

Lessons from listening in South Africa: towards a multi-centered study of the global past

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This is an essay about World History, a sub-discipline that has become increasingly dominant in the production of knowledge about the global past in the United States over the past decade and that is now actively reaching out to professional historians and history teachers around the world. It is an essay written from the inside, by someone who has taught World History and written some as well. Ever since completing my dissertation on the topic of slavery and colonialism in the late nineteenth century in two small parts of West Africa, I have been asked to teach courses covering the entirety of the human past around the world. With some variation, this is not an unfamiliar scenario for many young scholars in the United States, and I made the transition with a mix of enthusiasm and apprehension both at the University of New Orleans and at San Francisco State University. As the lone Africanist in both departments, World History represented to me a way to tell stories that would both dislocate and appeal to my students. In my classroom, I have viewed World History as a valuable tool in the promotion of a multi-lateral and multi-cultural way of viewing the world. Yet over the past six years I have also become increasingly aware that World History has both limits and dangers, problems that are framed by the uneven relationships of power between World Historians and our subjects and colleagues, especially those from the global south, and between academic historians and others who “know” the past.

These issues have become especially clear to me over the past four months, as I have been affiliated in South Africa with the History departments of the University of Stellenbosch and the University of the Western Cape. I have used this time to listen to the types of historical questions being pursued by these and other departments in the wake of quite significant upheavals in South African civil society and academia over the past decade-and-a-half. What I have learned from them has led me to the conclusion that we need to have a broader discussion of World History and its place in the world. This discussion must include a conversation with those who are under-represented in our

history-making, and it must involve serious consideration of the implications of the construction of World History narratives that are moralistic and universalistic, and that claim precedence over others' ways of knowing the past.

In this essay, I try to make the argument for a multi-centered approach to the global past. First, I explore two polemical views of the World History sub-discipline, one that paints it as a form of neo-colonialism and the other that defends it as a panacea to xenophobia and chauvinistic hatred. I then present what I believe is a more historicized view of World History as a particular liberal, North American way of explaining the world around us. In the third section, I evaluate the ways in which World History has hitherto silenced some past and contemporary human voices even while seeking to include their experiences in a universal narrative. Finally, I use my experiences in South Africa and the work of a number of African and Africanist scholars to discuss the potential advantages of a more multi-centered approach to the global past.

World History: moral imperative or colonial act?

For much of its existence, World History as a sub-discipline escaped the kinds of philosophical debates that have enriched but also at time hobbled other post-consensus historical approaches like post-colonialism and post-modernism. While journals serving the sub-discipline and a number of fine monographs raised methodological, theoretical, and historiographic issues, few practitioners openly questioned whether World History was “good” for its stakeholders: the North American teachers and historians are its professional constituents, their students and readers, and the global citizens past and present whose stories it purports to tell.¹

Recently, however, this calm has been rudely shattered by a body of critics who have begun to ask whether World History is an appropriate paradigm through which to view the multitude of human experiences in the global past and the ways in which people

¹ Aside from critics on the U.S. right who have repeatedly attacked World History as unpatriotic or Europe-bashing.

today relate to them. These scholars are variously labeled Marxists, radicals, ethno-centrists, post-colonialists, or relativists by their supporters or detractors, but all share in common a skepticism of World History's claims to be able to replace Eurocentrism with a single universal history of the world through the pursuit of a dispassionate empiricism and Historical method.²

Three such critics who have received significant attention are Vinay Lal (an Indian national affiliated with a U.S. university), Arif Dirlik (a Turkish-born historian of China affiliated with a U.S. university), and Ashis Nandy (an Indian national affiliated with an Indian university). Part of what links these three scholars together is that they all see World History not merely as a continuation of History's monopoly on the past, but moreover as an essentially *colonial* act of the western academy. In common, they interpret World History as a kind of twenty-first century North American *mission civilisatrice* being imposed on other parts of the world. Vinay Lal, for example, calls World History "the clearest sign of a resurgent colonialism masquerading as ecumenism", and writes that:

As far as I am able to judge, 'world history' informs the greater part of the people in the world that the only history they have is to catch up to someone else's history, or else they themselves will become history. Such a history has every potential to be a form of 'cultural genocide', politically disempowering, and destructive of the ecological plurality of knowledge and lifestyles.³

Arif Dirlik, similarly, considers World History's attempts to produce universal narratives to be an "imperial" claim that "the colonizer must of necessity have a better grasp of the world than the colonized".⁴ Ashis Nandy points to the collusion between History (including World History) and the "modernizing narratives of citizenship, bourgeois

² I include in this list a broad group of scholars including Maghan Keita, Steven Feierman, Joseph Inikori, Joseph C. Miller, Tarif Khalidi, Ira Lapidus, Arif Dirlik, Vinay Lal, Ashis Nandy, Ranajit Guha and Dipesh Chakrabarty.

³ Vinay Lal, "Provincializing the West: World History from the Perspective of Indian History", in Benedikt Stuchtey and Eckhardt Fuchs, editors, *Writing World History, 1800-2000*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 288-289.

⁴ Arif Dirlik, "Confounding Metaphors, Inventions of the World: What is World History For?", in Stuchtey and Fuchs, *Writing World History*, 98.

public and private, and the nation state” that were imposed on the world through colonialism.⁵

These objections to World History are wrapped up in a decisive rejection of the notion that there can be a single “ecumenical” or universal human narrative. Dirlik, for example, asserts that historical universalism was a product of attempts by European historians to absorb the histories of colonies into “western civilization” meta-narratives designed to serve their own needs. Through these meta-narratives European notions of capitalism, the nation-state, and History were all portrayed as having “universal relevance and legitimacy”.⁶ In Dirlik’s interpretation World History similarly legitimizes the global, capitalist order today. This is an argument put even more clearly by Roxann Prazniak, who writes that “[j]ust as western civilization courses took one strain of themes –commercial individualism, legal rights, and political democracy –as their pivotal points, so U.S.-style world history continues to represent the past around the same themes.”⁷

Underlying this critique is the assertion that through World History, North American scholars are claiming the exclusive right to define how human experience in other parts of the world should be interpreted. It is this assertion that is implicit in Lal’s, Nandy’s, and Dirlik’s identification of World History as “colonialism” and “cultural genocide”. By attaching these labels to World History, these relativists signal their objection to the claim of World Historians to represent the global pasts, and especially *their* pasts. Thus, for example, Dirlik writes that:

World history persists ultimately because of a conviction that differences that mark the world and its past may be contained in a single grand narrative. It has yet to face the problem that the very crowding of diverse peoples (not their contributions to civilization in abstract) into history may in fact mean the end of history [the discipline] as we have known it

⁵ Ashis Nandy, “History’s Forgotten Doubles”, in Philip Pomper, Richard H. Elphick, and Richard T. Vann, editors, *World History: Ideologies, Structures, and Identities*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 167.

⁶ Dirlik, “Reflections on Eurocentrism”, 258.

