographs, feared, were significantly tinged by national interpretations and local issues, to what extent does the label 'Atlantic' remain accurate?

Seth Cotlar's fascinating tale of America's rejection of Tom Paine and the radicalism he represented offers a potent example. America's development of 'democracy', Cotlar argued, came in dialogue with the 'Atlantic-wide debate' over radical political movements percolating out of Europe.³⁸ The story of America's political scene, his book explained, was not isolated to the squabbles between Jeffersonian Republicans and Federalists, but was also in response to the radical movement that was centred in France and spread across an interconnected print web. Much of this influence ended up being reactionary, as the backlash against the extremes of the French Revolution created the 'ideal American citizen' that was a 'proudly xenophobic American patriot who had little interest in or desire to emulate European politics'.³⁹ Echoing the traditional exceptionalist narrative of American identity formation, though with the added flair of utopian politics, Cotlar's account presented America's Atlantic cousins as scary bogeymen who frighten citizens away from foreign interaction.

But this tale also demonstrates the elastic nature of evidence. Cotlar sought to gauge the temperature of the American public by dissecting the newspapers they read: ‘political printers succeeded in generating a cohort of engaged and sympathetic readers’, he reasoned, and created imagined communities comprised of ‘people whom they knew not as neighbours, but as abstract and theoretically equal fellow citizens’.⁴⁰ This is a difficult leap, which Cotlar acknowledged and therefore subsequently nuanced the relevance of his conclusions. This theoretical print culture that connected foreign nations and American citizens across the vast Atlantic world is a slippery concept, and often fails the test of materialist scholars. Interpretation and reception of both foreign news and national newspapers varied by locality, and the interconnected web of ‘engaged and sympathetic readers’ did not reach a broad scale until the mid nineteenth-century.⁴¹ How, then, can one assume a broad audience that shared national views, let alone Atlantic sympathies?

Rachel Hope Cleves aimed to avoid this problem in her study of American anti-Jacobinism by tracing specific political and intellectual themes through several decades and in many localities. Indeed, her creative and insightful narrative of the Reign of Terror’s image in America from the French Revolution to the Civil War is an acute example of how eclectic transnational issues evolve over time and place. The purpose of the book was to explore the reception and memory of the French Revolution’s violent images in order to ‘understand the pressures that the exigencies of a new republican political culture placed on violence in the early national era’. While most historians have acknowledged the role of the French Revolution during the 1790s Federalist-Republican debates, Cleves argued that remnants of Robespierre and the Terror remained long after

that decade: ‘For seven decades,’ she explained, ‘from the rise to power of the radical Jacobin club in 1792 until the fall of the southern Confederacy in 1865, French Revolutionary discourse pervaded American newspapers, religious literature, political orations, broadsides, private letters, fiction, poetry, pedagogy, drama, and periodicals’. Demonstrated most poignantly—and persuasively—by the sermons of Calvinist minister Elijah Parish, Cleves painted a portrait of America dominated by an intellectual mixture of human depravity and American exceptionalism—a blend that was drawn from the Terror’s morbidly graphic imagery as a way to caution against dangerous anarchy and bloody chaos. The French Revolution demonstrated, in the end, that humankind was too dangerous to be left to its own fancy, and that strong central order and cultural checks were required to maintain peace.⁴²

Thus, many ministers, politicians, and writers emphasised the difference between America and France in their ability to resist violence and control humankind’s dangerous potential. The marriage of Federalist and Calvinist rhetoric brought stability and unity, especially after the French Revolution’s violent turn. (Indeed, Cleve’s work is one of the few treatments of American identity that persuasively infuses religion into the narrative.) Chants of anti-Jacobinism permeated late 1790s discourse, and conspiracies of an international Jacobin/Illuminati connection continued long after the Jeffersonian revolution in 1800. Then, importantly, after the perceivably Jacobin threat subsided, the image of Jacobinism was transferred to a new threat to American peace and civility: slavery. To American ‘anti-Jacobins’ in the antebellum period—and at this point the label of ‘anti-Jacobin’ became increasingly slippery—the persistence of slavery was connected to the violence of the French Revolution, as both were the examples of ‘the individual’s

