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Adding America to World History: The K-12 Challenge

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In thinking about the state of transnational history I will focus on primary and secondary school education (or K-12, kindergarten through Grade Twelve). That is because when I came to graduate school at New York University I was already working in children's publishing and I have continued to edit, write and publish for K-12. Now, at Rutgers University, I train librarians to work with children and young adults. I hope the trends I map out here can help us to understand what students know when they enter college.

In one sense the outlook for an expansive and international view of US history in K-12 is grim. When, in April of 2014, the College Board decided to craft a new advanced placement US history curriculum, the Republican Party decided to take a stand against it.¹ Indeed the *National Review* focused its criticism of the proposed curriculum on Thomas Bender and the very concept of transnational history.² By the next July, a revised AP curriculum was released that again featured the idea of our "exceptionalism," a view that echoes down to town school boards.³

There is one sterling exception to this political push for a restrictive view of how to teach history. The International Baccalaureate (IB) program was originally created in Europe as a junior and senior high school system for the children of diplomats and expats. But currently the US has the highest number of IB programs – with more than sixteen hundred schools involved. The essence of IB is an effort to create an education that is both broad and demanding enough that students anywhere in the world can use it to prepare for college – no matter where their undergraduate education takes place. Thus international baccalaureate programs do not teach national histories. US history is necessarily a hemispheric history. The growth of international baccalaureates reflects a perception among many parents that their children are growing up in an interconnected world, and thus these young people need a wider view of our past. This is echoed in the many travel and time abroad programs that high schools are

instituting. IB programs are now most often found in public schools, and so this broader vista is not limited to wealthy families who can afford overseas experiences.

Unfortunately, however, IB is an island unto itself. The nature of trade (retail-oriented) book publishing and an insistent and indefensible localism in elementary school curricula confine US history to a most limited focus. Even as “multiculturalism” is a buzzword throughout primary and secondary education, the very push to create a more inclusive literature for younger readers has, so far, served to marginalize an international perspective. For instance, a group called We Need Diverse Books (WNDB) drew attention for its criticism of trade book publishing in general and children’s and young adult books in particular. WNDB made use of a survey conducted by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to claim that (in 2013) only about ten percent of trade books for K-12 were by or about a nonmajority experience (what they termed “multicultural content.”) WNDB then pressed publishers to hire more people from nondominant groups and advocated for books ideally by, but even about, nondominant experiences.⁴ Yet WNDB did not place any focus on books from other lands. A more recent expert estimate (also from Cooperative Children’s Book Center) is that less than two percent of the more than five thousand trade books for children and teenagers published in the US were originally written in another language and published elsewhere.⁵

Even in the age of Harry Potter (which qualifies as originally from England), American children and teenagers are very, very, very rarely exposed to experiences, points of view, stories, images, narrative styles, and, most of all histories, from other lands. For example, I believe that any child in the United States who reads only in English and is not ready for fully adult or academic books would have to search long and hard to find a single book published within the last fifty years on any South Asian leader other than Gandhi or the Buddha; any African leader other than Nelson Mandela or Shaka Zulu; any Islamic thinker, theologian, or artist other than Rumi; any Chinese thinker other than Confucius; any Japanese subject at all other than the Samurai or Hiroshima—I could draw similar analogies for any area of the world. This is the bleak picture for books sold in bookstores or available on school and public library bookshelves. What about textbooks?

Typically a child coming through elementary school will study *My Family, My Community, My Neighborhood* on the theory that a child should begin with the concrete and local.⁶ Personally I think most elementary school kids know the Disney, Marvel, Sponge Bob, or Madden universes far better than they do their local streets and post offices—so if we wanted to begin with their actual experience, we should start with Media Studies. In fourth grade the child finally reaches *My State*. But in my informal survey of Fourth Grade state history textbooks, what I have seen is actually US History One, with a few nods to local Native American nations, or inventors, or politicians. The seemingly big shift comes in fifth grade, where the student finally gets US History One, to be followed by US History Two—a brief dash through all of world history for sixth and seventh grade, only to arrive at, guess what, US History One.

This sequence would be totally stultifying, if anyone actually carefully followed it. But here comes the rub. Starting with the No Child Left Behind legislation, and then the grant program Race to the Top and the Common Core State Standards Initiative, we have entered the era of high-stakes testing. Testing what? Students are tested in Language Arts, in Math; many states have adopted the Next Generation Science standards and tests, and there is even talk of a national test in the Arts. But there have never been and surely never will be national Social Studies standards. No standards mean no high-stakes tests; no tests mean the subject does not matter. In elementary school, then, students split time between Social Studies and Science—and since Science is tested, it counts. Primary school Social Studies has become an adjunct of Language Arts—a place to be trained in critical reading, thinking, and writing. That is in a way wonderful—but it means Social Studies is about process not content.

