

Shane Carter

UC Berkeley - ORIAS Program Coordinator

H/21 1000 Words

I'm offering my personal reflection as a student of introductory World History courses and a former high school teacher who has never taught at the college level. I don't experience the institutional constraints of teaching at a college or university, but I watched the promise/threat of college as wielded by parents and teachers for almost two decades, and I have plenty of familiarity with the hopes and expectations of the students who populate those introductory courses. College is marketed to high school students as an experience that will be personally *relevant*: intellectually, emotionally, and financially. My comments are focused on the possible mismatch between college-as-promised and introductory courses, as delivered.

### 1. Existential Relevance

Climate models are obviously variable, but there's a lot of agreement that we are currently on track to reach at least 3.1 to 3.5°C above the pre-industrial average [global temperature](#) by 2100, with quite a few models showing us hitting +3°C by 2050. Chapter 3 of the 2018 [IPCC Report](#) includes a somewhat uncharacteristic imagined narrative of life on Earth during the rise from +2°C to +3°C:

“... Starting with an intense El Niño–La Niña phase in the 2030s, several catastrophic years occur while global warming starts to approach 2°C. There are major heatwaves on all continents, with deadly consequences in tropical regions and Asian megacities, especially for those ill-equipped for protecting themselves and their communities from the effects of extreme temperatures... Intense flooding occurs in high- latitude and tropical regions, in particular in Asia, following increases in heavy precipitation ...Major ecosystems (coral reefs, wetlands, forests) are destroyed over that period ...with massive disruption to local livelihoods ... A two-year drought in the Great Plains in the USA and a concomitant drought in eastern Europe and Russia decrease global crop production ... resulting in major increases in food prices and eroding food security...”  
(pp. 280 – 281)

An 18-year-old sitting in an introductory World History course in the fall of 2019 has every reason to expect this to be their life when they reach their early 30s. Introductory history classes should draw *significantly* from Environmental History, with a particular focus on concepts such as contingency and institutional resilience. Information and analytical skills that help students understand and (perhaps) mitigate the growing crisis will be painfully relevant.

### 2. Personal Relevance

Just after noon on Monday, October 27, 2014, I was eating lunch in a hogan a few miles outside of Window Rock, Navajo Nation. I was there as the driver for a sick friend who had recently gotten her second breast cancer diagnosis and whose friend had arranged a ceremony for her before she undertook surgery and chemotherapy. A pre-ceremony lunch for the group was, apparently, standard practice before getting down to business. We sat on rugs on the floor and the woman whose family owned the hogan came in to set down a series of dishes in front of me: lamb soup with hominy, a wedge of iceberg lettuce with Thousand Island Dressing, a banana, coffee, a can of Coke. My friend had nothing to say while she ate and everyone else in the room

spoke Dine so I was left to my meal and – because of my exposure to World History – an undeniable private delight, despite the circumstances.

While I ate I thought about the Columbian Exchange and the intersecting narratives that resulted in lamb soup where I sat, but polenta and tomato sauce in Italy. I recalled side-by-side images in *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart* comparing 17<sup>th</sup> century English coffee-house culture to Ottoman coffee-house culture. I thought about industrialization and robber barons and upstate New York resorts and how Worcestershire sauce, which is in Thousand Island Dressing, would be a good candidate for the flavor of British imperialism if it were being described in terms of taste. That can of Coke was made with corn syrup now - so the Columbian Exchange - but previously sugar, so 12.5 million enslaved Africans and the Haitian Revolution and the American conquest of Hawaii, just for starters. The things that had to have happened for me to eat that lunch in that context rippled out into the distance across space and time: the Atlantic slave trade and *Loving v. Virginia*, genocides of Native peoples and ancient mariners moving through the Strait of Malacca into the Indian Ocean. How many different narratives ended with me, a college-educated black woman, eating a banana in a hogan ten miles from the seat of Navajo tribal government?

Young adults need, developmentally speaking, to think exhaustively about themselves. Introductory World History courses can be structured pedagogically to work with, rather than against, students' stage of emotional development. The course question for each student is, "What are the characteristics of my World and how did it come to be?" The pedagogical question is, "How do I structure and deliver my course so that it invites and enables each student to connect a macro-history of the World to their own experience?"

### 3. Equal Relevance

If the geographical allocation of k-12 and (to a lesser extent) college textbook pages is any indication, World History courses deliver *significantly* unequal opportunities for self-discovery to students depending on their gender and ethnic/national/racial identities. Many students enter college having learned by experience that the "World" in World History is false advertising. What is the "World" if your classmate's family has been part of it for 5,000 years but your family barely merits a mention until Europeans arrived to trade or conquer? Or if people of your gender are objects rather than subjects, in the instances when they are mentioned at all? Instructors of introductory World History college courses should actively avoid reproducing that inequality of knowledge and interest via the allocation of classroom minutes and assigned pages. What is the argument for expecting students to engage in vastly unequal emotional acrobatics to connect themselves to the narrative? Yes, there are parts of the globe with only very recent written texts. Histories of places even with written records are yet-to-be-written or remain largely inaccessible due to funding, language, and political constraints. But these are survey courses. To take a page from the world of inclusive design (or maybe this is a bastardization of John Rawls), imagine you are designing a World History course for only one student: a young woman recently arrived in the US from New Caledonia.