failure to control his or her depraved passions and be obedient to moral authority'. At the very least, the anti-Jacobin tradition provided abolitionists a language to denounce the violence and amoral acts of slaveholding. But the influence of the Terror continued even further: 'Anti-Jacobins' also 'became the nation's most consistent advocates of common schooling' due to their insistence that moral education was necessary to prevent rising generations from developing the vices of depraved humankind.⁴³ In Cleves's narrative, the legacy and tradition of anti-Jacobinism had far-reaching effects in shaping American culture long after Robespierre.

However, indicative of much of these types of work on Atlantic history, there still remains a question of how much the French Revolution was an actual influence on American culture and how much different movements used the event as a prop for their own arguments—that it was more a bogeyman than an actual instigator. This is especially the case with the abolitionists: in most cases, it appears that they were merely being pragmatic by using whatever language proved useful. Further, the label of 'anti-Jacobin'—not unlike the broader question of 'Atlantic culture'—becomes so hazy and diffused that its effectiveness as a description becomes questionable. Anything that emphasised the depravity of humankind, the necessity of a strong moral and governmental structure, and the fear of humanity's anarchic tendencies could be labeled as 'anti-Jacobin'; at this point, where does 'anti-Jacobin' begin and Federalism or, even more broadly, Calvinism, end? As recent scholarship has shown, there is a much longer intellectual pedigree for these viewpoints than merely the French Revolution.⁴⁴

Where Cleves examined the fear of French Jacobins, Sam Haynes's recent work focused on America's continued obsession over 'John Bull,' an image that represented

the overshadowing and intimidating figure of Great Britain. In the wake of the War of 1812—where, according to Haynes, citizens finally came to peace with the idea of being separate from England—‘Americans became even more conscious of the web of transatlantic connections that rendered them, for all intents and purposes, a cultural and economic satellite of the British empire’. Now that their military once again claimed victory, their ‘patriotic fervor of the postwar years encouraged them to address the issue of nationhood as never before’. In Haynes’s telling, Americans became obsessed to, on the one hand, repudiate all cultural ties to their former parent and, on the other, still seek approval from the very culture they denounced. The image of a British puppeteer was behind every threat the early republic encountered, from antislavery to Texas’s annexation. And in the process of describing and decrying the British ‘Other’, they were better prepared to develop their own national ‘self’. ‘To become more American,’ Haynes claimed, ‘they would first have to become less British’.⁴⁵

Haynes is much more willing than Cleves to admit that these foreign threats were more perceived than real. For American orators, Haynes explained, Britain became ‘a one-size-fits-all *bête noire*’, an effective prop to invoke whenever they required a rhetorical opponent. ‘Americans during the Jacksonian period routinely indulged in transatlantic scapegoating’, Haynes acutely noted in one of his book’s strongest sections.⁴⁶ Even if the text never persuasively proved that this Anglophobia reached beyond the newspaper editors and conspiratorial politicians, Haynes’s narrative successfully demonstrates how many Americans were more interested in the *image* of a foreign ‘Other’ than the actual presence itself. This is a necessary concession, for recent scholarship, like that of Elisa Tamarkin and Leonard Tenenhouse, has shown that even

while Americans rhetorically denounced England they continued to love, embrace, and import numerous British ideas materials with surprising frequency—an irony that epitomised America’s ambivalent attitude with the foreign world.⁴⁷