⁷ Roxann Prazniak, “Is World History Possible? An Inquiry”, in *History after the Three Worlds: Post Eurocentric Historiographies*, edited by Arif Dirlik, Vinay Lahl, and Peter Gran, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 221-239.

because, if those people are recognized genuinely in their differences, they are not to be contained within a single narrative.⁸

It is important to recognize that this critique of World History is part of an activist struggle against the domination of post-enlightenment, western forms of knowledge like History within as well as outside the academy. This broader project is perhaps best expressed in the manifesto of the Committee for Cultural Choices and Global Futures (chaired by Nandy, of which Lal is a member), which declares “an intellectual concern for the ecology of plural knowledge, a normative concern for cultural survival, and a potential concern with the search for humane futures for the victims of history”.⁹

The Committee for Cultural Choices and Global Future’s attack on World History in the service of humanity is matched by many World Historians’ convictions that their narratives and approaches that serve the greater good. In 1986, for example, one of the founding fathers of World History, William H. McNeill, wrote of a vision of World History which:

Instead of enhancing conflicts, as parochial historiography inevitably does... might be expected to diminish the lethality of group encounters by cultivating a sense of individual identification with the triumphs and tribulations of humanity as a whole. This, indeed, strikes me as the moral duty of the historical profession in our time. We need to develop an ecumenical history, with plenty of room for human diversity in all its complexity¹⁰

Writing twenty years later, the Director of the World History Association, Jerry H. Bentley, has similarly proposed a vision of World History as a moral service as well as an intellectual pursuit, writing that it is:

essential as a mode of study because it deepens the understanding of individual societies’ experiences by clarifying their relationships with other societies and by placing them in comparative perspective ... Yet

⁸ Dirlik, “Confounding Metaphors?”, 127.

⁹ Op. cit. Vinay Lal’s UCLA web description, <http://www.history.ucla.edu/people/faculty?lid=51> .

¹⁰ William H. McNeill, “Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History, and Historians”, *American Historical Review*, 91 (1986), 1-10.

another argument for studying world history is that it is moral, in that it has to do with the kinds of personal conduct and public policy that are appropriate for the contemporary world...[W]orld history has unusual practical value because of its potential to acquaint students, citizens, and policy makers with cultural and social differences, and furthermore to facilitate constructive engagement with different peoples and societies... For those who cannot abide difference, the temptation to elevate one particular allegiance about all others and strictly police its boundaries is powerful. That is the temptation that animates rabid nationalists, religious fundamentalists, xenophobic racists, and other ideological zealots....¹¹

By thus linking historical studies and education with both personal morality and public policy, Bentley presents a dichotomy between humanistic World History on the one hand and self-serving national “myths” promoted in around the world on the other. World History, Bentley suggests, can replace these divisive, chauvinistic narratives with a single human story for all. However, he particularly sees World History as playing an important role in U.S. classrooms, writing that “[b]ecause the United States is so wealthy, powerful, and influential, I would argue further that American students and citizens have a particular moral responsibility to make conscientious efforts to pursue constructive engagement with peoples in the larger world, and to understand the effects of American national policy in that larger world.”¹²

World History has, indeed, made its most significant inroads into history teaching in the United States, gaining only limited acceptance in many other parts of the world. However the World History Association and associated groups have been making plans to rectify this difference by planning to expand World History from its now solid foundations in North America to the rest of the world. A leading proponent of this process is Patrick Manning, who has envisioned a World History network of affiliated regional World History associations. In an explanation of this vision, Manning has written that:

If doctoral training can provide the needed researchers, creating collaborative networks will maximize their effectiveness. For this reason I

¹¹ Jerry Bentley, “Why Study World History?”, *World History Connected*, 5 (2007), 4.

¹² Bentley, “Why Study World History”, 6.

have supported the creation of the International Network of World Historical Organizations and the creation of the Asian Association of World Historians and the African Association of World Historians which will join INWHO; INWHO in turn will become an affiliate of the International Congress of Historical Sciences. We have the potential to create a global discourse in world history and a global community of world historians.¹³

Manning's concept of a global cadre of World Historians reflects the growing recognition of the importance of non-U.S. scholars to the further development of World History. Yet the reality is that World History today finds itself facing not only the hard opposition of implacable critics like Dirlik and Nandy, but also skepticism on the part of many other scholars in the global south.

Can World History truly find space for narratives and approaches from other parts of the world that are not in line with the approach advocated by the World History Association? Can a universal narrative cope with the multitude of perspectives on offer around the world? Will World History (coming soon to your neighborhood!) impose, assimilate, reject, or accept these varied narratives? In a recent anthology, *The Journal of World History* editor Jerry H. Bentley has invited debate on these topics, writing that:

If in years to come the *JWH* is able to promote discussion, dialogue, and debate between world historians from different world regions and provide a space for the articulation of multiple perspectives of the global past, it will serve not only to advance the cause of world history in particular but also to increase the value of professional historical scholarship in general.¹⁴

This essay is offered as one contribution to that debate. It is first and foremost a rejection of the false dichotomy presented by the most ardent defenders of World History and its critics. The position I take is not that of Nandy or Dirlik -- that World History is a

¹³ <http://www.worldhistorynetwork.org/manning/>. The principal audience was his own colleagues at Pitt, to whom he was introducing his conceptualization of World History. He also recommended that they read not only chapters of his own book, *Navigating World History*, but also papers from a Japanese, a German, and an Israeli historian.

¹⁴ Jerry H. Bentley, "The *Journal of World History*", in *Global Practices in World History: Advances Worldwide*, edited by Patrick Manning, (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2008), 139.

colonial act. Although like them I see World History as reflecting the worldviews of a particular population in a particular place and time, namely liberal North Americans, I am not necessarily hostile to this act of world-making and history-making. However, I do fear that in our moralistic exuberance and pursuit of a shared universal narrative some World Historians are drowning out the voices of less easily-heard groups both past and present, both professional historians and others. Indeed, as a teacher and author of World History articles and textbooks I have found this all too easy to do so myself. Moreover, I fear that in the process a great deal of what is potentially valuable in World History is becoming lost. This essay, therefore, revolves around two linked contentions. First, that even while reaching out to include the stories of peoples once excluded by historians, World History ironically often acts to *silence* other peoples' perspectives on their own and global pasts. Second, that seeking to understand and to teach global history from many perspectives can have advantages pedagogically, intellectually and in the service of the moral mission that World History's practitioners claim to be pursuing.

Historicizing the World History project

Vinay Lal has opined that World History has its own political economy. "In big places", he writes, "one's pretensions are likely to be big as well, and it is inconceivable that world history would emanate from Khartoum, Tripoli, Dhaka, Kuala Lumpur, or Lima".¹⁵ Indeed, the self-bestowing of the title "world history" on a particular way of viewing the global past does seem to reflect a certain confidence or even arrogance. It is partly for this reason that I assign the sub-discipline and its institutions capital letters – to distinguish World History (a particular structure and vision) from the history of the world (the global past).

Yet I think that by reducing World History to its "bigness" Lal is missing the point that World History has emanated particularly from the United States not solely because of our country's realities and self-identification as a global hegemonic force but also because

¹⁵ Vinay Lal, "Much Ado about Something: the New Malaise of World History", *Radical History Review*, 91 (2005), 125.

