History for the Twenty-First Century Conference
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Using longer works of fiction/memoirs in the World History classroom

I have been teaching World History at least once a year for twenty-one years: fourteen at a large, public state university, and seven at a selective, private university. One of the challenges I noted early on was that students had a great deal of difficulty 'zooming in' to think about the actual people we were discussing and reading about on such large geographical and temporal scales. On these large scales, people seemed to be reduced to mere numbers (four million died of famine, ten million died in war, one million migrated). Often those numbers, even when appalling or amazing, just didn't resonate with my students. I found, in other words, that my students were having trouble *relating* to the human experience of world history. Because of that, they were not finding things to grasp onto that would help them to empathize with the people of the past.

I should add that, for me, teaching world history is all about two main things: first, helping students think about the past in terms of different scales, from the biggest (big history) to the smallest (microhistory). Students should be able to learn to shift between scales, and to see the relevance of the other scales even when focusing on just one. Second, at the introductory level I think world history should be able to help students empathize with people from the past--especially with people from very different backgrounds and different times.

To achieve both goals, I thought (and still think) that using primary sources was crucial. Like many others, I initially used readers to give my students access to a wide variety of sources over a long period of time. I hoped these sources would help them think about the local in the regional and global, about the individual in larger processes, and at the same time expose them to many different kinds of people. But I found that readers required a great deal of context to make such short excerpts meaningful to students. Whereas I might read an excerpt and understand multiple things about its purpose, it became increasingly clear to me that students were unable to adequately process the material in world history readers because they lacked the necessary context. At the same time, there were so many sources in the readers that they seemed to blend into one another.

Over the course of the last two decades, I developed a system that I believe has worked to help students understand how to switch between the large and the small scales necessary to doing world history, and how to think about the people of the past as both very familiar and human while also acknowledging their very different historical and temporal contexts. Indeed, one of the most consistent points of feedback I have received from students on course evaluations (and verbally) over the years is the way this approach really forced them to think about the humanity of people in the past, particularly those from very different times and places than those with which they are most familiar.

The system is relatively simple: it involves selecting four or five longer pieces of literature (memoir, fictional autobiographical, fictional) written by contemporaries or near contemporaries of the time being discussed. I choose these pieces with care, since obviously one sacrifices 'coverage' of all places and times. I then build a series of lectures and discussions around each one of these longer pieces, including both contextualization of the time and place and contextualization of the author. Students read the book at a pace determined in the syllabus, and then take an 'exam' based on the book's content. This ensures that students must read the book and will be ready for discussion. Once the exam is completed, we then have a class discussion problematizing the use of literature in history, problematizing the author's unique perspective, and determining what, if anything, an individual account can tell us about larger processes of world history. Students, having read the book carefully in order to take the exam, have very definite opinions about each of the books, and very often have important insights to offer on all of the above issues. They immerse themselves in the events and language of the narrative, and a part of the past comes to life at a human scale.

I offer this here because I would advocate using longer pieces of literature in place of, or to complement, multiple primary sources in the world history survey course. These works should be, in my opinion, as much as possible by people from places unfamiliar to students. For that reason I do not assign literature written by western Europeans in this course (though such literature could be appropriate in a different course). In the end, while students may not read about as many people, places, and times during my course, those they do read about stay with them, cause them to think about their place in larger historical scales, and help them to empathize with the pain, the happiness, and the challenges of humans around the world at different times. Instead of coverage, then, they get skills, and they can take these skills with them when they leave the classroom.

I copy here a partial list of the many books I've used (some with more success than others) over the years.[1] Keep in mind that all of these works require contextualization and problematization to help students understand where they fit within larger historical scales. Below that I include a sample book exam, the entire purpose of which is to ensure students have read the book so they can adequately engage with it.

I look forward to discussing ways some parts of this approach might be modified to fit into a secondary classroom.

List of books assigned since 1998:
Chinua Achebe, *Man of the People*.

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[1] Please note that I have only taught World History from 1945 to the present since 2012, which means that I have not had a chance to assign Trevor Getz's *Abina and the Important Men*, though I certainly would have if I had been teaching the 1500 to the present survey.

Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*.
Mariama Ba, *So Long a Letter*.
Azouz Begag, *Shantytown Kid*.
Tsitsi Damgarembga, *Nervous Conditions*.
Slavenka Drakulic, *How we Survived Communism and Even Laughed*.
Duong Thu Huong, *Paradise of the Blind*.
Buchi Emecheta, *Second Class Citizen*.
Olauda Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*.
Shen Fu, *Six Records of a Floating Life*.
Liang Heng, *Son of the Revolution*.
F. Sionil Jose, *Dusk: A Novel*.
Heda Margolis Kovaly, *Under a Cruel Star*.
Miguel Leon-Portilla, *The Broken Spears: the Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*.
Kamala Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve*.
Mark Mathabane, *Kaffir Boy*.
Nozipo Maraire, *Zenzele: A Letter for my Daughter*.
Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave Narrative*.
Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis*.
Bapsi Sidhwa, *Cracking India*.
Khushwant Singh, *Train to Pakistan*.
Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman*.
Ngugi Wa Thiongo, *Weep Not, Child*.
Pramoedya Toer, *This Earth of Mankind*.
Tran Bu Binh, *The Red Earth*.
Dumb Luck: A Novel by Vu Trong Phung.
Rae Yang, *Spider Eaters*.

Here's a sample book exam:

Khushwant Singh – *Train to Pakistan*
Book Quiz
History 2211

Name:

Answer all of the following questions, front and back.

REMEMBER: It is up to you to convince us that you have read the book thoroughly. One or two sentence answers will not suffice. You MUST use specific examples in each question.

1) Describe the town of Mano Majra. What was the significance of trains to the village prior to Partition? What was life like? (10 pts)

2) What was the first act of violence that happened in Mano Majra? Who was involved? Who was the target? (10 pts

3) Describe the character of Hukum Chand, the District Magistrate, using specific examples. Is he a sympathetic character? Why or why not? (10 pts)

4) Why was Iqbal, the social worker, arrested? What happened afterwards? (10 pts)

5) Why did Jugga Singh, Nooran's lover, almost kill the dacoit (criminal) Malli at the prison? (10 pts)

6) What caused relations between Sikhs and Muslims to change in Mano Majra? (10 pts)

7) Describe the circumstances in which the Muslims left Mano Majra. (10 pts)

8) Who saved the Muslims on the train at the end of the book? Why? (10 pts)

9) What role did Iqbal play in stopping the massacre of Muslims on the train? What do you think the author thought about Iqbal's character? (10 pts)

10) What do you think is the message of this book? Explain your answer using specific examples. (10 pts)