When I attended graduate school in Madison, Wisconsin, in the 1960s, nation-states were the self-evident focus for the discipline of history. Nation-states expressed people’s identities, focused their dreams, arbitrated their differences, solved their problems, exercised their collective sovereignty, fought their wars. Modern professional historical scholarship grew up alongside the nation-state. Its mission was to document and explain the rise, reform, and fall of nation-states and national cultures. And professional history developed a civic mission to teach citizens to contain their experiences within nation-centered narratives.

Now, some 45 years later, I have a very different take on the practice of history and the work of nations. In particular, I question the assumption that history either can or should assume the centrality of nation-states. Part of the change comes from what I learned from interactions over the 1990s as editor of the Journal of American History with hundreds of historians who practiced the discipline outside the United States as we explored initiatives to try to internationalize the practice of history (Thelen 1992).

Part of my interest in internationalization came from engaging the intellectual, political, and cultural currents that were swirling through historical scholarship, challenges to master narratives like those of nation-states, challenges to the authority of the discipline and its methods. And stepping still further back, I recognize that this initiative to rethink history in transnational perspectives was part of larger historical challenges to the identity and authority of nation-states. The widening spread across national borders of institutions such as multinational corporations and CNN, of social movements such as feminism and environmentalism, and of unprecedented migrations of people have unleashed processes of hybridization and creolization as people shape new and multiple identities. The global reach of corporations and capitalism have also battered at the capacity of people to effectively
shape control over their lives within their nation-states. Even the concept of citizenship, once the unquestioned right of nation-states to bestow, has been shaken by movements that claim that people’s civic rights belong to and should accompany them as human beings wherever they go, not be bestowed on them by nation-states (Barber 1995, Bender 2002, Greider 1997, Jameson and Miyoshi 1998, LaFeber 1999, Reich 1991).

These changes, in turn, sparked resistance in many forms, including new notions of nationhood like “black nationalism,” Nation of Islam, Queer Nation, as well as transnational sort-of nationalisms like Hispanic and Latino. As some people construct borderlands between cultures—as migrants, in intermarriage or in languages like Spanglish—others invoke nation-states or national cultures to try to prevent such mixing or creolization.

In thinking about how to approach internationalization of history we began by following the prevailing thrust of the literature toward debating a priori assumptions and ideologies about what nation-states should be or do. We would debate definitions of concepts like nation, diaspora, global citizenship, homeland, hostland. Over time, however, we came increasingly to conclude that the worst approach was to assume or define the things to be questioned and investigated. What mattered was not to define what a nation-state (or a diaspora) could or should be—or what transnational should mean—but how people experienced and constructed nation, state or diaspora as they went about their lives. We wanted to explore the challenges and constructions individuals experienced when they crossed national borders or when they encountered the nation-state within their own borders (Thelen 1999a). We reached the same conclusion as participants in a recent American Historical Review forum on transnational possibilities for history: The most exciting point to begin to draw attention to and begin that study is with circuits and circulation—of people, ideas, institutions, as they encounter possibilities and constraints when they cross national borders and to assume that such circulation, such movement, is natural and frequent (AHR Conversation 2006).

Along the way we discovered the exciting possibilities for exploration contained in the prefix “trans,” which draws attention to movement across, over, or through nations. As Aiwah Ong wrote: “Trans denotes both moving through space or across lines, as well as changing the nature of something. Besides suggesting new relations between nation-states and capital, transnationality also alludes to the transversal, the