World History resonates with particular groups in a *domestic* setting. By failing to correctly historicize World History in its local context, Lal has not identified the fact that World History attracts many progressive and liberal U.S. historians and history teachers because it offers them real advantages in their struggle against two alternate histories: the conflict-centered global worldview and historical narrative of civilization struggle embraced by the Bush administration on the one hand and ethno-centric epistemologies on the other. Many of these scholars have rejected the triumphalist Western Civilization narrative that previously dominated the teaching of global history in the U.S, but at the same time they have been unable or unwilling to associate themselves with emerging critical approaches to history influenced by post-colonialism, ethnic studies, and post-modernism¹⁶. They have generally judged these to be too particularistic, too amoralistic, too impenetrable, or too unfamiliar.¹⁷

The evolution of World History is intertwined with the social and political transformations of the late twentieth century: not only on the streets of Berkeley and Madison but also in Accra and Abidjan, where for example a young Immanuel Wallerstein watched the upheavals of the struggles of new nations to emerge in a hostile world. Wallerstein would later write that “I credit my African studies with opening my eyes both to the burning political issues of the contemporary world and to the scholarly questions of how to analyze the history of the modern world-system”.¹⁸ Nor was he alone – in the 1960s and 1970s a growing number of young Americans were studying the present and the past in locations around the world, and many of them became contributors to the emerging field of World History.

¹⁶ For a narrative history of Western Civilization in the U.S. academy see Lawrence W. Levine, “Looking Eastward: The Career of Western Civ” in *The New World History: A Teacher’s Companion*, edited by Ross E. Dunn (New York: Bedford St. Martin’s, 2000). 18-25. Also see chapters by Gabrielle M. Spiegel, Anthony Molho, Philip Benedict, and especially Daniel T. Rodgers in *Imagined Histories: American Historians Interpret the Past*, edited by Anthony Molho and Gordon S. Wood, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

¹⁷ See Epstein, Barbara, “Postmodernism and the Left”, *New Politics*, vol. 6, no. 2 (new series), whole no. 22, (Winter 1997), permanent URL <http://www.wpunj.edu/newpol/issue22/epstei22.htm>.

¹⁸ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein*, (New York: The New Press, 2000), xvii.

Over the last few decades, the diverse models of interactive historical pasts proposed by specialists like Wallerstein, Marshall Hodgson, Philip Curtin, Patrick Manning, William H. McNeill, and Ralph E. Turner have coalesced into a sort of consensus definition of World History. In the words of its leading chronicler, Patrick Manning, “world history is the story of connections within the global human community. The world historian’s work is to portray the crossing of boundaries and the linking of systems in the human past.”¹⁹ This coherent vision has become possible in the last decade or so because World History has become governed and to some degree monitored by a semi-centralized institutional structure. The hub of this structure is the World History Association, founded at the American Historical Association’s 1982 annual meeting in Washington .D.C. The WHA has a formal membership and an annual conference, and gives book and teaching awards much like other professional associations. It sponsors the publication of two journals –the *Journal of World History* and *World History Connected* (online) –as well as a bulletin. The WHA also has affiliated organizations, of which the most significant research group is the World History Network run by Patrick Manning out of Pittsburgh State University.²⁰ A non-affiliated group that nevertheless shares many members is H-World, which is part of H-Net, run largely from offices at Michigan State University.

All of these organizations and journals are open to members from around the world, all of whom can run for office or potentially be appointed as editors. The WHA even holds conferences on alternate years outside of North America. Nevertheless, its executive director and offices are based in the U.S. –at the Center for World History at the University of Hawaii.²¹ Moreover, at the time of the writing of this article every single elected WHA officer (including all of its council members) lives in the United States. The majority of these officers are affiliated with U.S. universities and a slim minority are high school teachers. The two immediate past presidents of the organization are also from

¹⁹ Patrick Manning *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 3. Manning is President and Chairman of the Board of the World History Network, former editor of H-World, and has consulted for more than a dozen universities on their World History programs.

²⁰ Manning’s World History Network is affiliated but nevertheless independent, and his vision differs somewhat from that of the current leadership of the WHA.

²¹ This information is freely available on the WHA website: <http://www.thewha.org>.

the United States: one is a high school teacher and one a university professor. The editor of *The Journal of World History*, Jerry H. Bentley, and the book review editor for the journal are also both based in North America, as are the editor and book review editor of the organization's bulletin and the two editors of *World History Connected*. The four-person editorial board of H-World is similarly uniformly based in the United States.²²

What sorts of histories does the WHA think should be written about the world? The oft-stated objective of World History is to create a deeper and more accurate understanding of the human past within the epistemological system of "professional" History. Without denying the sincerity of this goal, I would assert that World History's histories are also deeply influenced by the location of its officer class and most of its rank-and-file in the United States in at least three ways.

First, it is possible to view World History primarily as a liberal response to neo-conservative mappings of U.S. policy onto a "patriotic" history of the world. This patriotic history is undergirded by a portrayal of global history as a teleological progression of the world towards modernity (western civilization, democracy, and the nation-state) under the benevolent guidance of the United States. It is a view promulgated by the historical writings of a circle of advisors around George W. Bush. The best known of these is probably (the now apostate) Johns Hopkins professor Francis Fukuyama. In a polemical 1989 article, Fukuyama famously argued that: "The triumph of the West, of the Western idea, is evident first of all in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism." As such, he concluded: "What we may be witnessing in not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."²³ Not only Fukuyama, but also other scholars on the Bush administrations' reading list like Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis have depicted this "end of history" as coming in the form of a civilizational clash between a free West

²² This information is freely available on the H-World website: <http://www.h-net.org/~world>.

²³ Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?", *The National Interest*, Summer 1989, 3. See also his 1992 book, *The End of History of History and the Last Man* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992).

and a backward Islam.²⁴ In the words of Lewis, “This is no less than a clash of civilizations—the perhaps irrational but surely historic reactions of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both.”²⁵ This grand narrative of human history represented any enemies (domestic or foreign) as the enemies of American values, and equated them with the most nefarious creatures in history. From this intellectual basis comes President Bush’s global history lesson: “They [Islamic terrorists] are the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century. By sacrificing human life to serve their radical visions—by abandoning every value except the will to power—they follow in the path of fascism, and Nazism, and totalitarianism.”²⁶

This grand narrative of conflict between distinguishable blocks of people as the engine of history contrasts fundamentally with the boundary-bashing of the World History narrative, which offers an opposing moral lesson in its focus on exchange and interaction among peoples. This was the founding narrative of World History championed by William McNeill, who in 1983 wrote: “My contention... amounts to this: in recent as in ancient times, encounter with strangers was central to history because that was what forwarded innovation, always and inevitably.”²⁷ As a result, the “success of societies”, while still generally measured by World Historians in terms of finances or “development”, is located by World Historians not in internal racial or national superiority but rather in a willingness to learn from others. Indeed, McNeill warns that “[c]ommunities that refused to alter their ways in the light of threats and promises arising from contact with strangers were liable to extinction. Those who reacted intelligently by accepting new ideas and learning new skills...were the people most likely to flourish and enlarge their hold upon the earth’s resources”.²⁸ For World Historians, therefore, war is

²⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?", *Foreign Affairs*, 72 (Summer 1993), 22-36.

²⁵ Bernard Lewis, “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” *Atlantic Monthly*, September 1990. Digital version <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/print/199009/muslim-rage> , 9.

²⁶ Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People by President George W. Bush, 20 September 2001, U.S. White House Press Office.

