



**National and Transnational historiographies ASSA Workshop  
University of Technology Sydney, Broadway, 18-19 June 2015**

*National, transnational, comparative, regional or global: what are the most useful frameworks for our histories?*

Conveners: Anna Clark (UTS), Stuart Macintyre (University of Melbourne), Marilyn Lake (University of Melbourne)

**Themes and participants:**

**Political History:** Stuart Macintyre, Frank Bongiorno, Marilyn Lake, Judy Brett  
**Counter Histories:** Tracy Banivanua-Mar, Penny Edmonds, Pat Grimshaw  
**Cultural History:** Sophie Loy-Wilson, Richard White, Christina Twomey  
**Vernacular Histories:** Michelle Rayner, Tanya Evans, Anna Clark  
**Private Lives:** Leigh Boucher, Michelle Arrow, Alecia Simmonds

**WORKSHOP REPORT: *Making Australian History: national and transnational perspectives***  
Anna Clark, University of Technology Sydney

**Background**

This workshop was co-convened by Anna Clark (UTS), Stuart Macintyre (University of Melbourne) and Marilyn Lake (University of Melbourne) as a response to what we perceived to be a critical juncture in Australian historiography. In recent years the 'national narrative' has been powerfully challenged by transnational and international historical perspectives. Key moments in Australia's past, such as colonisation, Eureka, federation, Australians at war, and the recognition of Indigenous rights, have been increasingly re-examined with a transnational lens, raising important questions about the unique context of Australia's national narrative. Global movements of ideas, people and capital provide the theoretical basis for such scholarship, which has rightly complicated and challenged the overwhelmingly national focus of the history discipline—in research, practice and pedagogy.

Given the impact of this transnational influence in challenging Australian exceptionalism, it's worth asking what the relationship in fact is between national and transnational histories: namely, is there anything about the 'Australian story' that is distinctly national anymore? At a time when Australian history is both challenged and energised by transnational studies, this workshop asked a number of critical research questions: What are implications of

transnational and international approaches on Australian history? What possibilities do they bring to the discipline? And, significantly, what are their limitations?

The workshop was held as a way of working through some of those questions that face Australian historians and the discipline. Over the course of the two days, seventeen scholars navigated some of those challenges and tensions between national and transnational perspectives across five historiographical themes: political history, cultural history, intimate histories, vernacular histories, and counter histories. Participants discussed the critical need to internationalise forms of narrow parochialism that characterise much national history, while also sensing the limits of transnational histories in a national setting.

### **Discussion**

While it is sometimes said that history was constituted as a professional discipline to serve the business of nation building, the enthusiasm for transnational history might be taken as a striking example of the phenomenon with which it is concerned. Different scholars working in different disciplines and different countries adopted the term, with little reference to each other – so that in its earliest manifestations it could mean supranational, pan-national, multinational or international. By the 1970s political scientists used it to signify interactions across state borders involving non-government actors, and it was adopted more widely in the social sciences as they responded to globalisation.

Historians came late to transnational studies, though when they did they constructed genealogies of earlier efforts to overcome the limits of national history. These historiographical lineages attributed seminal influence to schools of world, regional and comparative history in Britain, France, Germany and the United States, where the transnational turn (or turns) attracted greatest attention, and transnational history itself began to flow outwards from the same countries. As it circulated, however, it took on new uses and there was a return flow of ideas that increased the decentring effect. If social history rewrote history from the bottom up, transnational history proceeds from the outside in. In short, it is dependent on the idea of ‘the nation’ and ‘nationhood’ that it seeks to move beyond: as a concept it remains enmeshed within the very framework it breaks down.

The discussion that arose during the workshop grappled with this complex historiographical relationship—between the national and the transnational—in Australian history, and generated three broad questions for further research and discussion:

#### *1. Transnational histories have the potential to overcome parochial national narratives*

As **Stuart Macintyre** suggested, the transnational perspective has afforded new insight into convict transportation; the legal basis of territorial claims, expropriation and the status of Indigenous subjects; religious and humanitarian activity, the formation of political institutions and much else. The participants in these new histories are reconfigured as actors in international networks rather than as the national subjects of the older ones.

For the most part, the new approach has been more apparent in studies of the colonial period (as well as Federation and the nation-building project) than of the political history of the nation-state. There are some important studies of the transnational engagement of social movements and intellectual elites during the twentieth century, but a more limited attention to their articulation with state power. Military and diplomatic history remains relatively unaffected. Nor has there been any sustained engagement with economic history.

