INTRODUCTION

Globalizing the History of French Decolonization

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ABSTRACT: While the recent “transnational” and “global” turns in history have inspired new approaches to studying the French Revolution and the French Resistance, they have made a surprisingly minor impact on the study of French decolonization. Adopting a global or transnational lens, this special issue argues, can open up new possibilities for broadening our understanding of the collapse of France’s global empire in the mid-twentieth century as well as the reverberations of decolonization into the twenty-first.

KEYWORDS: decolonization, empire, global history, globalization, internationalism, transnational history

In the winter 2014 issue of *French Historical Studies*, David A. Bell evocatively wrote that over the course of the last three decades historians have “taken so many different historiographical turns as to leave us all staggering about dizzily.” As Bell explains, definitions of a “historiographical turn” run the gamut from “popular topic” to a fundamental shift in the way the discipline of history is practiced.¹ Over the years, the study of history has been profoundly transformed by a series of historiographical shifts: the social turn, the linguistic turn, the cultural turn, the colonial and postcolonial turns, and—most recently—the global and the transnational turns.²

Rather than calling for yet another “turn” in our approach to studying the history of France and its empire, this special issue encourages scholars of French decolonization—or decolonizations, plural—to draw inspiration from the recent transnational and global turns as a way of facilitating a deeper engagement with the global interconnectedness of these processes. The most recent global shift in French history has inspired new scholarship on prerevolutionary France, the French Revolution, and on the

myriad forms of resistance that took shape in France during World War II.³ Transnational or global histories of French decolonization, by contrast, remain surprisingly few and far between.⁴ Collectively, the articles featured in this special issue provide some initial responses to the question: What new perspectives can global or transnational history provide that can help us understand the process of French decolonization as well as its reverberations into the postcolonial era?

The definitions of transnational or global history are “far from stable or self-evident,” Isabel Hofmeyr has explained, but they can be generally described as approaches to history that attempt to move beyond the nation-state—or, in this case, the imperial nation-state—as the field of analysis.⁵ Whereas the study of French history has traditionally been predicated on a quest to define France’s exceptionalism and its “distinctive revolutionary and radical heritage,” argues Laura Frader, scholarship since the global turn has focused on upending “the very notion of French uniqueness.”⁶ Recent studies have compellingly questioned traditional narratives of the universal French republic, but the relationship of French colonialism and decolonization to that of other empires remains an underexplored avenue of inquiry, according to Frader.⁷

If the transnational framework has been unevenly applied to different subfields within French history, it has also been met with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Nancy Green, for example, has shown how the debates about the transnationalization of French history at the Centre de recherches historiques at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales quickly devolved into a “verbal fistfight” that pitted proponents of a more global approach against those who favored cultivating “the deep knowledge of the complexities of one area.” Issues of scope and scale, Green contends, are at the very heart of how we understand the historical profession.⁸

Recent works on the history of global France have been driven by efforts to decenter the Hexagon, to broaden the range of voices and perspectives, and to contribute to an ongoing discussion about inequality and racism in France today. As scholars have shown, racial disparity in France is both connected to the particular history of French colonialism *and* enmeshed in broader global structures of inequality.⁹ The growing availability of archives in former French colonies that deal with the immediate postcolonial period has also begun to transform the field in important ways. New sources have allowed historians to weave fresh narratives and construct innovative arguments about the nature of the empire’s unraveling, shifting the focus from metropolitan France to the way people experienced the processes of decolonization in the former empire.¹⁰

Historiographical turns, however, are shaped by more than the development of innovative theoretical frameworks, the discovery of new

sources, and shifts in the broader political landscape. As Jan Goldstein explained in a 2001 *French Historical Studies* article entitled “The Future of French History in the United States,” university presses looking to appeal to a wider scholarly audience and grant agencies hoping to widen the impact of the research they fund have encouraged scholars to look beyond the boundaries of the Hexagon and the French Empire. Financial pressure on smaller colleges and universities, moreover, has led to a reduction in the number of France-specific faculty positions.¹¹ Although nearly twenty years have passed, Goldstein’s assessment remains spot on. If anything, we have continued further down this path. While trained as a French historian, I myself hold the position of Assistant Professor of History in the field of “Modern Europe in the Wider World,” and am the sole modern Europeanist in my department.

