

## “The Healing Power of Teaching World History”

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I want to thank Dr Bonnie Lee for encouraging me to submit a proposal for this conference, because it has given me the opportunity to think through and articulate some of the reasons why it matters to teach diverse and inclusive histories.

The truth is, I think history can heal. That’s a weird sentence for this audience, I know - after all, I specialize professionally in dead people - but I believe that telling and teaching a wider range of stories about the past can help individuals and societies. You are missing pieces of yourself if you don’t see yourself in history; nations can’t make sense of their current realities if they can’t face the truth about their pasts; and social media shows us everyday that people can’t function well as engaged citizens of the world if they don’t understand how we got here. If the only “history” you are taught is about what white people from western Europe did, and people who aren’t white only appear in the story when white people show up to steal stuff and start a fight, it sends a pretty clear message that histories by and about white Europeans are the only ones that matter. It leaves everyone ill-equipped to understand their own place in the world, never mind what is happening in the world around us, and how you can enact change.

Historians have been calling for more diverse and inclusive histories, and explaining their value, for decades. 40 years ago, in her presidential address to the Organization of American Historians called “The Necessity of History,” the pathbreaking Jewish feminist historian Gerda Lerner wrote that history is “more than collective memory; it is memory formed and shaped so as

to have meaning. ... It is not a dispensable intellectual luxury; history-making is a 'social necessity.' It satisfies a range of human needs, including as a source of personal identity, cultural tradition, and explanation."<sup>1</sup> In a later chapter called "Why History Matters," she argued that when we see "ourselves to be part of history, we can begin to think on a scale larger than the here and now." When collective myths, often but not always rooted in nationalist myths, only legitimize the coherence of the in-group, they reinforce the deviant status of the out group. "By making distinctions between 'us and them' appear natural, they reinforce a sense of alienation and 'Otherness' in those excluded."<sup>2</sup> In his 1995 book *Silencing the Past*, the great Haitian anthropologist and historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot used the children's game "cowboys and Indians" as a metaphor for that process and its consequences. He asked, "is it really inconsequential that the history of America is being written in the same world where few little boys want to be Indians?"<sup>3</sup>

That is, it matters whose stories we tell. In this paper I will briefly explain how and why my department developed a first-year World History course, explore some of the effects I have seen the course have on my students, and conclude with some thoughts on the healing power, the *social necessity*, of teaching inclusive histories.

Back in 2012, three of us in the Department of History decided that it was time to add a first-year World History course. Me, my colleague Gideon Fujiwara who specializes in Japanese history, and Caribbean historian Harriet Edwards, believed that the Department needed to offer a more global and inclusive first-year course than the traditional, European-focused, "Western Civilization" course it had offered since its inception. World historians have long challenged the

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<sup>1</sup> Gerda Lerner, "Necessity of History," reprinted in *Why History Matters*, 116.

<sup>2</sup> Lerner, *Why History Matters*, 201-202

<sup>3</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 22

profound racism behind the word “civilizations,” which has been used for centuries to demean the histories and achievements of non-Western cultures in general, and African and Indigenous cultures in particular. We were one of the last History departments in North America to still even offer a course called “Western Civ,” never mind have that as our only first-year, entry level course. It took two years to get World History on the books, as we worked through our colleagues’ concerns.

The first was that the department had only ever had one first year course, so our students would lose some of that shared foundation if we offered a second option, and students who took World History instead of Western Civ wouldn’t have the background they needed for our upper level courses. Our response was that the majority of the students in our first-year courses aren’t History majors, and even the ones who do go on to complete a major have to take a lot of second-year national and regional surveys anyway. We showed that Western Civ was really only supporting about half of our second-year courses, the ones about Western European history. North American or Asian history got little coverage in Western Civ, so in those second-year courses the instructor already had to assume that students were coming in with little background knowledge. We also noted that prioritizing Western Europe as the “shared foundation” was exactly the problem we were trying to address.