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>

²⁷ William H. McNeill, unpublished paper delivered as the Prothero Lecture to the Royal Historical Society, London, July 1981.

²⁸ *Idem*.

not an engine of development, but rather a break-down of the normal operations of systems of peaceful exchange. Moreover, for many World Historians the teaching of this message is seen as one way to ensure that such break-downs do not occur. It does so through the promotion not only of a universal history but also a universal morality that calls on people everywhere to abandon chauvanisms and xenophobia in favor of openness, tolerance, “cross-cultural understanding and global peace”.²⁹ If only everyone would adopt a universal World History, they could put aside their patriotic, ethno-centric “mythhistories” that only serve to “stroke the collective psyches of national, ethnic, racial, religious, and other groups”.³⁰

Canadian historian Gilbert Allardyce first chronicled this connection between historical interpretation and moral universalism in World History in a 1990 paper published in the first volume of the *Journal of World History*. Allardyce argued that the pioneers of World History possessed a moral idealism that was connected to the idea of education for peace.³¹ McNeill’s vision firmly planted within World History a celebration of plurality combined with a generally positive attitude towards the “globalization” of capitalist trade and western-style political institutions. This perspective continues to heavily influence the field today, as World History serves as an element of a protest identity for opponents of the Bush regime and perhaps a self-reinforcing ideology for a resurgent Democratic party. This identity, while not eschewing mainstream American values such as “freedom” and “democracy”, is nevertheless explicitly “humanocentric” rather than nationalistic. Thus WHA Director Jerry H. Bentley is able to write in his 2005 defense of World History that “personally, as an individual, I wholeheartedly subscribe to American political values on moral grounds” even while putting forward World History as *the* way to “move beyond historical scholarship that takes the glorification of the national community or some other exclusive constituency as its principal purpose[.]”³²

²⁹ Jerry Bentley, “Myths, Wagers, and Some Moral Implications of World History”, *Journal of World History*, 16 (2005), 81-82.

³⁰ Bentley, “Myths, Wagers”, 52.

³¹ Gilbert Allardyce, “Toward World History: American Historians and the Coming of the World History Course”, *Journal of World History*, 1, (1990), 23-76.

³² Bentley, “Myths, Wagers”, 58, 52.

My second contention is that World History provides additional advantages to its practitioners in the much smaller arena of the high school and college classroom. The important trends here are demographic shift in the United States, especially the influx of Latino students from Mexico and Central America. that in the increasingly multi-ethnic U.S. classroom, World History has become a way to acknowledge and celebrate every student's pasts while folding them all into "History", the unique domain of the teacher. In this way, World History affords teachers a way to protect their own status as *the* knowers of the past. For secondary school teachers especially, World History gives them a tool to dispute Ethnic Studies narratives which claim a particular and exceptional place for particular ethnic groups, and which often reach students at high school age. Such narratives question not only the content of classroom curriculum, but also the status of teachers as honest and egalitarian brokers of history.³³

Indeed, I would argue that many high school teachers are attracted to World History partly because it addresses the ambiguities of being progressive members of a privileged elite. World History is a way of telling a unified story of everyone's past that reaches out to their students (or to their research subjects) while buttressing their own unique status as knowers of history. Even if he or she is white, by encompassing everyone's history within World History the instructor, teacher, or researcher legitimizes the type of professional History they know best. Thus in the classroom, World History counteracts the rebellious, anti-mainstream narratives of Ethnic Studies that seeks to challenge their status as interpreter of everyone's pasts with the messages of pluralism and cosmopolitanism. The instructor is no longer a white person (outsider) telling a black person his or her history, but rather a human (insider) telling the history of humanity. Thus Ross Dunn suggests that World History makes it possible for the instructor to not "look repeatedly over our shoulders in fear that this or that cultural lobby group will disapprove of the way we are making choices."³⁴

³³ This may explain in part the large part played by secondary school teachers in the World History Association since its founding in 1982. Currently, three of eight Executive Council members are high school teachers, as is the past president.

³⁴ Ross E. "Multiculturalism and World History", published in *Instructor's Guide to Teaching the World*, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007). Based on a 1991 paper presented at a conference entitled "Rethinking

A similar dynamic may help explain why some U.S.-based area studies specialists are attracted to World History.³⁵ While we wish to identify with the subjects of our research in Africa, Asia, Latin America, we are also distanced from them by their different perspectives and positions of power. By placing ourselves and our subjects in a single narrative, however, we feel we are to some degree able to bridge this gap.

My third assertion about the connections between World History and the contemporary United States has to do with World Historian's focus on empirical evidence and social science methods in the study of the global past. A key indicator of the strength of empiricism in World History is WHA Book Prize, which since its inception in 1999 has been consistently awarded to texts dealing heavily with economic and environmental data.³⁶ This attention to data is not coincidental to World History, but rather has been at the center of what has defined it since the 1980s, when founding father William H. McNeill sought to convince the Royal Historical Society that "the pursuit of world history... conforms to the canons of our profession... and does so just as rigorously as history on any other scale".³⁷ That it is a core feature of World History can, again, be explained only by understanding the domestic context of its construction in opposition to chauvanistic narratives that have been put forward in the interests of both the dominant (Western Civ and patriotic histories) and minority (Ethnic Studies) groups in U.S. society. Both of these alternate histories appeal to memory and heritage to cleave a group together – whether all "Americans" or some subset. Thus World Historians explicitly locate their methods in opposition to this type of "myth-making" and foreground the

World History: Globalizing the Curriculum", sponsored by The University of Virginia Division of Continuing Education, Washington, D.C., November 1991, 92.

³⁵ Africanists, Sinologists, and historians of the Middle East have played especially important roles in the development of World History. For an assessment of the roles played by Africanists see Trevor Getz and Esperanza Brizuela-Garcia, "Going global I: A reconnaissance into the role of Africanists in world history", *World History Bulletin*, 22, 2006, 4-9.

³⁶ Frank, *(Re)Orient*. Kenneth Pomeranz. *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*. (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000). David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World*, (New York: Verso, 2001). John McNeill, *Something New under the Sun: An Environmental History of The Twentieth Century World*, (New York, W.W. Norton, 2000). Of all of the World History Association book prize winners, only Lauren Benton's *Law and Colonial Cultures: Legal Regimes in World History, 1400-1900* falls decisively outside the realm of economic history, although some texts mix approaches.

³⁷ McNeill, Prothero Lecture.

“accuracy” of their version of history as one of its major attributes. Only by attacking ethno-centric or patriotic versions of history with “facts”, World Historians seem to be arguing, can they be overcome. In the classroom, this approach has the secondary advantage of asserting the primacy of the *teacher’s* historical knowledge over that of the family, community, or ethnic group. Moreover, such social science approaches to history are the most familiar and to both students and the wider readership in the United States, and thus World History cannot stray too far with them.

World History and the silencing of African pasts?

My argument so far is that World History is not a value-neutral narrative of the global past for all humanity. Nor, however, is it a neo-colonial plot. Rather, it represents the project of a particular group of historians and history teachers to construct a globalized, historicized understanding of their contemporary position and to use that understanding to advance their objectives and to meet perceived challenges. This is, it seems to me, is what human beings do – World History’s critics no less than its practitioners.