Yet Britain and France were not alone in occupying the American mind. Timothy Roberts, in his study of the 1848 European revolutions, explored almost the same period but came to a tantalizingly different conclusion: American exceptionalism didn’t triumph during their encounter with the broader Atlantic world during the late 1840s; on the contrary, American exceptionalism only became more contested during that period. By focusing on how Americans interpreted and depicted the tumultuous revolutions of 1848, Roberts recounted the compelling story of two different perspectives during the decade. The first, more simplistic reaction to the wars was indeed a reaffirmation of exceptionalism: ‘simplistic or inaccurate interpretations’ of the European revolutions led many Americans to not only conclude ‘that the American Revolution was exceptional, but also that, indeed, *so was* America at the mid-nineteenth century, on account of its revolutionary heritage and its apparent lack of problems in contrast to the social unrest that plagued Europe’. It is in depicting this reaction that Roberts is most astute in demonstrating the faultiness of America’s understanding of the wider Atlantic world. Americans were not thirsting for international news as much as they were yearning for a reaffirmation of their own nation’s exceptional status. When contemporary events did not conform to how Americans wished to interpret them, ‘the details...were often altered or omitted altogether’.⁴⁸ The most important part of how the revolutions were depicted was not accuracy, but reassurance.

However, the second and more telling reaction—and perhaps the most important insight in Roberts’s volume—was a response that took time to sink into American culture. America during the late 1840s was not, of course, the place of contentment that newspapers wished to depict. The remnants of Jacksonian democracy and the slow coming of the Civil War introduced more unrest and caused much more cultural instability. Thus, an increasing number of American figures began concluding that ‘Revolutionary Europe, not despite its flaws but because of them, demonstrated that complacency—failure to reform—was transatlantic and thus implicitly challenged the notion of American exceptionalism’.⁴⁹ It was the very realisation that America was *not* immune from the problems that plagued the world that enabled reform to arrive.

Where Cleves found American exceptionalism at the roots of abolitionism and the Civil War, Roberts insisted that it was the ‘challenging and redirecting, if not ending, belief and practice in American exceptionalism’ that finally led to the many calls to reform.⁵⁰ While the first reaction to the 1848 revolutions that Roberts depicted—which reaffirmed uniqueness—was based on caricatures and distortions, the second and more lasting response was based on an actual contemplative interpretation to what was taking place across the Atlantic. In this interpretation, the actual beginning of an Atlantic influence brought the end of American exceptionalism. The fact that these recent and well executed books written by able historians can drastically diverge on the obsessions and interactions between the early American republic and the broader Atlantic world, however, should underscore the impossibility of determining a single coherent American response to the larger world, let alone construct a representative identity for a period known for its tumultuous instability.

The Atlantic's Future(s)

Perhaps the central message delivered in these recent works on the relationship between America's identity and the broader Atlantic world is that the foreign 'Other' more often than not served as a proverbial mirror than a point of direct influence. America—or perhaps more succinctly, American rhetoric—was obsessed with the threats of British interference, Jacobin conspiracies, Haitian slave uprising, and foreign revolutions, but only the *caricatured* or *distorted* versions of those threats. They served more as a tool than an instigator. American thought did not actively participate in a transatlantic, international marketplace of ideas; in most cases, it was still a closed circle of Americans speaking to other Americans about American issues with only America's best interest in mind. Foreign culture did indeed serve as a supplier of ideas and innovations, but it was more often than not relegated to a series of proof-texts meant to deal with parochial agendas.

And that is perhaps why American historians should be more willing to adapt elements of what David Armitage termed 'trans-Atlantic' history, or 'a history of the Atlantic world told through comparisons'.⁵¹ This approach to an international history focuses on how different regions received, interpreted, and appropriated ideas circulating throughout the revolutionary and early republic period. Atlantic histories of America have often treated both the foreign and the domestic as two monoliths contesting each other, when in reality there were vast divisions within each. Comparative studies that examine how these tensions played out in different times and places will better exemplify the heterogeneity of early America. Ironically, intellectual historians of the late nineteenth and twentieth century have already utilised these tools, a remarkable fact

given that America during the Gilded Age was more internationally connected and thus more prone to the foreign influence upon which early Americanists have focused.⁵²

