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Toward the internationalization of American  
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[David Thelen](#)

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# Of Audiences, Borderlands, and Comparisons: Toward the Internationalization of American History

David Thelen

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The project of internationalizing the *Journal of American History* begins with the conviction that the history we write emerges from the ways we engage audiences. We frame our inquiries with an eye to the people we imagine will be interested in what we have to tell. What historians contribute is the ability to uncover and hold up pieces from the past as alternatives for their audiences to consider in the present—perhaps for action, perhaps for solace, perhaps even for identity. When anything interferes with the ability of historians and audiences to engage alternatives from the past, the conversations are weakened. In the United States today, that ability is weakened by the narrow and overspecialized vision of historians and by empty and stalled political debate that discourages people from imagining alternatives to the present.

We hope that by drawing foreign scholars and their work into the everyday activities of the *JAH*, we can encourage exploration of alternatives to the narrowed academic conversations that shape our field and to the empty political debate that characterizes our American politics. Foreign scholars, who by definition introduce texts and events from one culture to audiences from another, develop two approaches that can widen our approaches to the American past. First, foreign audiences expect comparison: How does an American process, structure, method of interpretation, or style of problem solving resemble and differ from something in their own country? Second, the foreign audiences of Americanists abroad occupy borderlands in which scholars must translate: How do people use words, and ultimately create lives, out of materials from two or more cultures in the borderlands between those cultures?

David Thelen is professor of history at Indiana University and editor of the *Journal of American History*.

I picked up many of the ideas and citations in this introduction from talks with Americanists abroad and in this country. I would particularly like to thank those who read and criticized the first draft of this introduction. Some of these readers dissented from some of my conclusions, but I am deeply grateful to all for their helpful criticism and encouragement: Willi Paul Adams, Tadashi Aruga, Chad Berry, Casey Blake, Mari Jo Buhle, Marianne Debouzy, Drew Faust, Richard Fox, Paul Murphy, José Luis Orozco, Mary Ryan, Michael Sherry, S. Ilan Troen, Sarah McNair Vosmeier.

On our practical steps toward internationalizing the *JAH*, see the first appendix to this article, "How We Will List and Review International Scholarship," and the introduction to our "Recent Scholarship" section in this issue.

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