THE UNITED STATES IS A NATION of immigrants, or so the saying goes. This popular mythology continues to loom large in the twenty-first century, in no small part thanks to its constant reiteration and reinforcement by public figures. Barack Obama’s 2013 Constitution Day and Citizenship Day proclamation could have just as easily been an excerpt from John F. Kennedy’s posthumously published 1964 book *A Nation of Immigrants*: “We are a proud Nation of immigrants, home to a long line of aspiring citizens who contributed to their communities, founded businesses, or sacrificed their livelihoods so they could pass a brighter future on to their children.”¹ The media is also partially responsible. To give just one recent example, in a 2014 *New York Times* column titled “Still a Nation of Immigrants,” Charles Blow asserted that “[t]he American melting pot appears to be heating up again, and its ingredients have grown ever more varied.”² These tired clichés are all too common today, and reinforce inadequate and inaccurate stereotypes of immigrants and the United States.

For most of the twentieth century, historians, like Chicago School sociologists before them, helped to create and cement the United States’ identity as a nation of immigrants. Oscar Handlin’s Pulitzer Prize-winning 1951 book *The Uprooted* may have popularized the field of immigration history, but it also did more than any other work to establish the “immigrant paradigm,” or the traditional notion that the history of immigration to the United States is the story of one-way European immigration and assimilation—in short, the “making” of Americans.³ Scholars like Rudolph Vecoli and John Bodnar offered important revisions to Handlin’s thesis, but their critiques still treated Europeans as prototypical immigrants.⁴ Indeed, as George Sanchez reminded us in a 1999 article published in this journal, the field of immigration history was “constructed around European immigrants being the norm to understand the histories of all ethnic groups in the United States.”⁵ Or, as Dirk Hoerder put it, “the gates of Ellis and Angel Islands admitted people into the population long before historians, as gatekeepers of national lore, admitted the newcomers—and resident Others—into national memory.”⁶

The dominance of the nation of immigrants paradigm within the scholarship gave European immigrants a privileged place in U.S. history, while
treating non-European immigrants as secondary actors, and excluding African Americans and Native Americans altogether. Over the last two decades, historians have dismantled the nation of immigrants myth. Instead of examining stories of European immigration to the United States, historians have turned their attention to the diverse origins and stories of people who migrated to the United States. Scholars have rightfully incorporated Latin Americans, Asians, and other non-Europeans as central actors in U.S. history, but, for the most part, they have broadened the nation of immigrants paradigm rather than replacing it. While this is both historically accurate and important in contemporary political terms, doubling down on the nation of immigrants paradigm does nothing to fold African Americans and Native Americans into the larger narrative of U.S. history. Moreover, it fails to recognize the fact that many migrants returned to their countries of origin, thus reinforcing the stereotype of the United States as “a melting pot” and, in turn, promoting notions of American exceptionalism.

Still, many recent trends in the field are encouraging. Scholars today utilize multiple methods, rely on sources in multiple languages, and incorporate an interdisciplinary approach that, when necessary, pulls from sociology, anthropology, geography, political science, and legal studies. The best work often bridges divisions within the discipline as well, and can best be described as some combination of social, cultural, political, economic, and diplomatic history. And, over the last fifteen years, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to migration rather than immigration. A search of JSTOR’s 421 history journals indicated that the number of articles with the words “immigration” or “immigrant” in the title increased over the course of the twentieth century. Those whose titles contained the words “migration” or “migrant” also increased, although not as rapidly. However, since 2000, the number of articles with the words “migration” or “migrants” in the title (349) has outpaced those with the words “immigration” or “immigrants” (299).

As the scholarship has evolved from immigration history to migration history and mobility studies, institutions and professional organizations have lagged behind in some respects. The field’s professional association remains the Immigration and Ethnic History Society (IEHS). At the institutional level, many colleges and universities still offer courses in immigration—rather than migration—history, and a considerable number—if not the majority—of job listings in recent years have been in immigration history. An up-to-date examination of what migration and immigration historians are teaching is needed since, as far as I know, the last systematic study of
Goodman

this sort was conducted over twenty years ago. If we were to examine the content of the courses being taught and the work being done by members of the IEHS, we would probably find that they reflect recent changes in the field and developments in the scholarship. But language matters, and conceptualizing our courses as immigration history and our field as immigration and ethnic history reinforces the nation of immigrants myth and privileges histories of one-way migration and community formation, even if unintentionally. By contrast, using migration as an analytical tool to frame the teaching and writing of U.S. history helps to actively combat this myth and the destructive lore surrounding it. It also helps us see the United States for what it is: a nation of migrants, rather than a nation of immigrants.