The next concern was, given how hard it is to cover “Western Civ” in 13 weeks, how much harder and more pedagogically untenable would it be to try and cover “World History” in 13 weeks? And that was back when the U of L still had 13-week terms, we have since shifted to a 12-week term. Most universities in North America teach World History in two terms, but there are rules here that meant we had to do it in one. We pointed out that there was already a huge variety in how we taught Western Civ: each instructor gives it their own slightly different focus,

and there are no guidelines other than everyone uses the same textbook. World History would be no different: Gideon, Harriet and I worked together to choose a textbook that we would all use, and a key feature of the one we picked was that it did the best job at combining and comparing different parts of the world, rather than separating them into their disconnected sections or chapters. All other temporal, geographic, and thematic decisions are up to individual instructors. So for example Gideon's has a strong thematic focus: He starts with "What is a Civilization/Complex Society?" and goes on to include others like "Spiritual and Secular Authorities," "Global Encounters," "Visions for Society," "Women and Modern Societies," and "Imperialism and Resistance." He includes more Western Europe in his course than I do; we both start in the ancient world, but he ends at WWII while I go up to late 20<sup>th</sup> century decolonization, and so on.

The third concern was that teaching "World History" was well outside the expertise of most members of the department. We responded that at that point the three of us were teaching Western Civ without any deep expertise in Western European history either, so if "expertise" was not a requirement for teaching Western Civ we did not think it would be an insurmountable barrier for teaching World History. We weren't going to make anyone teach World History who didn't want to, but we were up for the challenge.

A final concern will be familiar to anyone who has wondered about starting a brand new course at a university: what if students here weren't interested in World History, and we did all this work only to have empty seats? There are a lot of stereotypes about students who come to U of L, and one of them is that they tend to be more conservative than students in big cities. As someone who grew up in Southern Alberta I have always known this stereotype is not true, and

our students have proved me right: enrollment has been strong from the start and we now offer two sections per term.

These conversations also encouraged the Department to finally change the name of the other first-year course to “The Western World,” leaving “Western Civ” behind for good.

So the paperwork went through, and in Fall 2015 I got to be the first person to teach the first-ever, first-year Introduction to World History course at the University of Lethbridge. My lack of knowledge about Western Civ had made it hard enough to teach that course when I had to, but my near-complete lack of knowledge about Asian and African history was terrifying and humbling. I was profoundly lucky that Gideon kindly shared all of the lecture notes from his second-year East Asian History survey course with me. The effort and stress was worth it, though: our “World History” course shows our students a more complete and inclusive picture of the human past, thus offering in its own small way the possibility of healing relationships with students, cultures, and worldviews my discipline has helped to denigrate and marginalize. I don’t care whether or not my students notice by the end of the course that we have spent very little time talking about white people, and when white people do show up it is from a non-European perspective; I don’t have a lecture called “The Age of Exploration,” for example, but I do have one called “Spain Invades the Americas.” I talk about the Haitian Revolution, not the French Revolution; the great Asian, African, Indian, and Indigenous empires, rather than European ones.

So how do I know that it matters to my students from non-European backgrounds to see their own histories represented? Easy: they tell me. In my course part of the assessments involve a series of three assignments where they choose topics they think are important and they have to tell me why they made those choices. More often than not, students from Asian, African,

and Indigenous backgrounds, students who are already marginalized at a school dominated by white students and faculty, choose at least some topics related to their personal histories. For example, last fall a student wrote about the Indian Rebellion of 1857, and said:

I chose this topic because I am half-Indian, and although I have always been aware of the colonialist presence in India with the British East India Company, I wanted to educate myself more about the rebellions that followed. India has always been very divided between various cultures, languages, and ethnicities. These divisions have created so much animosity in India, so I wanted to further explore this brief, although very violent, moment of intersectionality. This rebellion is monumental as it shows a time where the people of India were united, whether you were higher or lower class, or Hindu or Muslim, they were all against the British direct rule.