If the Atlantic Ocean indeed served, as one historian aptly put it, as a ‘seaway for the movement of people, goods, ideas, and aspirations’ for early Americans, scholarship has to further deal with the transmission of those goods at the receiving seaports.⁵³ Especially when it came to ideas, the raw materials leaving Europe rarely resembled the merchandise that was eventually distributed in America. There was no such thing as unbiased or objective news reporting to transmute foreign affairs—nor did anyone claim as much—and that should make historians alarmed to the point that even a serviceable knowledge of foreign relations was in many cases impossible. Newspaper editors, religious ministers, popular novelists, and crafty politicians all used transatlantic themes as malleable clay with which to craft their poignant messages. That transformation—that *Americanization*—is perhaps the most important process for understanding early American intellectual culture. A more materialistic approach to America’s interaction with the Atlantic world, which would focus on actual dissemination and appropriation rather than an ethereal conception of a transatlantic dialogue, offers a more grounded analysis for how Americans actually worked to construct their own identities.

Perhaps even more tantalizingly, the fact that this transformation of foreign texts, ideas, and caricatures is in many instances being performed by individuals who recently emigrated from those very countries should cause reflection. Indeed, if one were to search for the most tangible form of foreign influence, it is not necessary to look further than the very cities and neighbourhoods in which Americans lived. Immigration numbers were astoundingly large—especially from nations like Ireland and Scotland—during the

decades following independence. Thus, the traditional narrative of depicting the ‘foreign’ as evil and degenerate obscures the fact that a large number of Americans during the early republic either came from those cultures themselves or were in close contact with those who did. That these rhetorical denouncements dismissed relatives and neighbours should raise questions of sincerity and earnestness.

That said, the ‘Atlantic turn’ in American history should absolutely continue to be an important approach for understanding how citizens understood their newly United States; indeed, the ‘persistent localism’ of past decades is not the model that should be resurrected.⁵⁴ At its best, Atlantic history provides the historian with tools to understand past cultures and frameworks for comparative analysis.⁵⁵ As Joyce Chaplin has skilfully demonstrated, theories utilised by Atlantic historians can ‘bridge fields’ because ‘they are trading languages that can operate across frontiers’. Further, they can also help the scholar avoid historiographical exceptionalism, because ‘an illusion of uniqueness’ is most often the result of ‘ignorance of what is going on in parallel fields’.⁵⁶ The Atlantic framework, then, provides relevance and clarity—a broader perspective from which to better interpret local events.

Yet it remains important to refrain from placing modern sensibilities of transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, and globalism upon those of the past, and it is equally imperative to resist assuming a smooth transmission of ideas and influences within a fractured culture. Early Americans were indeed concerned over global events and foreign literature, but often only to preserve and reaffirm their own national, and local, anxieties. Our transatlantic frameworks should not infiltrate the largely provincial mind-sets of past thinkers. Those who did embrace a more cosmopolitan worldview—Ziesche’s Americans

in Paris, or Roberts's eyewitnesses to the 1848 revolutions—were more aberrations than harbingers. A majority of citizens of the early republic were most concerned over local affairs, local interests, and, most especially, local uniqueness. Rosemarie Zagari is correct that 'global history'—an even broader methodology than Atlantic history—'challenges the [early American] field's basic organizing principle: the primacy of the nation-state'.⁵⁷ Yet that critique works in both directions, as it is not only crucial to understand the broader sphere but also to recognise the more provincial context for much of the early American experience. While it is tempting to depict Americans, as Thomas Bender did, as 'rooted cosmopolitans' instead of 'nationalists', such a depiction projects many of our own sensibilities on those of the past.⁵⁸ In the end, the foreign 'Other' was most commonly nothing more than a pawn in the American game of exceptionalism. Acknowledging that fact does not approve the parochial mind-set, but it better captures the worldviews of the past.