Migration has been “ubiquitous and ever-present” throughout human history. Historians such as Dirk Hoerder, Leslie Page Moch, Patrick Manning, Jan Lucassen, Leo Lucassen, Adam McKeown, and Jose Moya have all made this point, in addition to situating humans as but one of many species with a history of migration over the last five million years. However, world historians have also stressed the importance of noting that not all migration is the same, and human migration has changed over time. As McKeown and Moya point out: “Moving may have been one of the elemental activities of our species, along with eating and reproducing, but mass movement [which they date to the middle of the nineteenth century] was a new phenomenon— as was the related ‘massification’ of reproduction, production, trade, and transportation, as well as communication, consumption, and culture." The growth of nation-states in the late nineteenth century, and states’ subsequent attempts to control migration across international borders through passports, quotas, and citizenship, marked another important shift in the history of migration.

While the nation may be a useful unit of analysis to study movement across international borders, it is limited in important ways. Putting U.S. history in conversation with world history and treating the United States as a nation of migrants allow us to think across temporal, geographic, and political boundaries. In the process, we can de-center the role of the nation-state and its relatively recently created and hardened borders, while still recognizing it—and its growth—as important, albeit historically contingent. By normalizing migration, rather than borders, U.S. historians have the opportunity to depoliticize, to an extent, the highly controversial nature of public and academic debates about immigration. Focusing on migration rather than immigration leads historians away from an “us vs. them” mentality, and shifts the emphasis from the supposed history of American
exceptionalism to U.S. history as a part of world history, and the United States as one of many nations of migrants.

A migration-based approach—in which internal and international migrations, both short- and long-distance, are considered together rather than separately—enables us to incorporate the free, forced, and coerced migrations that have shaped U.S. history into a single narrative: from Native American migration before 1492 to the arrival of European colonizers, to westward expansion and the Trail of Tears, to the spread of the railroads and the arrival of the Asian labor immigrants who built them, to industrialization, urbanization, and the arrival of Europeans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the two great migrations of African Americans, to the internment of Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans, to the fall of the Rust Belt and rise of the Sunbelt, to the long history of Mexican migration to the United States and the boom in Latin American, Asian, and African immigrants since 1965. Seeing U.S. history as a product of international and internal migrations forces us to break down the artificial divisions that the nation of immigrants paradigm creates between (European) immigrants and “others.” If, as Donna Gabaccia has argued, the creation and persistence of the immigrant paradigm was meant to exclude African Americans from the larger narrative of U.S. history, a migration paradigm is a way to include African Americans and other non-Europeans. Native Americans, African slaves, Asian labor migrants, African Americans, temporary Mexican agricultural workers, and Southeast Asian refugees, among others, all become integral actors in the nation of migrants narrative.

Treating European immigration as just one of the many important internal and international migratory flows that shaped United States history also allows us to bridge fictitious geographic boundaries and highlight regional similarities, differences, and connections. Instead of being the focal point around which U.S. history is told, in a migration paradigm, the Northeast becomes the principal receptor of some of the earliest European and African migrants and, later, Caribbean migrants. Meanwhile, the Southeast becomes the place of forced slave migration, the place African Americans left during the two great migrations, and the part of the country that until relatively recently was notable for its lack of immigrants. And the West becomes the region of Mexican and Asian immigration, and the destination of many internal migrants over the last two centuries. Each region moves to the forefront of the narrative at distinct moments, and all become essential to the telling of U.S. history. Future work that does more to connect multiple national historiographies and incorporate the literature on immigration with
the literature on the settling of the West and other internal migrations is something to aspire to.