However, this does not release World Historians from the task of considering the contexts of power relationships in which they are writing and teaching. My own particular concerns over World History’s claims and narratives arise from my particular position straddling two sub-disciplines. As well as a teacher of World History, I am also an historian of Africa following a trajectory that has led my research somewhat off the pathways of empiricism and into explorations of heritage, memory, and the ways people relate to the past. It was at the junction of my research into slavery and abolition in West Africa and my World History teaching that I began to discover something troubling: that in my World History classes I had acquired the habit of silencing the convey historical and contemporary actors in favor of the sweeping narrative I was trying to explain to my students.

All histories, in fact, grant agency and voice to certain actors and silence others. But the problem is particularly thorny with regards to World History. Convinced of the moral righteousness of their efforts to overturn narratives of western exceptionalism build a universal narrative for all humanity, *some* of its practitioners seem to believe that World History is immune from these concerns. They do not seem to want to grapple with the question of whether their narratives are really of universal relevance, or merely represent one collective perspective among many. Thus the narratives advanced by many World History textbooks seem to represent most of the past and present inhabitants of the world as objects of study without making space for them to speak for themselves. Among those affected in this way are peoples of the past who did not extensively author recognized primary sources, academics based elsewhere (especially those whose practices do not conform to World History's systems of knowledge), and finally non-guild historians such as heritage practitioners and other "knowers of history".³⁸ In the context of World History, these individuals and groups either have not had equal access to mimetic and political forms of representation or have lacked the resources to contest dominant representations of their past. Thus their perspectives and voices are absent from the historical record and from the writing of histories that are *about* them. As a result they have had little or no power to influence the way World Histories are written, and in turn these histories have transformed them into mere voiceless objects of study rather than living participants or acknowledged interpreters.

This process operates in at least four ways. First, universal narratives such as those constructed by World History by default collapse multiple perspectives of historical actors into one "ecumenical" or bird's-eye view of the past. Also, World History's close-clinging to empiricism necessitates a rejection of methods such as memory-work which might be used to excavate the voices of the most historically silenced (like young, female slaves) whose stories and perspectives are hidden deep in the historical record. Its

³⁸ Some of the theory surrounding this process is investigated by practitioners of sub-altern studies. See for example Partha Chatterjee, "A Brief History of Subaltern Studies", unpublished paper, Problematising History and Agency conference, University of Cape Town, 22-24 October 1997 Also see Leon de Kock. "Interview With Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa." *A Review of International English Literature*. 23(1992), 29-47.

accepted methodologies similarly sidelines “myth-makers” like *griots*, professional oral historians, and a host of other non-guild historians, thus marginalizing their contributions.

Finally the WHA has yet to develop an attitude or a process by which a wide variety of scholars abroad can engage in contesting and formulating World History from a position of equal power to those in the United States³⁹ While some of the leadership of World History has expressed an interest and even actively worked to include global scholars in conversations, their invitations have sometimes been perceived less as an offer to hear and value their perspectives than an attempt to “civilize” or discipline their research and teaching to a western, empirical model. To be sure, Patrick Manning’s *World History Network* has paid some attention to this issue. For example, the official report of the 2007 *Mapping World History* conference discloses debates at the conference as to whether “world historians should aim at a unified vision of world history...or a diverse vision”. The authors report that participants generally accepted that this duality should be “regarded as a creative tension, not a problem”, concluding that “If they are to be truly global in their approach it is vital for world historians to widen their view of what world history can be, by incorporating approaches from different strategies and eras, and also from writers who are not professional historians”.⁴⁰ Yet the methodologies and approaches discussed in the chapters of the edited volume that resulted from this conference are relatively homogeneous and neither include nor reference critics such as Feierman, Miller, Lal, Dirlik, or Nandy.⁴¹

As a result, while World History does not deny the existence of, for example, pre-colonial southern African or Amazonian histories the way Western Civilization narratives used to, it still seems to have positioned itself as *the* arbiter of these regions’ histories. One useful way of understanding the continuity inherent in this statement may be through a paradigm proposed by Jacques Depelchin, an historian based in Kenya, for understanding the evolution of western studies of African pasts. In his recent book

³⁹ I say this with all due respect to Patrick Manning, whose efforts to create a global conversation about the global past deserve recognition.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 4, 9.

⁴¹ Manning, *Global Practices in World History*.

Silences in African History, Depelchin proposes that academic histories of Africa have been infected in turn by the syndromes of “denial” and “affirmation”. In the early twentieth century, western historians denied the very existence of African history. Sometime around the 1960s, however, a shift occurred contemporaneously with decolonization, and western historians began to affirm and even celebrate African “achievements”. Yet in doing so, Depelchin asserts, these scholars continued to claim African as their own domain. They still wrote in the vernacular of the western academy, for western audiences, and without real consideration of the perspectives of Africans past and present. Thus whereas early studies discussed Africa as a discovery of western explorers, later studies merely claimed its history as a discovery (and thus a conquest) of western historians.⁴²

This general model is useful in explaining the specific evolution of narratives involving Africa by World Historians specifically. In the case of the United States’ academy, World History has now superseded the claims of Western Civilization, with its celebration of European discovers and western domination. However many World Historians continue to implicitly claim the past as our discovery and to proclaim the universal relevance of our work. We fit the histories of societies around the world into narratives of liberal values that are relevant to ourselves, rather than accepting that those narratives would have had little or no relevance to the people about whom we are speaking and trying to listen to how they understand their own pasts. If this criticism sounds either “politically correct” or hopelessly philosophical, I hope in the next two sections of this paper to give several solid examples of this silencing and its implications from African perspectives.

Lessons from listening in South Africa

⁴² Jacques Depelchin, *Silences in African History: Between the syndromes of discovery and abolition*, (Dar es Salaam: Mkukiu Na Nyota Publishers, 2005), 6-15. Personally, I find this sweeping assessment a bit difficult to apply to many recent works of African history, which consider deeply the relevance of their work to African audiences, issues of “authenticity”, and the ways in which African perspectives past and present are presented.

It must seem from the above sections that I am asking the impossible of World Historians: perhaps to master the entire historiography of every region of the world, or to engage a room full of non-majors in extensive philosophical exploration into the alterity of a multitude of past and present existences. My actual suggestion is somewhat more limited. I merely propose that World History's students and scholars alike could benefit from serious attention to what the global past looks like --and what meanings are drawn from it --from perspectives outside of their own.

This proposal does not seem to me to conflict with the goal of World History, proposed by both a chief founder (McNeill) and its current Director (Bentley), of promoting intercultural understanding and learning. Indeed, I would argue that this mission is *better* served by an approach that takes into account multiple perspectives. We can ask, for example, whether U.S. students would not be better prepared to understand the current global crises if they studied not only the past histories of interactions between the "west" and "Islam", but also how those histories look to young people in Afghanistan or Iraq? Is it more important to us that World History hands to students the "facts", or the "attitudes", or a combination of both? This question matters for us in terms of our own students' understandings of the world in which they live. I would argue that it also matters to the populations of Afghanistan and Iraq who are the recipients of policies predicated partly on U.S. understandings of their histories.