While external pressures might be pushing us in the direction of globalizing our scholarship, the actual practice of this brand of history often brings us face-to-face with new challenges. Histories of empire are often already multilingual and multiarchival in nature, and transnational or global histories of decolonization can, in many cases, require additional research travel, funding, and language skills.¹² Despite these practical constraints—and perhaps despite our temptation to resist external pressures to think more globally—the articles in this issue collectively demonstrate that there is significant ground to be gained by opening up the scope of our investigations.

In the last two decades, the work of globalizing the history of decolonization has been initiated by scholars who have embraced international organizations as sites of inquiry. Histories of decolonization and international institutions have revealed innumerable global entanglements that influenced how decolonization unfolded across the world from the importance of transnational political networks to the role that global public health played in the dismantling of empire.¹³ But “the global,” of course, extends far beyond the walls of the United Nations (UN), the International Labor Organization, and the World Health Organization. Indeed, the seven contributions to this issue jointly speak to the multiple ways that global or transnational connections shaped the end of colonialism across the empire. Thinking globally about French decolonization raises new questions, invites new frameworks, and encourages unconventional readings of archival sources. All of these can lead us to a more nuanced understanding of how French decolonization was embedded in a larger global process of imperial collapse and political, social, economic, and cultural reinvention.

The articles featured in this issue engage with a set of varied yet interconnected questions: To what extent were both anticolonial activists and proponents of empire embedded within broader global networks? How did

this embeddedness influence their approach to opposing or advocating decolonization? What role did physical movement across national and imperial boundaries play in the dismantling of France's overseas empire? In what ways did independence open up opportunities for new nations to think and act globally? And conversely, how much have they been constrained by the powerful ties that continue to link France to its former empire?

Thinking globally was as important for colonial reformers as it was for those people who wanted to see the definitive end to colonial rule. While the founding of the UN in 1945 would offer new opportunities to look beyond the frontiers of the empire, global thinking about colonial reform in many locales had its origins in the interwar period. As M. Kathryn Edwards shows in her article, the reform-oriented press in interwar Vietnam looked to both the United States' relationship with the Philippines and Australia, Canada, and India's relationship with Britain as possible models for an autonomous relationship between Indochina and France. The threat of world war, moreover, steered some Vietnamese toward the pursuit of a more moderate agenda of colonial reform, rather than pushing them to advocate full independence from France.

Just as supporters of reform in the empire drew on global models as they began to imagine a decolonized world, members of the French diplomatic corps and military also situated their agendas within broader international frameworks. My own contribution to this issue focuses on the role of colonial politics in the deliberations that led to the creation of the UN. I argue that while French officials at home were eagerly negotiating a new French Union that would theoretically put metropolitan France and the colonies on unprecedentedly equal footing, French delegates to the 1945 San Francisco conference were unwilling to stand up for these reforms-in-progress. Ultimately, I assert, they lacked confidence that the incipient French Union would stand up to international scrutiny as conference delegates set out to define new standards for what constituted "self-government."

Thinking globally likewise shaped the ways that the French military approached the end of empire. In his article on French military strategy during the Algerian War, Terrence Peterson illuminates the global dimensions of the conflict, focusing on the ways that French military thinking drew from models abroad. Debates about the nature of "modern" war, Peterson argues, were—at their core—transnational conversations, and the broader global political context had a notable impact on French strategy. For French officers, the war in Algeria was part and parcel of the global Cold War, not a sideshow threatening to distract onlookers from the main event.

In the final years of French colonial rule, proponents and opponents of empire did not just *think* globally, they also *moved* globally. When we think of decolonization as a "movement," it is often in the political sense.

But the end of empire also entailed the literal movement of people across colonial and postcolonial spaces, as Megan Brown and Burleigh Hendrickson demonstrate in their contributions. Undoubtedly, global travel shaped these actors' understanding of empire and the postcolonial world in notable ways. In her article on the Rallye Méditerranée-le Cap, Brown introduces us to a range of historical characters for whom Africa was an extension of Europe, two continents merged together around a central Mediterranean lake. "Eurafrica," as they called it, was the moral property—if not the political dominion—of all Europeans. As European contestants in this transcontinental car race zoomed through imperial borders, they claimed the space as their own. Africans, in this formulation, were relegated to the realm of support staff and onlookers, gazing wide-eyed as modernity whizzed by them. After independence, tourism would become an important means to establish new national identities, as African states assumed control of the means and meanings of travel within their newly sovereign territories.