If Timothy Roberts's concluding narrative is correct—and I suspect it is—that the oncoming and reality of the Civil War was the primary cause for challenging American exceptionalism, then it required the death of over half a million citizens to realise that the nation was not immune from larger problems. Even if strains of cosmopolitanism saw a later rebirth that continues today, it would never again go unchallenged. But that does not diminish the dominance of exceptionalism prior to that conflict. Atlantic history and transnational frameworks can help modern readers understand how Americans constructed that exceptionalism in the face of a large and evolving world. By keeping in mind the limits of this approach—the lack of overall exposure, the dearth of reliable knowledge, and, most importantly, the pre-eminence of parochial interests—the

parameters of Atlantic history can remain wide enough to encompass both thematic issues as well as a broad array of American citizens. Even when it is admitted that exceptionalism ruled the day, Atlantic history can help determine what the many varieties of exceptionalism really meant.

¹ David Armitage, 'Three Concepts of Atlantic History,' in David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2002), 11.

² For general overviews of this historiographical trend, see Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concepts and Contours* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Jack P. Greene and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Bernard Bailyn and Patricia L. Denault, eds., *Soundings in Atlantic History: Latent Structures and Intellectual Currents, 1500-1830* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Alison Games, "Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities," *American Historical Review* 111 (2006): 741–57. In the job market, no fewer than fifty positions in American history have been advertised in the last three years that prominently featured "Atlantic history" in the job description.

³ W. M. Verhoeven, ed., *Revolutionary Histories: Transatlantic Cultural Nationalism, 1775-1815* (New York, 2002), 3.

⁴ Sam W. Haynes, *Unfinished Revolution: The Early American Republic in a British World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010).

⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London: Verso, 1991).

⁶ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 44, 46, 47.

⁷ Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 1998), 3. Nationalism in eastern contexts has taken a somewhat different approach; Kosaku Yoshino, ed., *Consuming Ethnicity and Nationalism: Asian Experiences* (Richmond, VA: Curzon Press, 1999).

⁸ For an example of the former, Anthony Smith argues that nationalism produces a "broad and abstract framework" that is filled in by local communities. Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism: Key Concepts*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 27.

⁹ Prasenjit Duara, "Historicizing National Identity, or Who Imagines What and When," in Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny, eds., *Becoming National: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998): 151-152, 161.

¹⁰ Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹¹ A somewhat similar proposal for colonial New England is found in David D. Hall, *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996).

¹² Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication: An Inquiry into the Foundations of Nationality* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1966).

¹³ Miroslav Hroch, "From National Movement to Fully-Formed Nation," in Gopal Balakrishnan, ed., *Mapping the Nation* (London: Verso, 1996), 78-97.

¹⁴ Jon Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss, "Everyday Nationhood," *Ethnicities* 8 (December 2008): 536-63.

¹⁵ For postcolonialism, see Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (London: Routledge, 1998); Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2001). For settler societies, see Daiva Stasiulis and Nira Yuval-Davis, eds., *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class* (London: Sage Publications, 1995).

¹⁶ See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁷ For the persistence of localist interpretations within the colonial setting, see Michael Warner, “What’s Colonial about Colonial America?” in Robert Blair St. George, *Possible Pasts: Becoming Colonial in Early America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000): 49-70.

¹⁸ Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 402.

¹⁹ David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 3. See also Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997).

²⁰ See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *This Violent Empire: The Birth of an American National Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Martin Brückner, *The Geographic Revolution in Early America: Maps, Literacy, and National Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Carolyn Eastman, *A Nation of Speechifiers: Making an American Public after the Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Linda K. Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to be Ladies: Women and the Obligation of Citizenship* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998).

²¹ Robert Blair St. George, ed., *Possible Pasts: Becoming Colonial in Early America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); Malini Johar Schueller and Edward Watts, eds., *Messy Beginnings: Postcoloniality and Early American Studies* (New York: Rutgers University Press, 2003). For a broader and more interdisciplinary approach, see Richard C. King, ed., *Postcolonial America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); for a focus on postcolonialism and American literature, see Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt, eds., *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000).