Furthermore, transnational studies have tended to work as counterpoints to national ones, even reparative of their injuries. There is a preference for the liberal and progressive causes (peace movements, human rights, international co-operation) and a valorisation of the cosmopolitan, despite Glenda Sluga's recent reminder of the different valencies of internationalism. It is claimed that the transnational defamiliarises the national and shrinks the agency of the state. The challenge is to realise that claim in Australia

## *2. Transnational History—as a method and as content—have a radical potential for the history discipline*

**Tracey Banivanua-Mar** and **Penny Edmonds** discussed the turn towards transnational histories in the last decade and how it has coincided with, or perhaps partly emerged from, a critical turn in imperial and colonial history. New imperial studies have sought to tell histories of empire that are more nuanced, and cognizant of the multi-directional flow of power, information, people, and influence across and between imperial metropolises and peripheries. An abiding interest in colonial and imperial networks and networking, and on the transborder mobilities of bodies that facilitated and affected territorial expansion has reminded us that empires and colonies were contingent, uneven, shifting sites. More recently, and significantly less prolifically, the widened aperture of a transnational focus has allowed histories to begin charting the ways imperial power and colonized resistance and accommodation were co-produced. Counter networks of protest and resistance are now figuring more prominently in understandings of the contingent processes of empire.

Several of the workshop participants (**Tanya Evans**, **Anna Clark**, **Pat Grimshaw** and **Michelle Rayner**) also explored how vernacular historical discourses, such as family and community histories, use national and international archives to produce their own historical narratives and to understand local, social, national and global history more broadly. Such work raise the question, can the practice of family history transform understandings of the history of settler nations and their place within global history? And, beyond that, how might the global digitisation of archival materials empower peoples to compose their own histories and narratives, outside and beyond public and official historical discourses?

## *3. The question of 'audience'*

**Christina Twomey** wondered whether it is possible to view transnational history as a conceptual framework which historians have adopted in response to the increasing globalization of contemporary economic and cultural life, at least in part to search for its antecedents? But does this translate to broader audiences?

The pervasiveness of the 'Australian story' reveals the enduring resonance of the nation in public historical discourse and scholarship. Public debates over Australian history, including contests over the national curriculum, museum exhibits and national commemorations, continue to generate heated discussion around the country and are framed as explicitly national—despite the history wars being a transnational phenomenon. Popular history books drawing on national stories such as Anzac, Kokoda and Eureka are consumed avidly by an Australian readership, as are heritage tours, Australian historical fiction and television. These popular expressions of Australia's past demonstrate that people around the country—not just historians, public commentators and politicians—care deeply about the national narrative.

**Marilyn Lake** shared her experiences of research and producing transnational histories with significant broader impact, that speaks to a variety of audiences. Some versions of her own research have appeared in national scholarly journals, some in international collections aimed at US readers and some in the *Age* newspaper. For **Judith Brett**, the question was more problematic:

My approach to the tension between national and transnational in Australian history is from the perspective of writing and publishing. In relation to Australian political history, the question I want to discuss is who to write for? There is a secondary question of motivation and the formation of research questions. How important is the international discipline in framing one's questions compared with subjectivity, experience and passion?

The relationship of national and transnational perspectives to writing about Australian history writing seems to be a new form of a dilemma that has faced academics in the social sciences and humanities who write about Australia. Does one write primarily for a national public or primarily for an international academic readership? If one wants to write about Australian material for an international readership it has to hook into international questions and debates. Ideally one would be able to write for both, but this is difficult. These challenges of national readerships and markets, along with the national public discourse of Australian history, present distinct challenges for transnational readings of the national past. In other words, histories are primarily produced for a national audience, and a strong national discourse resonates powerfully in public debate. The 'nation' remains the central framework of historical discussion for good reason.

## **OUTCOMES**

As a way of teasing these questions out further, participants have agreed to write up their discussion papers into reflective chapters on practice and historical approach as they relate to national and transnational histories in their own work. The book is provisionally titled, *History Today: Vernacular Voices, National Histories and New Transnational Perspectives*. Those three themes in the title also act as a guide for participants in response to the discussion topics generated by the workshop that, taken together, explore the possibilities and limits of transnational approaches in Australian historiography.