Hendrickson's article similarly demonstrates the power of global travel for activists, writers, and filmmakers in former colonies as they (literally) navigated the decolonization process and, later, their new-found independence. In his exploration of "French others" and "othering Frenchness," Hendrickson traces the trajectories of Ousmane Sembène, Frantz Fanon, and Simone Lellouche Othmani as they engaged with an ever-shifting notion of French identity—an identity that they played a role in constructing. As these three figures traveled within and beyond the boundaries of the empire and the former empire, their own perspectives on "Frenchness" (and their relationship to French identity) shifted as they moved. While Sembène, Fanon, and Lellouche Othmani all possessed some intimacy with France and the French, Hendrickson contends, their own identities as anticolonialists and (at least partial) outsiders were shaped by their own experiences of France and the empire as well as by encounters outside the bounds of the Francophone world.

After formal independence, new nations—at least in theory—had the opportunity to embrace global relationships beyond the boundaries of the former empire. In practice, though, the magnetic pull of colonial legacies has proven difficult to escape, as Sarah Runcie and Frédéric Viguier reveal in their contributions. Runcie's article explores the politics of health in postindependence Cameroon, formerly a UN trust territory jointly administered by France and Britain. Even as Cameroonians labored to develop their own medical establishment, Runcie argues, French doctors and government officials worked to maintain a sphere of French influence over African medical care. Cameroon's unique position as a former trust territory aroused much anxiety for the French, who feared competition with British and other international influences after Cameroon gained its independence in 1960.

As Viguié suggests in his contribution, France exerts an ongoing influence in postindependence Morocco as well, where the ongoing dominance of the French language in higher education points to a kind of “false decolonization.” Drawing on interviews with students from a wide range of backgrounds, Viguié demonstrates how, in contemporary Moroccan society, French-language education remains the most promising path to professional success. Despite the possibilities for *arabisation* in the decades that followed Moroccan independence in 1956, the pull of the Hexagon remains stronger than that of other Arabic-speaking countries as students consider their educational options abroad.

Collectively, these articles suggest a number of fruitful paths for scholars of decolonization moving forward, highlighting what can be gained by broadening our field of vision. If the history of the French Empire and its ultimate demise is, on the one hand, a unique story of a particular set of places and peoples, it is also, simultaneously, part of a global narrative of decolonization wherein historical actors both thought and moved beyond the French-controlled world. Physical borders are both consequential and permeable, and movement across the frontiers of the French Empire undoubtedly shaped people’s visions of the decolonizing world. Yet globalization, too, has its limits. While boundaries are penetrable, they are also persistent. As former colonies acceded to independent statehood, the physical bounds of France’s empire crumbled, only to be replaced by less visible—and perhaps more allegorical—borders. In the six decades since the collapse of the French Union, the ghosts of imperial frontiers have continued to hold former colonies in France’s orbit, defying the infinite possibilities that new forms of global solidarity had seemed to offer in the wake of independence.

Acknowledgments: This special issue is based on a conference entitled “French Decolonization in Global Perspective” that was hosted by the Institute of French Studies at New York University in April 2019. The editors would like to thank the Institute for its generous support of this project. We also thank the conference commentators, Frederick Cooper, Liz Fink, and Charlotte Walker-Said, for their insights. I would like to thank Megan Brown, Ernesto Capello, Jennifer Foray, and Katrina Phillips for their comments on earlier drafts of the introduction.

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Nations and Decolonization (Routledge, 2020). Presently, she is working on a book manuscript entitled “Traveling to the End of Empire: Leisure Tourism in the Era of Decolonization,” which explores the global entanglements between travel and the collapse of the French and British empires in the twentieth century. She has taught at Tulane University and the College of International Studies at the University of Oklahoma, and she is currently Assistant Professor of History at Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Email: jpearso4@macalester.edu