The de-centering of the Northeast as the focal point of U.S. history also pushes back against the specious notion that equates being American with being a person—or a descendant of someone—of European ancestry who immigrated, naturalized, and assimilated. Immigration, assimilation, and ethnic community formation are, of course, an important part of many migrants’ experience, but they are far from the only ones. As scholars such as John Higham, David Gutiérrez, Erika Lee, Mae Ngai, Paul Spickard, Daniel Kanstroom, Kelly Lytle Hernández, Cindy Hahamovitch, Hiroshi Motomura, and a growing number of others have shown, nativism, exclusion, internment, forced internal migration, and deportation are also integral to the larger narrative of U.S. history. My own research on the history of deportation has revealed that whereas the United States has granted permanent residency to 41 million people in the postwar period, it has carried out more than 54 million deportations. This ultimately raises important questions about the reputation of the United States as a nation that has welcomed immigrants throughout its history, and forces us to rethink what constitutes “the immigrant experience.”

A migration-based framework also requires historians to explore migrants’ countries of origin and many transnational connections. International migrants are at once emigrants, migrants, and immigrants, leaving one country and arriving in another—oftentimes passing through additional countries before reaching their final destination. Most historians are familiar with Oscar Handlin’s iconic lines: “Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants were American history.” Far fewer, however, know that thirty-eight years earlier, in 1913, Swedish demographer Gustav Sundbärg made an inverse proclamation: “To discuss ‘Swedish emigration’ is the same as to discuss ‘Sweden’; there is hardly a single political, social or economic problem in our country which has not been conditioned, directly or indirectly, by the phenomenon of emigration.” If the United States was a nation of immigrants, then Sweden was a nation of emigrants. These identities are not always fixed over time. Whereas Mexico was once a nation of emigrants, today it is also a nation of immigrants and a nation of transit: hundreds of thousands of Central Americans pass through Mexico each year. Some settle, but many more continue north to the United States.

Indeed, from a world history perspective, the United States was anything but exceptional. Adam McKeown has shown that international migration
within Asia far outpaced European migration to the Americas from 1846 to 1940.\textsuperscript{20} And as Frank Thistlethwaite noted as early as 1960, considering the mass European migration to the Americas as a "peopling of the United States" distorts the history. Only three out of every five (33 million out of 55 million) Europeans who emigrated between 1821 and 1924 went to the United States. Many others settled in Canada, Argentina, Brazil, and other "nations of immigrants" in Latin America. Moreover, an estimated thirty to forty percent of those who went to the United States—and an even higher percentage of those who went to Argentina and Brazil—returned to their countries of origin. Many Southern and Eastern Europeans, like a considerable number of Mexican migrants, just to name one other example, never planned on becoming U.S. citizens.\textsuperscript{21}

Placing migration in a global context also helps us to better understand U.S. diplomatic and international history. Despite the prevailing political and popular idea that immigration is a domestic issue, scholars have shown that it is unquestionably an issue of foreign relations, shaped by large structural economic transformations, geopolitical relations, and shifting international migration control policies, among other factors.\textsuperscript{22} For example, it is impossible to understand the history of Mexican migration to the United States without understanding the history of the Mexican-American War, the spread of industrial capitalism and railroads on both sides of the border, the Mexican Revolution, U.S. labor contractors' active recruitment of Mexican migrants, the creation of the U.S. Border Patrol, the bi-national labor accords known as the Bracero Program, subsequent changes in U.S. law ending the Bracero Program and putting a cap on Western Hemisphere migration, and demographic and economic pressures in Mexico during the twentieth century. Similarly, the history of Southeast Asian, Filipino, or Central American migration to the United States cannot be understood without close attention to the history of U.S. imperialism and intervention abroad, in addition to local, national, and regional contexts, not to mention macro-historical processes. As migration scholar Hein de Haas has posited, to understand migration, we must ask "how processes such as imperialism, nation state formation, the industrial revolution, capitalist development, urbanisation and globalisation change migration patterns and migrants' experiences."\textsuperscript{23}

Although states, state policies, and macro-historical and geopolitical trends play an important role in shaping migratory flows, ultimately, in the words of Dirk Hoerder, migration results from "the will of men and women to fashion lives."\textsuperscript{24} This type of history may be more difficult to research
Goodman

and write (than the history of national migration policy, for example), but it is essential to understanding the experiences, motivations, and decisions of migrants, and their diverse reasons for migrating. The narrative of a nation of migrants enables historians to focus on the migrants themselves, and their decisions to move to, from, and within the United States. It recognizes migration as contingent: individuals’ decisions to migrate cannot be boiled down to simplistic “push” and “pull” factors, and migration cannot be predicted or explained by neoclassical economics or the new economics of migration alone. People also migrate to reunite with family, or to flee natural disasters, violence, political instability, or war. Oftentimes the decision to migrate is the product of a combination of these factors.25

