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To our history and our future

The View from the Hills: Considering the Future of Early Modern History in Trump-Era Oakland

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On the evening of 24 May 2018, by way of a final course review for my students, I led a discussion about Charles C. Mann's *1491*, a book that discusses life in the Americas before European contact and then narrates the catastrophic changes brought to the New World by this contact. On 25 May, I awoke to a minor media kerfuffle. In his commencement address to the Naval Academy, our president had stated "In recent years and even decades, too many people have forgotten that truth. They have forgotten that our ancestors trounced an empire, tamed a continent, and triumphed over the worst evils in history."¹ Saving me from having to interpret this as one of the many embarrassing actions of our current administration were several emails from my students, who, although they were in the midst of preparing for final exams, were incensed and excited. They wanted to make sure that I had seen his statement and that they knew how directly the president's "truth" that Americans had "tamed a continent" contradicted what they had learned about interactions between Europeans and Native peoples in the New World. Instead of adding to my frustrations with the current state of affairs in the United States, the incident and its aftermath gave me a small glimmer of hope for the future.

In the fall of 2016, I was hired as the primary faculty member for the liberal studies program at California State University, East Bay. Formerly known as California State University, Hayward, CSUEB is a small campus of roughly 15,000 students in the California State University system. Located in the Hayward Hills (near the Oakland Airport), CSUEB draws its students primarily from the San Francisco Bay Area and is trumpeted as the most diverse student body on the US mainland. As of fall 2017, 70 percent of our enrolled students identified as people of color, and 74 percent of our student body received some form of financial aid.² Most of my students take my classes with the goal of becoming educators. The liberal studies major is one of two ways that undergraduate students can prepare for a certification to work as an elementary or middle school teacher in the State of California. Instead of teaching undergraduate history majors, as I had assumed I was preparing to do, I have found myself teaching students who are themselves preparing to teach the state's youngest and most impressionable students.

¹Lena Felton, "Read President Trump's U.S. Naval Academy Commencement Address," *The Atlantic*, 25 May 2018, available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/05/read-president-trumps-us-naval-academy-commencement-address/561206/>.

²"University Facts," Cal State East Bay, available at <http://www.csueastbay.edu/about/facts.html>, accessed 14 June 2018.

The difficult job market for history PhDs has been the subject of much recent discussion.³ Like many of my colleagues, after completing the PhD, I struggled to find steady employment that would make use of the training I spent so long acquiring and am fortunate to have it. I hope that the response of my students to the issues and problems of early modern history, as well as my introduction of historical thinking to students outside of the history department, can serve as a model for future historians of the early modern era. With the job market as merciless as it currently is, we are already in danger of experiencing a “lost generation” of early modernists. If early modern studies is to continue as a vibrant community of scholars, we must adapt. In this essay, I propose some ideas for moving forward in this time of crisis and transition.

The first and most important thing that early modern historians must do is maintain a world history consciousness, in teaching as well as in research. The second half of the twentieth century saw an explosion in “world history,” as well as significant improvement in the quality of scholarship that concentrates on the histories of those people outside “Western Civilization.” This has resulted in a large mass of evidence that humans in general, including Europeans, have always been affected by goings-on in the rest of the world. This insight has been incorporated into the existing body of scholarship to great success. It is time for it to be brought into the undergraduate classroom and, particularly, into large survey courses, where we have the best chance of reaching non-majors.

In the TED talk I show on the first day of class, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says the following about her early reading material:

Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify.... Now, I loved those American and British books I read. They stirred my imagination. They opened up new worlds for me. But the unintended consequence was that I did not know that people like me could exist in literature.⁴

Much has been made over the past decade about the increasing proportion of Hispanic/Latino and Asian students enrolling in undergraduate institutions.⁵

³Anthony Grafton and James Grossman, “No More Plan B: A Very Modest Proposal for Graduate Programs in History,” *Perspectives on History*, 1 Oct. 2011, available at <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/october-2011/no-more-plan-b>. I aim my comments at historians in the United States (and to a lesser extent Canada) primarily due to my training and my familiarity with the current shabby state of the job market for historians in these countries. Certainly it is no better for our colleagues in other disciplines and outside anglophone North America. I do hope that at least some of what I say here may be applicable to them.

⁴Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story*, TED Global, 02:24, July 2009, http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript.

⁵Eric Hoover, “Minority Applicants to Colleges Will Rise Significantly by 2020,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 10 Jan. 2013, <http://www.chronicle.com/article/Wave-of-Diverse-College/136603>.