Notes

1. David A. Bell, “Questioning the Global Turn: The Case of the French Revolution,” *French Historical Studies* 37, 1 (2014): 1–24, here 1, doi:10.1215/00161071-2376501.
2. There is a wealth of thoughtful discussion on the meanings, uses, and limitations of these various turns. See, for example, Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005); Durba Ghosh, “Another Set of Imperial Turns?” *American Historical Review* 117, 3 (2012): 772–793, doi:10.1086/ahr.117.3.772; Judith Surkis, “When Was the Linguistic Turn? A Genealogy,” *American Historical Review* 117, 3 (2012): 700–722, doi:10.1086/ahr.117.3.700; and Gary Wilder, “From Optic to Topic: The Foreclosure Effect of Historiographic Turns,” *American Historical Review* 117, 3 (2012): 723–745, doi:10.1086/ahr.117.3.723.
3. On the global history of prerevolutionary France, see Paul Cheney, *Revolutionary Commerce: Globalization and the French Monarchy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). For recent global approaches to the French Revolution, see, for example, Suzanne Desan, Lynn Hunt, and William Max Nelson, eds., *The French Revolution in Global Perspective* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); and Michael Kwass, *Contraband: Louis Mandrin and the Making of a Global Underground* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014). For a compelling global approach to the history of the French resistance, see *French Politics, Culture & Society* 37, 1, special issue on “The French Resistance in Transnational Perspective” (2019), guest editor: Valerie Deacon.
4. A few recent exceptions to the relative paucity of transnational studies of French decolonization include Burleigh Hendrickson, “March 1968: Practicing Transnational Activism from Tunis to Paris,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44, 4 (2012): 755–774, doi:10.1017/S0020743812000852; Salar Mohandesi, “Bringing Vietnam Home: The Vietnam War, Internationalism, and May ‘68,” *French Historical Studies* 41, 2 (2018): 219–251, doi:10.1215/00161071-4322930; and Todd Shepard, “Algeria, France, Mexico, UNESCO: A Transnational History of Anti-Racism and Decolonization, 1932–1962,” *Journal of Global History* 6, 2 (2011): 273–297, doi:10.1017/S174002281100026X.
5. C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connolly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed, “AHR Conversation: On Transnational History,” *American Historical Review* 111, 5 (2006): 1441–1464, doi:10.1086/ahr.111.5.1441.

6. Laura Frader, "French History: Old Paradigms, Current Tendencies, New Directions," *French Politics, Culture, & Society* 32, 2 (2014): 21–33, here 21–22, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24517982>.
7. Frader, "French History: Old Paradigms," 24. For a broader discussion of the state of the field in French colonial history, see Alice Conklin and Julia Ann Clancy-Smith, "Introduction: Writing Colonial Histories," *French Historical Studies* 27, 3 (2004): 497–505, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/171200>; and Emmanuelle Saada, "More than a Turn? The 'Colonial' in French Studies," *French Politics, Culture, & Society* 32, 3 (2014): 34–39, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24517983>.
8. Nancy L. Green, "French History and the Transnational Turn," *French Historical Studies* 37, 4 (2014): 551–564, here 552, doi:10.1215/00161071-2717034.
9. For an excellent overview of issues of race in France, see Herrick Chapman and Laura L. Frader, eds., *Race in France: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Politics of Difference* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004).
10. See, for example, Jeffrey James Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Elizabeth Foster, *African Catholic: Decolonization and the Transformation of the Church* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019); and Jennifer Johnson, *The Battle for Algeria: Sovereignty, Health Care, and Humanitarianism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).
11. Jan Goldstein, "The Future of French History in the United States: Unapocalyptic Thoughts for the New Millennium," *French Historical Studies* 24, 1 (2001): 1–10, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/11875>.
12. I would be remiss not to acknowledge the inequalities built into a professional system that rewards ambitious archival work abroad, privileging scholars in the United States, Canada, and Europe who can more easily access both visas and research funds. See Emily Callaci, "On Acknowledgments," *American Historical Review* 125, 1 (2020): 126–131, doi:10.1093/ahr/rhz938.
13. See, for example, Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo and José Pedro Monteiro, eds., *Internationalism, Imperialism and the Formation of the Contemporary World: The Pasts of the Present* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Daniel Maul, *Human Rights, Development and Decolonization: The International Labour Organization, 1940–1970* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Alanna O'Malley, *The Diplomacy of Decolonisation: America, Britain and the United Nations during the Congo Crisis, 1960–1964* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2018); Eva-Maria Muschik, "Managing the World: The United Nations, Decolonization, and the Strange Triumph of State Sovereignty in the 1950s and 1960s," *Journal of Global History* 13, 1 (2018): 121–144, doi:10.1017/S1740022817000316; and Jessica Lynne Pearson, *The Colonial Politics of Global Health: France and the United Nations in Postwar Africa* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).