Historians must accept that we cannot always know or predict how migrants will act, and treating all migrants as the same, or presuming they will act in a certain way or make the same decisions, does a disservice to the field and to our readers. So, while we should acknowledge assimilation and ethnic community formation, we cannot treat them as inevitable, and cannot ignore return migration or the transnational, transborder, transregional, and transcultural connections that shape migrants’ lives and nations’ histories.26 By recognizing migrants’ agency, historians can stress the important role that migrants play in challenging and changing the immigrant experience and what it means to be American. And by focusing on migrants and incorporating a nation of migrants paradigm, historians can help others understand the history of the United States as the shared history of many migrations, and the encounters that resulted from those migrations.

NOTES

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3. Oscar Handlin, The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migration That Made the American People (Boston, 1951). It should be noted that the context in which Handlin wrote his classic book—in the years immediately following World War II, during which many
European refugees were indeed uprooted—is important. Moreover, although Handlin's account is Eurocentric, it fits within broader postwar liberal efforts to build a more inclusive national history. For example, in Handlin's *The Newcomers: Negroes and Puerto Ricans in a Changing Metropolis* (Cambridge, MA, 1959), he argues that the experiences of African Americans and Puerto Ricans were, in many senses, more similar than not to those of earlier European immigrants.


7. This is an admittedly crude, imperfect way to measure the field's focus. The articles in the search results were not limited to U.S. history. While the growth can be attributed, in part, to the increase in the number of journals and articles published over the course of the period examined, it is still instructive for comparative purposes. Donna Gabaccia utilizes a similar approach in her chapter “Time and Temporality in Migration Studies,” in an updated edition of Caroline B. Brettell and James F. Hollifield, eds., *Migration Theory: Talking across Disciplines*, 3rd ed. (New York, 2014), 37–66.


17. Handlin, Uprooted, 3.


19. More recently, scholars have described countries like El Salvador and Mexico as “nations of emigrants.” See, for example, Susan Bibler Coutin, Nation of Emigrants: Shifting Boundaries of Citizenship in El Salvador and the United States (Ithaca, NY, 2007); David Fitzgerald, A Nation of Emigrants: How Mexico Manages Its Migration (Berkeley, CA, 2008).


24. Hoerder, Cultures in Contact, xx.


26. For a transnational approach, see Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, eds., Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration: Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Nationalism Reconsidered (New York, 1992). Scholars subsequently made several critiques of transnationalism, and in some cases, proposed other approaches. See, for example, Roger Waldinger and David Fitzgerald, “Transnationalism in Question,” American Journal of Sociology 109, no. 5 (March 2004): 1177–95; Roger Waldinger, The Cross-Border Connection: Immigrants, Emigrants, and Their Homelands (Cambridge, MA, 2015); for a “transborder” approach, see Lynn Stephen, Transborder Lives: Indigenous Oaxacans in Mexico, California, and Oregon (Durham, NC, 2007); for a “transregional” approach, see Harzig and Hoerder, with Gabaccia, What Is Migration History?; for a “transcultural” approach, see Hoerder, Cultures in Contact; for an “inter-National” approach, which combines aspects of transnational and transcultural approaches, see Eiichiro Azuma, Between Two Empires: Race, History, and Transnationalism in Japanese America (New York, 2005). Although transnational histories of migration have become ubiquitous over the last twenty years, some migration historians have made the point that such studies are not entirely new: Carl Wittke, Marcus Lee Hansen, and Theodore C. Blegen, all historians of European migration, were writing what would now be considered transnational history in the 1930s and 1940s. See, for example, Carl Wittke, We Who Built America: The Saga of the Immigrant (New York, 1939); Marcus Lee Hansen, The Atlantic Migration, 1607–1860: A History of the Continuing Settlement of the United States (Cambridge, MA, 1940); Theodore C. Blegen, Grass Roots History (Minneapolis, 1947).