On a later assignment she wrote about the creation of the Indian National Congress party in 1885 and made some fascinating analytical connections between it and more recent events. She noted that the INC

is important context to understand the tense relationship between the Hindu and Muslim people in India. Although the Congress was attempting to provide representation for the Indian people, it was only composed of the elite, with little gender or religious representation. This exclusion led to one of the biggest events in Indian History, the partition of India. As someone who is half-Indian and has travelled there, I have heard a lot of stories about the partition and how it changed Indian history. This tension is very apparent in India today, as a negative sentiment towards the Muslim minority is very present. It is important to consider how the creation of the Indian National Congress led us here.

In two short paragraphs I could see her making sense of aspects of her own cultural history as well as present-day clashes in India.

Another student was of mixed Caribbean and Chinese heritage, and when she wrote about Latin America's ethnic mixing she said,

I chose this topic because I felt that growing up as a multiracial individual, I've been lucky to have been raised in a country where there is so much diversity, and in a time where there is a lot of acceptance and equality (not perfect but not nearly as much discrimination as the time periods we are learning about in class). The fact that areas we were learning about in Latin America ... had this blend of cultures living together, and

the small (but important) period of time where ... slavery was banned, is such an important and influential piece of history to have learned about and is information I can think about in a personal way because of my experiences and some the opportunities I have/had.

In a later paragraph she noted that her dad was born and raised in Jamaica but her family never talked about the fact that his ancestors were brought there as slaves. Then her aunt did a DNA test. “When the results came back about where in Africa our ancestors came from, that’s when I first heard anything about how our family would have come to Jamaica, and honestly the first time I learned at all about the original Indigenous groups in the Caribbean and how the rest of the ethnic groups came to be in the area.” She found herself reflecting on the history of sugar cane, a snack she had eaten often in her own life: “Until this lecture in class, I never knew about the history of sugar cane and the importance of the geography and agriculture in the Caribbean and how the area supplied sugar to so much of the world, and how it may have brought my ancestors to that area in the first place.” In a concluding paragraph she noted that “One of the reasons I chose this class ... was because I knew we would be covering history from some of the areas of the world I have connections with through my ancestral line, ... [but] I never thought that I would have learned about parts of history that I could directly apply to my family or that I relate to in the ways that I have.”

Gideon has observed a similar pattern in his class, even with very different assignments. “It’s especially exciting to see students connect with certain topics because they identify with that culture, faith, or historical figure. Often those students can share personal insights and valuable perspectives on that topic. It’s good to see their enthusiasm come through in our class discussions or in their term papers.”

While racialized, minority students are seeing themselves in history, often for the first time, they aren't the only students who are making those kinds of connections between world history, the world around them right now, and who they are or want to be in that world. Students with European backgrounds also tell me, repeatedly, how much it matters to them to get a different and much wider perspective on the past. I have lost count of the number of times I have heard, "I did not know this before, why didn't I know this before, we should learn this in high school!" For example, one student wrote that she's had a long interest in Korean pop culture,

but I never knew how Korea's North and South became divided in the first place. I knew that the countries were once somewhat united, and I knew that the Americans fought in a war there, but I didn't know much else. ... Learning about this part of Korea's history is something that I was interested in but never took the time to do. ... But knowing about who did what helps me make much more sense of those videos I used to watch, and it also helps me understand part of the reason these countries align with each other today.

In a later paragraph she wrote that when she had learned about the Vietnam War in high school it was from the American perspective, which

made it seem like the American forces came to an unstable Vietnam to diplomatically restore order and that the Vietnamese militia attacked the Americans for trying to help. This narrative really painted the Americans as the "good guys" and the Vietnamese as the "bad guys," but I had no idea how little I knew about the situation. Now it's easy to understand that Vietnamese forces were just trying to protect the country that they had worked so hard to have determination over. Of course, they weren't just going to let the Americans take their country from them, if anything it seems like the Americans were the "bad guys" for invading a fully functioning country because they were afraid that it would spread its Communist ideas to other countries. ... I am glad that I learned how wrong I was now and not later during more advanced history courses.