²² See Jack P. Greene, “Colonial History and National History: Reflections on a Continuing Problem,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 64 (April 2007): 235, 243, 246, 250.

²³ See Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770-1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

²⁴ Philipp Ziesche, *Cosmopolitan Patriots: Americans in Paris in the Age of Revolutions* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 165. For a similar approach that looks at how Americans experienced living in London prior to the Revolution, see Julie Flavelle, *When London was the Capital of America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

²⁵ Ziesche, *Cosmopolitan Patriots*, 7.

²⁶ Ziesche, *Cosmopolitan Patriots*, 39.

²⁷ Ziesche, *Cosmopolitan Patriots*, 124-125.

²⁸ Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010). For a similar approach, see Matthew J. Clavin, *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War: The Promise and Peril of a Second Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

²⁹ White, *Encountering Revolution*, 87-88.

³⁰ White, *Encountering Revolution*, 125.

³¹ Kariann Akemi Yokota, *Unbecoming British: How Revolutionary America Became a Postcolonial Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 8-9.

³² For earlier works on early American identity and material culture, see, for example, Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Knopf, 1992).

³³ See T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³⁴ Yokota, *Unbecoming British*, 13.

³⁵ See Elisa Tamarkin, *Anglophilia: Deference, Devotion, and Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

³⁶ It should be noted that Roberts, *Distant Revolutions*, spends a chapter on Americans living in Europe during the 1848 revolutions, though his narrative in that chapter does not seem to play a role within his larger thesis, as will be discussed.

³⁷ Rachel Hope Cleves, *The Reign of Terror in America: Visions of Violence from Anti-Jacobinism to Antislavery* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3.

³⁸ Seth Cotlar, *Tom Paine's America: The Rise and Fall of Transatlantic Radicalism in the Early Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 6.

³⁹ Cotlar, *Tom Paine's America*, 83.

⁴⁰ Cotlar, *Tom Paine's America*, 17.

⁴¹ See Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770-1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁴² Cleves, *The Reign of Terror in America*, xiv, 2.

⁴³ Cleves, *The Reign of Terror in America*, 115, 234, 198.

⁴⁴ See Alison L. LaCroix, *The Ideological Origins of American Federalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); George McKenna, *The Puritan Origins of American Patriotism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

⁴⁵ Haynes, *Unfinished Revolution*, 10, 23.

⁴⁶ Haynes, *Unfinished Revolution*, 131, 202.

⁴⁷ See Tarkanin, *Anglophilia*; Leonard Tenenhouse, *The Importance of Feeling British: American Literature and the British Diaspora* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁴⁸ Timothy Mason Roberts, *Distant Revolutions: 1848 and the Challenge to American Exceptionalism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 15, 44, emphasis in original.

⁴⁹ Roberts, *Distant Revolutions*, 104.

⁵⁰ Roberts, *Distant Revolutions*, 191.

⁵¹ Armitage, "Three Concepts of Atlantic History," 18.

⁵² See, for example, Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and His Ideas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

⁵³ Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 1.

⁵⁴ T. H. Breen describes this past approach in "Persistent Localism: English Social Change and the Shaping of New England Institutions," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 32, no. 1 (January 1975): 3-28.

⁵⁵ For an argument for a comparative focus within Atlantic history, see Francis D. Cogliano, "Revisiting the American Revolution," *History Compass* 8, no. 8 (August 2010): 951-963.

⁵⁶ Joyce Chaplin, "Expansion and Exceptionalism in Early American History," *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 4 (Mar., 2003): 1433.

⁵⁷ Rosemarie Zagari, "The Significance of the 'Global Turn' for the Early American Republic: Globalization in the Age of Nation-Building," *Journal of the Early Republic* 31 (Spring 2011): 5.

⁵⁸ See Thomas Bender, "The Boundaries and Constituencies of History," *American Literary History* 18 (Summer 2006): 267-82.

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