My thinking about this question is informed by my attempt over the past few months to understand the disconnect between the ways in which I have taught the history of South Africa to U.S. students and the ways it is experienced within this society. I have taught the recent history of South Africa both within African and World History courses, but although I studied at the University of Cape Town I am not an expert on the region's history. Thus in writing my lectures dealing with apartheid and colonialism I have always drawn heavily on two texts readily available in the United States: *The Oxford History of South Africa*, co-edited by Leonard M. Thompson and Monica Wilson and

published in 1977, and Leonard M. Thompson's 1990 *A history of South Africa*.⁴³ These two texts fit into what South African scholars generally refer to as a "liberal" approach to the country's history, one that is generally appealing to World Historians. Like World History, the liberal school in South Africa developed partly as a challenge to Eurocentric master narratives; in this case both the English-language British imperial histories and the apartheid-sustaining Afrikaans-language "volksgeskiedenis" (people's history).⁴⁴ Both of these previous histories had endorsed the racialized *status quo*: Volksgeskiedenis as a celebration of Afrikaaner achievements and English-language narratives as a prop for imperialism and colonialism. Thus in a preface to the *Oxford History* that explicitly challenged these dominant historical narratives, Thompson and Wilson proposed a number of revisions to the ways in which histories of South Africa were written. These included the assertions that allied social sciences (anthropology and archaeology) could enable historians to *discover* Africans' pre-colonial histories, that Africans' histories included the progressive adoption of new techniques and construction of new types of societies, and that there had been so much interaction among "tribes" and "races" historically that such categories were not real but rather socially and academically constructed.⁴⁵ All of these assertions constituted a challenge to apartheid narratives, whose natural demise liberal historians predicted at the hands of capitalist development.⁴⁶

World History textbooks have largely adopted these assertions in developing their histories of South Africa. For example begin their discussions of sub-Saharan African pasts by synthesizing anthropological and archaeological data about pre-colonial African societies.⁴⁷ Yet, because most of their information reflects somewhat dated anthropology the surveys remain both somewhat ahistorized and enormously broad in scope, with

⁴³ *The Oxford History of South Africa*, edited by Monica Wilson and Leonard M. Thompson, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969-1971). Leonard M. Thompson, *A history of South Africa*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

⁴⁴ See Albert Grundlingh, "Politics, Principles and Problems of a Profession: Afrikaner Historians and their Discipline, c.1920-c.1965", *Perspectives in Education*, 1990 (12) 1-19.

⁴⁵ Wilson and Thompson, *The Oxford History of South Africa*, Vol. I, vii-x.

⁴⁶ An analysis of this discourse from an admitted critic is Bernhard M. Magubane, "Whose memory – whose history: The illusion of liberal and radical historical debates", in *History Making and Present Day Politics: The Meaning of Collective Memory in South Africa*, edited by Hans Erik Stolten, Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2007), 251-279.

⁴⁷ Some do this better than others. One of the best is Jerry Bentley, Herbert Ziegler, and Heather Streets, *Traditions and Encounters: A Brief Global History*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006). See 294-295, 421.

South African societies tucked into a somewhat essentialized and broader discussion of African values, material culture, and social systems.

World History textbook treatments of recent South African history also draw largely on liberal histories of South Africa, with the intention of giving students an allegorical morality play that opposes the perfidy of racism and oppression (imperialism, apartheid) with the redemption brought by the multicultural ANC and Nelson Mandela. In this allegory the colonizers (whether British or Afrikaans-speaking) play the part of Western Civilization (and thus a surrogate for neo-conservative unilateralism). By contrast the ANC, with its message of a “rainbow nation” is recognizable as exactly the type of ethical, trans-cultural, tolerant organization promoted by World History. In the new, highly-promoted textbook *The World*, by Felipe Fernández-Armesto, for example, South African history (as opposed to anthropology) seems to begin with the arrival of Europeans who immediately set out to “exploit... the natural environment” before establishing the colonial/apartheid state.⁴⁸ The replacement of this state in the 1990s by a new, multiracial government is described by Fernández-Armesto as one of a number of “[N]otable landmarks in the spread of democracy”⁴⁹, and in its final mention in the book South Africa’s emergence as a democratic society is explained in a manner wholly in keeping with that of Leonard Thompson: “Integration in the global economy”, Fernández-Armesto writes, “shored up South Africa’s delicate new democracy... and helped to provide a capital-starved economy with the wealth the country needed to make a start –at least –at rebuilding after centuries of injustice”.⁵⁰ . With this conclusion, South Africa’s past is fit effectively into a moralistic tale that opposes unilateral imperialism against tolerance and liberation within a model that celebrates the 1994 triumph of the liberal values of democracy and capitalism.

⁴⁸ Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *The World: A History*, Combined First Edition, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007), 512, 574, 581, 595, 864, 865,. This is the book chosen by many of my colleagues this year, and with reason. It is gorgeously produced, written in a largely narrative style, and exemplifies the “big history” approach.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 985. See also 1005-1006.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 1014.

But South Africa's history, and its History-writing, did not end in the 1990s. Indeed, since the end of apartheid the contest over how to understand the South African past has become more heated than ever within the country. On the one hand, despite the role played by many liberal and radical historians of the 1980s in combating apartheid through the promotion of 'democratic' social histories⁵¹, the African National Congress and many young students remained deeply suspicious of History through their exposure to the blatant Eurocentric narratives embedded in the schoolbooks of the Bantu Education System. They also tended to perceive the liberal arts as less essential than "useful" disciplines such as engineering and commerce. Partly as a result, the numbers of students in History departments at tertiary institutions dropped, and for a while History was even written out of the secondary school syllabus.⁵²

What the government offered in the place of History was (and to come degree continues to be) an attention to "Heritage" in the form more of celebrations of South Africans' relationships to the past than attempts to evaluate it empirically. This project serves both to promote the pasts of traditionally under-represented peoples the imagining of a shared, national past converging in the struggle. Its sites of production are not so much universities and schools as a series of monuments, museums, holidays, television specials, and commemorations in public places. In school history textbooks, as well, the government mandates that heritage should play a primary role.⁵³ But of course not all ways of relating to the past through heritage are considered to be equally acceptable: The government's version emphasizes the "miracle" of a new South Africa by which Nelson Mandela's "special magic" fused together a society of "many cultures".⁵⁴ By contrast, the government has had a more complex attitude towards celebrations of ethnic differentness, especially from the Afrikaner community.

⁵¹ For example I Hofmeyr, *"We Spend Our Years as a Tale that is told": Oral Historical Narrative in a South African chieftdom*, Wits University Press, Johannesburg (1994).

⁵² For a description of this process see Colin Bundy, "New Nation, new history?: constructing the past in post-apartheid South Africa", in Stolen, editor, *History Making and Present Day Politics*, 74-76.

⁵³ See for example Department of Education, *National Curriculum Statement Grades 10-12 (General), Learning Programme Guidelines, History*, 29 April 2005.

⁵⁴ Ciraj Rassool, "the Rise of Heritage and the Reconstitution of History in South Africa", *Kronos: Journal of Cape History*, 26 (2000), 1-21.