In a concluding paragraph she noted how surprised she was that she kept picking topics

in Eastern Asia, which is a region I didn't think I was as interested in. But in this course, I was able to revisit the only two parts about East Asian history I knew about and realized that most of what I knew was incorrect or lacking context. Gaining this context and re-learning about the events helped me make sense of modern-day alliances and relationships between different nations. ... [B]y re-learning what I thought I knew about

East Asia I found a new interest in the region and gained a desire to understand the area's ancient past and reconnect it to today's events.

Last fall's class also included a senior student who was drawing his own personal and sophisticated connections. For one assignment he chose to write about Kwame Nkruma, the first Prime Minister and then first President of Ghana. He said,

I have not heard of this man before, but as I learn more about him I find his story incredibly admirable. Although he did college in America, he used his education and his advocacy to get to a place where he was able to make effective change in a vulnerable area that he had some connection with. I think it's important that after he did what he set out to do, he made a point of explicitly saying it was all meaningless unless they use that political momentum to help other areas of Africa. It offers this thoughtful idea in activism that there is power in dissatisfaction; that once you reach one finish line you plan your next race. I think that's the type of leader I want to be.

In a later paragraph he linked the Mongol conquest of Abbasid Baghdad in the 13th century, the first Opium War in China in the 19th century, and the Armenian genocide during WWI, saying:

These are three bloody historical happenings spanning across approximately 600 years, and all are quite different in nature, but all pose an answer to a question that I found came up a lot as I moved through this course: Why do humans kill each other? In each of these scenarios, there was one nation economically thriving, strong military, ambitious views, that designs a ruthless attack on a nation that is not so well off. There is a clear difference in power between the killers and the killed, and it brings up a lot of valid questions on the way nations exert power, or preserve their values. I picked these because it feels like they happened in a different world, one where you can't just conquer a nation, you have to go that extra mile. Kill. Extract. Rape. Humiliate. Stomp. Profit. It's a matter of shock in these events, it's a question of if I am the same species as the soldiers wrapping up the Baghdadi Caliph in the Carpet to let their horse trample him, or the soldier who put a gun to the Chinese general's head then told him to sign away his country's dignity, or the general who got the nickname the 'Blood Shedder' for his military orders. It's these events that lead me to believe that history isn't completely about studying economics, geography, political systems, and religion but it is a mode in which we can understand humans' capacity for violence when their ideas of these topics are threatened.

His remarks speak to the final point I will make here today, which is that we need to teach more inclusive histories because our world needs more people who can make these kinds

of informed connections, who have learned from the choices and consequences of the past and want to be better leaders for the future. Last November I was lecturing about the 20<sup>th</sup> century just as Israel's latest genocidal assault on Palestine had been underway for about a month. I told my students that the heartbreaking mess in the so-called "Middle East" is the direct result of more than a century of history, and knowing a little more of that history could help them understand. I noted that the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 and the Balfour Declaration of 1917 have as much to do with what is happening in Palestine right now as the Holocaust; that the West's support of Zionism has deep anti-Semitic and Islamophobic roots; and that *Shoah* in Hebrew and *Nakba* in Arabic can both be translated as "catastrophe."

In the words of South Asian historian Carey Watt, world history can "contribute to the nurturing of more inclusive, empathetic, and informed 'global citizens' who would have a flexible and critical approach to life and learning and more multicentric, complex, and cosmopolitan understandings of their own societies and the world at large."<sup>4</sup> Students who have taken World History see their own histories in a new way and relate them to big events in the past and contemporary political situations, while others are now curious about parts of the world that they weren't curious about before; they understand contemporary geopolitics in ways that they didn't before; and they are able to take a different perspective on the past and the present than the one they started with. That is how a World History course can heal.

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<sup>4</sup> Carey A. Watt "World History, Liberal Arts, and Global Citizenship," *The Journal of General Education* 61:3 (2012), 214