Among these students, in particular, I find that there is a hunger to learn the histories that (to paraphrase Adichie) show these students that people like them did exist in history. I hear almost universally that my courses are the first time that these students, who are training to be educators themselves, have learned anything systematically about history that did not focus on Westerners. At least one student every teaching term has reached out to me via email or in my office hours to thank me for covering these topics. Hopefully, this will also have the secondary effect of allowing these students to speak meaningfully about these histories to their own elementary and high school classes. If they do teach in the State of California, these classes will likely also contain a great many students of color.

It is widely acknowledged among academic historians that Western Civilization courses are at best problematic and at worst obsolete. The Western Civilization course has its roots in cram courses designed for US military officers preparing to enter the First World War.⁶ After the war, the classes were enlarged and in many schools made a mandatory course for all undergraduates, with the stated goal of teaching good citizenship and links between the United States and Europe. “The intelligent citizen, many educators had come to believe, was historically minded.”⁷ Dropping Western Civ has been a topic of discussion in departments since the 1960s, but these classes are still being taught, though now often under the guise of European history. Although “European history” has replaced “Western Civilization” in many course catalogs, more often than not these courses still follow the general format of Western Civilization courses as they have been taught since the post WWI era. It is telling that, although these courses are purportedly about Europe, they often ignore events that took place east of the Oder-Neisse line and incorporate events in the United States.

The goal of teaching citizenship through history is, I believe, still a useful ideal. Much of our current public discourse could benefit from a deeper understanding of history. These classes are useful for academic historians as well. History departments often attract majors from large survey classes students take as requirements for the general education portion of their major, and a basic knowledge of chronology is essential for upper-level history study; however, the narrative of the standard Western Civilization class, which often features an exclusive or near-exclusive focus on the actions of white people (and particularly white men), in teaching our youngest undergraduates risks further alienating them.

In my classes, I foreground the idea that there are many competing narratives about any given incident. In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s twenty-minute 2009 TED talk, “The Danger of a Single Story,” Adichie, the Nigerian novelist and essayist, talks about the power of narrative, particularly in the way that humans understand people outside their groups. “So that is how to create a single story,

⁶Gilbert Allerdycy, “The Rise and Fall of the Western Civilization Course,” *American Historical Review* 87 (1982): 706.

⁷Allerdycy, “Rise and Fall,” 708.

show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.... How [stories] are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power."⁸ By foregrounding the instability of narrative and the power aspects attached to writing, and teaching my students to be critical of narratives presented to them, I am able to introduce historical thinking to people who would otherwise be untouched by our discipline. I can also introduce world history to a group of people who would likely otherwise have avoided such topics because of their reputation for being boring and difficult to master.

Roughly half of the class term is taken up with discussion and analysis of Charles C. Mann's *1491*. Mann is a journalist by training, and his book is primarily concerned with working backwards from the standard narratives of European contact and conquest of the peoples of the New World. He uses alternative narratives, along with a variety of other evidence, to reconstruct the world in which the peoples of the Americas lived pre-contact. As a result, much of the discussion centers around the famous stories with which my students are familiar from their K-12 education: the first Thanksgiving, the conquest of the Aztec empire, and the conquest of the Inca in Peru.

In the same spirit, historian Dipesh Chakrabarty and others hold as a goal the "provincializing" of Europe and the West, thereby seeing the cultures and peoples of Europe as among many ways that humans have lived in recorded history, rather than using the developments of European society as a teleological framework of human development. This, I think, is an achievable goal for teaching. Specialists in the early modern period, both in Europe and outside it, are especially well suited to teaching with a world history perspective. If one begins the early modern period with the fifteenth century and continues through the eighteenth, we can see Latin Christendom and its inhabitants begin as, in Felipe Fernandez-Armesto's words "A small promontory of Asia" and encounter the kingdoms and civilizations of Asia, Africa, and the Americas, interactions that ended as often with negotiation as with war and conquest.⁹ Particularly in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, Europe's global dominance seems far from a given. This perspective, which appears throughout our scholarly research and writing, is invaluable to the project of world history. It ought to show up in textbooks as well as in class lectures.

The focus on narrative instability and competing stories about the past that I emphasize in my teaching has also influenced my research. I am currently in the midst of preparing my dissertation for publication as a book. As originally written, my dissertation concentrated on the competing dynastic strategies of two baronial families in a small territory in Northwest Germany, one Catholic

⁸Adichie, *Danger of a Single Story*, 09:14.

⁹Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, *Millennium: A History of the Last Thousand Years* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 151.

and one Protestant. After teaching these students, the importance of power in the construction of narrative, and how narrative influences power, have been made explicit to me. I therefore am revising the manuscript so that the published volume will concentrate more explicitly on political power as a constituted and unstable phenomenon, and the methods, specifically those relating to material culture and writing about the community, that the winning family used to keep themselves in power. I believe this will be a much better contribution to the historiography than my work would have otherwise been.