The “rainbow heritage” has come to be challenged by South African scholars from several sides. First, some professional historians, (and especially social historians) have bemoaned the government’s attention to heritage as un-critical and un-contested myth-making. Whereas history seeks to reduce bias, they argue, heritage sanctions it.⁵⁵ Almost the opposing critique has been leveled from a group of scholars who are based largely at the University of the Western Cape. They argue that in fact heritage is constantly contested at the local level, but that these complexities are sometimes obscured by the overwhelming force of the government-sanctioned heritage narrative.⁵⁶ They also attack the social historians as being “[u]nwilling to to engage or question the issues of power involved in the production of their pasts” and thus “impos[ing] themselves and their ‘radical’ methods on ‘ordinary people’.”⁵⁷

This debate is not merely philosophical because the past is very much alive in the South African present. The work of both historians and heritage practitioners informs land restitution cases, Truth & Reconciliation Commission hearing, and debates over the building of new monuments and the disposition of old ones. But of what relevance are these “local” concerns to U.S. students?

I would like to make three arguments for having U.S. students think about these debates taking place in South Africa. The first is that South Africans’ deliberations of heritage are in many ways advanced over our own, or at least distinct from them. World History makes a big deal about the advantages of societies learning from their neighbors, and this is no less true in the history profession than any other sector. Students deserve to be equipped with the tools for thinking about heritage around them –local monuments, personal histories, national resources –and the South African analogy is an excellent tool for so equipping them.

⁵⁵ See Jeff Guy, “Battling with Banality”, *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, 18 (1998), 156-193. Also Jane Carruthers, “Heritage and History”, H-AFRICA Forum #2, H-NET.

⁵⁶ Rassool, “The Rise of Heritage”. Also Noel Solani, “The Saint of the Struggle: Deconstructing the Mandela Myth”, *Kronos: Journal of Cape History*, 26 (2000), 42-55.

⁵⁷ Gary Minkely, Ciraj Rassool, and Leslie Witz, “Thresholds, Gateways and Spectacles: Journeying through South African hidden pasts and histories in the last decade of the twentieth century”, paper presented at the conference on “The Future of the Past: The Production of History in a Changing South Africa”, University of the Western Cape, 1996.

Second, U.S. students can benefit not only from envisioning a shared human past, but also in thinking about how others might see American involvement in this past. The historical narratives being constructed by South Africans show an awareness of the roles of Americans both in supporting apartheid and in opposing it, and South African scholars have written a number of studies both comparing and linking the United States and South Africa.⁵⁸ Exposing U.S. students to these perspectives turns history back upon them, thus not only exposing them to alternate worldviews but also reversing the author-object relationship. This undermining of the relationship of power that History often constructs, I would argue, is potentially a more significant tool in reversing U.S. unilateralism and the Western Civilization narrative than merely considering the whole world in a single frame of study.

Finally, our World History students need to be able to understand the ways in which South Africans think about their pasts because the world of the U.S. history student is not discrete from that of South Africans – the two often leak into and affect each other. One such sphere of overlap is tourism, a major industry in South Africa. U.S. tourists often arrive in South Africa with preconceptions, including a demand to see the expected morality play of oppression (colonialism and apartheid) and redemption (Nelson Mandela and the rainbow nation).⁵⁹ Their dollars open these worlds to them, and give them power to help design the narratives and exhibitions at these sites. As a result, World History’s narratives are on display at sites like Robben Island, the District Six Museum, and the Apartheid Museum, just as the anthropological survey of a pre-colonial African past they have come to expect is displayed for them at “cultural villages” like the one at Lesedi, which presents five authentic “tribes” in one visit.

Of course, World History alone is not complicit in creating these narratives, and can even be said to have helped combat previous, overtly racist conceptions of African “stagnancy” and “backwardness”. Nevertheless, there is a cost to the constant replication

⁵⁸ Of special note is the online journal *Safundi*, which has published a wide range of such studies.

⁵⁹ “The traveler does not begin narrating without some sort of manuscript”. Torun Elsrud, “Risk Creation in Travelling: Backpacker Adventure Narration”, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 23 (2001), 600.

of simple pre-conceived narratives, even those as cosmopolitan as liberal U.S. conceptions of the rainbow nation. The price is the suppression of South Africans' own complex and conflicted remembered pasts and presents. In order to preserve the sanctity of Robben Island, for example, ex-prisoners-turned-tour guides may need to suppress any personal memories that might conflict with the narrative of Nelson Mandela's sanctity demanded by tourists.⁶⁰ Thus does World History ironically contribute to the silencing of the very people whose history it is designed to include. By contrast, a World History that looks at the global past from a multitude of South African perspectives could help to reverse this process.

How can World History students be introduced to South African history in a way that presents all of these benefits? This is not an easily answered question. The sorts of students enrolled in freshman World History courses, for example, might not be prepared for dense historiography and methodological debates. However nor do I not find that many of them are particularly inspired by the universal meta-narrative currently driving World History. On the other hand, I *do* think that World History students would be interested in a series of well-framed primary sources arranged in a debate about the local and global past, and about the ways in which today's people (especially those of their age) are relating to it. In this respect, South Africa's particular history of youth activism and its contemporary debates presents a wealth of opportunities.

World histories *from* Africa

More generally, I would argue that recent research into many aspects of African history has created the potential for really exploring the global past through the eyes of past and present Africans for the first time. One illustrative example is the recent work on the Atlantic slave trade highlighted by Former American Historical Association and African Studies Association President Joe Miller in a recent article entitled *Beyond Blacks*,

⁶⁰ Harry Garuba, "Museums, Mimesis, and the Narratives of the Tour Guides of Robben Island", in *Desire Lines*, edited by Noeleen Murray, Nick Shepherd, and Martin Hall, (London: Routledge, 2007), 129-144.

*Bondage, and Blame: Why a Multi-centric World History Needs Africa.*⁶¹ The Atlantic slave trade, as an example of trans-national economic exchange directed largely from Europe, has been an important episode in most World History textbooks for decades (and even featured in many Western Civilization texts). But only recently has the work of Africanists and African scholars using a variety of sources enabled us to get a picture of how this trans-national trade in slaves may have been perceived by Africans. Some of their work has focused on the ways in which some Africans understood the disappearances and suffering of the slave trade through an idiom of “cannibalism”, which John Thornton for example has argued was understood as a practice of witches whose main symptom was rampant and anti-social capitalistic accumulation.⁶² The body of scholarship on this topic is quite significant, but World Historians have so far largely ignored these insights into how Africans may have viewed their experiences in this era. Instead, the Atlantic slave trade continues to be discussed in World History texts largely through an amorphous trade and exchange model and a survey of the suffering that it caused Africans. While broadly acknowledging the victimization of Africans, these treatments do not suffice to explain how they might have viewed their experiences.⁶³ Nor is there any real consideration of how Africans *today* understand and seek to deal with this episode of their past.⁶⁴ Ironically, many World History textbooks *do* devote extensive space to explaining the world-views and ethics of (European) abolitionists.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Miller, Joseph C., “Beyond Blacks, Bondage, and Blame: Why a multi-centric World History needs Africa”, *Historically Speaking*, 4 (2004). Online at <http://www.bu.edu/historic/his/novemberdecember04.html>

⁶² William D. Pierson, “White Cannibals, Black Martyrs: Fear, depression, and religious faith as causes of suicide among new slaves”, *The Journal of Negro History*, 62 (1977), 147-159. Rosalind Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone* (Chicago and London, 2002). John Thornton, “Cannibals, Witches, and Slave Traders in the Atlantic World”, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 60 (2003), 273-294. Elizabeth Isichei, *Voices of the Poor in Africa*, (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003).

⁶³ Two book-end treatments are William McNeill’s early *A World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967) and the spanking-new Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *The World: A History*, Combined First Edition, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007). I consider both to be superior texts for their period, yet both fail to ask how the Atlantic slave trade may have appeared to Africans.

⁶⁴ Through, for example, the work of Martin A. Klein such as “Studying the History of Those Who Would Rather Forget: Oral History and the Experience of Slavery”, *History in Africa*, 16 (1989), 209-217.

⁶⁵ Fernández-Armesto, for example, gives the abolitionists’ viewpoint over the course of a page-and-a-half.

In fact, there are now plenty of studies that could allow World Historians to arm their students with an understanding of the ways in which Africans perceived episodes of global significance in which they were involved: whether the Atlantic slave trade or colonialism, the spread of Islam or the “Columbian” exchange of crops. For example, numerous historians and anthropologists have studied the ways in which Africans related to colonial institutions and operations through a familiar idiom of “vampires”.⁶⁶

Admittedly, these perspectives are sometimes hidden deep in sources (linguistic, oral tradition, personal diaries) not usually judged by Historians to be authoritative. They are also often recovered through methods (thick analysis, reading out interpolators) some might find speculative or dubious. But isn't listening for them an act worthy of the effort? Don't our students deserve to hear about the experience of these horrendous episodes from as close to the Africans who experienced it themselves as is possible?

Equally, World History that fails to consider local perspectives often ends up becoming terribly *incorrect*. Steven Feierman has pointed this out in an excellent article entitled “African Histories and the Dissolution of World History”. Feierman, drawing on the work of a multitude of scholars, points out that because historical African realities and worldviews were different from those of European historians, the ways in which African societies operated often did not always conform to the types of economic and social theories and assumptions deployed by World Historians. For example, recent research in West Africa has shown that acephalous societies were just as efficient traders as centralized states in Europe, a finding that is in contradiction to broadly accepted theories.⁶⁷ The fact that West Africans were able to harness unique local social institutions to commerce has simply been missed by scholars who assumed that since these structures were absent in “modern” Europe, they must have been pre-capitalist and therefore inefficient. Understanding the ways in which these socio-commercial networks

⁶⁶ See Luise White, “Cars out of Place: Vampires, Technology, and Labor in East and Central Africa”, in Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, 436-460.

⁶⁷ Steven Feierman, “African Histories and the Dissolution of World History”, in Robert H. Bates, V.Y. Mudimbe, and Jean O’Barr, editors, *Africa and the Disciplines: The Contributions of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and Humanities*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 167-212.

worked requires understanding the kinship systems and worldviews of Africans, a task that so far World History has not undertaken. What else have we missed or failed to understand because of our assumptions as to how societies work? Perhaps a great deal. For example, Joseph C. Miller has asked whether by ignoring Africans' perspectives of the Atlantic slave trade we misunderstand events that followed in Africa such as "Muslim *jihads*, "millennial uprisings", and "witchcraft eradication movements.

As a potential solution to these problems, Miller has suggested that World History acknowledge a *multiplicity* of ways of understanding the past. In a conclusion for the draft version of "Beyond Blacks, Bondage, and Blame", Miller writes that:

World history will die of boredom if it becomes "de-centered" and uniform, rather than dynamically multi-centric, diverse and engaged.... Until "world" historians incorporate Africa on its own terms, and focus also on the unique aspects of other world regions that may be easier to force into the appearance of modern modes, the logic of progressive world history is condemned to obscure the dynamism of a truly global past – "global" in the historical sense of multiple and inclusive, rather than in the too-conventional sense of merely macro in scale, and hence singular in concept – behind visions of the modern West writ larger and larger, farther and farther back in time, and inscribed over and over again on the lives of people who in fact proceeded with very different agendas on their minds. It is to *them*, the Africans and many others, and *their* visions and strategies, that we must turn to realize the full potential of thinking distinctively as historians –ultimately, true to the centered nature of history, to do so productively about ourselves.⁶⁸

Of course such a proposition is daunting to both researchers and teachers –it is far easier to construct a single human narrative and to convey it to our students than it is to induce ourselves and them to shift worldviews and to try to place ourselves in a series of alien shoes. But that very task is vital for both World History's intellectual and its moral tasks, for both its accuracy and its promotion of peace and understanding. Otherwise, a victorious World History, having slain the dragon of Eurocentrism, runs the risk of becoming everything it purports to be against – an orthodoxy that despises diversity and

⁶⁸ Miller, Joseph C., "Beyond Blacks, Bondage, and Blame: Why a multi-centric World History needs Africa", draft originally prepared for a talk at Carleton College, 9 March 2005.

claims the moral high ground while it imposes an elite, western, and ultimately incorrect master narrative. I don't think this is the vision of the future of World History most of its practitioners endorse, yet there is every danger of it going that way.

Concluding thoughts

The issues raised in this essay are not unique to World History. Similar questions are being asked at the levels of national, regional, and local history around the world as the “center” of the historical profession is increasingly seen “not to hold”.⁶⁹ Yet the institutions of World History have sought to avoid such messy issues and to stand above them. From my time in South Africa, I have come to believe that World Historians should take a very different attitude, and that we should see our task as offering a variety of tools to help students to relate to the global past. We should seek neither to eradicate alternate visions of that past, nor to contain or internalize them, but rather to relate to them in ways that acknowledge a multitude of past and present perspectives and that help students to appreciate and interact with them.

Admittedly, the History industry in the United States is not currently oriented towards such an approach. Many teachers –perhaps most –prefer straightforward interpretations to the types of “fuzzy” and complex analyses I propose. Publishers know this and often insist upon straightforward narratives from authors. In fact, some seem allergic to the words “historiography”, “contestation”, or “perspective”. This is a great loss for students, who could learn far more about other societies by understanding how its scholars and peoples comprehend and debate their shared pasts than through a simple, uncomplicated narrative. On a more hopeful note, the attention being paid to “primary sources” by many instructors suggests to me that I am not alone in my thinking.

⁶⁹ A phrase used by Peter Novick to discuss the fragmentation of the history profession in the United States. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

Outside of the United States, the shape of World History is of pressing concern for at least two reasons. First, World History influences the way that not only tourists but also other Americans interact with the world around them. I would go so far as to suggest that it has more of a chance of influencing foreign policy in a Democratic administration than it did under the Bush administration. What assumptions about the world could such an administration hold, and how willing would it be to listen to others and to act multilaterally? Second, World History is actively pursuing a sort of global hegemony. Will the projected Asian and African affiliates of the World History Association be able to shape and challenge World History's messages, or merely act a surrogates to a North American center?

In the context of the uneven relationships of power between North America and the developing world, between historians and our subjects, between teachers and students, and between academic historians and others who "know" the past, it behooves us to actively pass on to our students the perspective of those whose voices are historically not present in academic history-making. We need to think about the implications of the construction of World History narratives that are moralistic and universalistic, and that claim precedence over others' ways of knowing the past. This may require more listening and less telling than has been the case so far.