The second thing that early modernists must do is make a greater effort to address the misunderstandings inherent in the general populace. We live and teach in a time when the humanities as fields of study are seriously undervalued, a time when President Obama could make an offhand joke disparaging art history degrees without much notice.¹⁰ Nevertheless, history, in one form or another, forms the basis of most people's identities. We are who we are, and the world we live in is the way it is, because of things that happened in the past. The general population's observable attitude toward the past seems to be a combination of nostalgia, triumphalist teleology, and confusion. It is therefore unsurprising that the aforementioned statement of Donald Trump at the United States Naval Academy commencement also passed with relatively little comment.

The academic discomfort with popular history is well established, but the truth of the matter is that we draw our students, and therefore our future colleagues, from the general populace. Interest in history is driven in large part by consumption of media such as historical films, historical fiction, and popular historical documentaries. Although some effort is being made to introduce a more global sensibility into historical media (for example, the BBC's masterful 2016 documentary series, *The Silk Road*), the historical media landscape in general remains populated by triumphalist stories concentrating primarily on powerful white men (and, to a lesser extent, powerful white women), most of them anglophone. The academic historical profession needs to talk with the people who tell our stories to the rest of the world. It is perhaps worthwhile to consider the further development of graduate and undergraduate interdisciplinary programs in history and media studies as a way of addressing this problem.

More troublingly, these popular approaches to history have also become fertile ground for white supremacist recruitment. The primary era white supremacists employ seems to be a muddled idea of the European Middle Ages, one very close in its perspective to the medievalism promoted in Germany during the Nazi Party's period in power. In addition, icons of the early modern West have also been employed, most notably by the white supremacist group Identity Evropa

¹⁰Scott Jaschick, "Obama vs. Art History," *Inside Higher Ed*, 31 Jan. 2014, <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/01/31/obama-becomes-latest-politician-criticize-liberal-arts-discipline>.

(sic), which uses a photograph of Michaelangelo's *David* on their posters.¹¹ These groups are not merely angling for student recruits in "red states." CSUEB was the target of two different white supremacist groups during the academic year 2017/18, both of which covered nearly every bulletin board and display case on our campus with racist flyers. In an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the Anti-Defamation League noted that propaganda was most prevalent in campuses in Texas and California.¹²

As experts in the early modern world, and as educators, we have an obligation to combat these voices. Since many of these groups view college campuses as fertile recruitment territory, we have ample opportunity to address and rebut their views. This applies particularly to those of us who research in those parts of Europe and Asia ravaged by the Second World War and Iberian fascism and therefore have witnessed firsthand the lasting cultural and physical scars wrought by fascism in the twentieth century.

Demographically, politically, and economically, the United States, along with the rest of the anglophone world, is changing radically. Massive changes in technology and the availability of information are shaking the political order across the world. Scientific knowledge is growing by leaps and bounds and changing our world in ways that will likely not be fully understood for generations. Travel has become easier, and because of this the world appears to be getting smaller. The political hegemony of the Atlantic world order, as well as the West's relationship with Asia, are being reconsidered. People are being displaced from their homes on a scale not seen in generations, creating new cultural encounters and reviving old prejudices. Rulers are consolidating and centralizing power. All of these things have happened before, including between the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries. It is my experience that historians, particularly those of the early modern world, are happy to draw parallels between our fields of study and the world we live in and often lament that, if only public figures had the special knowledge of our profession, the public could be saved from ruin. It is time to bring this special knowledge out of the history classroom. 🇺🇸

¹¹Ben Davis "White Nationalism's Sloppy Use of Art History, Decoded," *Artnet News*, 7 Mar. 2017, available at <http://news.artnet.com/art-world/identity-evropa-posters-art-symbolism-881747>. That a neofascist group should look to a famous depiction of a Palestinian Jewish warrior as its icon of European superiority seems to me a great indicator of how poorly we, as stewards of the humanities, have penetrated the culture outside academia. For more on the use of medieval history in Nazi Germany, see, among others, Fabian Link and Mark W. Hornburg, "He Who Owns the Trifels, Owns the Reich: Nazi Medievalism and the Creation of the Volksgemeinschaft in the Palatinate," *Central European History* 49 (2016): 208–39.

¹²Megan Zahneis, "White-Supremacist Propaganda on Campuses Rose 77% Last Year," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 28 June 2018, available at <http://www.chronicle.com/article/White-Supremacist-Propaganda/243786>.