The net effect of the absurd obsession with US history narrowly defined and the decline in Social Studies is that students get taught the same thing over and over again. A friend who is just starting as a seventh- to eighth-grade grade Social Studies teacher in a ninety-nine percent African American Newark public school was given just one injunction by the assistant principal: “Don’t teach Martin Luther King; his story is the only thing they have ever studied.”

From the student point of view, the problem of endless repetition of a subject that the all-important tests do not require is exacerbated by the primacy of popular culture. Young people are awash in what is easily available in social and mass media. Clearly the latest meme or trending topic actually does matter, while the same old names and dates snoozed through once again (or bloviated about by politicians who seem to have learned their trade from the Duke of Deception) do not. As a result we have the case of college students who know everything about the Kardashians, and cannot name the country from which the United States achieved its independence—nor the century in which that struggle took place (as recorded by *National Public Radio* here: <http://www.npr.org/sections/theprotojournalist/2014/11/18/364675234/who-won-the-civil-war-tough-question>).⁷

There is a bright side, though, to this dreary tale. As Social Studies blurs into Language Arts, and as the entire school focuses on the mandate to pay attention to *evidence, argument, and point of view*, teachers, curriculum supervisors, indeed state education departments have more latitude. What better way to draw attention to point of view than to bring an international perspective to familiar US events?

To be highly personal, my wife is half-Russian Jewish and half-Indo-Guyanese. One day in Jerusalem, while talking with a relative, we learned that beet sugar had played an important role for one of my Russian relatives. My wife knew that her father’s family had originally left north India for (then British Guiana) to work on the sugar plantations. Realizing that one product had meant so much to two such totally different families, we decided to trace the world history of sugar. Our first stop was to visit Dr. Sidney Mintz, the author of the brilliant anthropological history *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*.⁸ He made the key point that while cane

has been grown all over the world, it necessitated a workflow that was the same everywhere—linking the lives and experiences of sugar workers. Thus even on the production side, the history of one product would have global implications, and of course that is all the more true when you add consumption, slavery, abolition, and non-violent resistance—all intimately linked to the sugar story.

We went on to write *Sugar Changed the World: A Story of Magic, Spice, Slavery, Freedom and Science* (which Dr. Bender was kind enough to read) but were not at all sure how it would be received.⁹ Our wide-ranging subject was not taught anywhere in middle or high schools. Yet now—in this age of crosscurricular discussions—both New York and Louisiana have added the book to their state curricula and created units around it and it was used as a source in the chapter on Sugar in the 1619 Project.¹⁰ With or without our book, the “Five S” (salt, spices, sugar, slavery, silver) model of world history is making inroads into schools. A transnational perspective can enter the curriculum not as a new view of US history but as an expression of a humanistic approach linking Social Studies, Science, and Language Arts.

At the same time, the vitality of the children’s trade book world has allowed some authors to bring new perspectives to young readers—for example, a tiny shelf of books about Stalin, the Soviet Union, and World War II is just now filling out. According to *The New York Times* historical fiction set in World War II (one of the few international subjects students do study) is replacing fantasy as a teenage favorite.¹¹ Our next book, *Eyes of the World* (2017), is about Robert Capa and Gerda Taro photographing the Spanish Civil War—the first book for young readers that has dealt with that war since the 1970s.¹² While there is hardly a topic more invisible to teenagers—and high school curricula—than the Spanish Civil War, we are in an age of demagogic leaders, anti-immigrant nativist movements, with the use of photography, film, and social media to bear witness. That is precisely what Capa and Taro tried to do with the means at their disposal—lightweight cameras and photo news magazines. We can link past and present, and bring a broad range of international events and stories to young people, if we can find the right connection.

In summary: Ideology, a myopic focus on US stories in trade books for younger readers, and localism serve to constrict US history in K-12. Yet that is not the whole story. The very decline of mandated Social Studies content has opened the door to books that bring cross-curricular and international points of view to younger readers. An appetite for an expansive transnational view is echoed in the rise of international baccalaureate schools and high school exchange programs. It remains to be seen how rigid US history education will remain in a self-evidently changing and globalizing society.

Notes

¹ Catherine Gewertz, “Republican National Committee Condemns New AP History Framework” *EdWeek Blog*, August 11, 2014,

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/2014/08/college_board_statement_on_ap.html.

- ² Stanley Kurtz, “How the College Board Politicized U.S. History,” *National Review*, August 25, 2014 <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/how-college-board-politicized-us-history-stanley-kurtz/>.
- ³ Colleen Flaherty, “Revisiting History” *Inside Higher Ed*, July 31, 2015, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/07/31/revised-ap-us-history-framework-seeks-calm-critics>.
- ⁴ For a basic introduction to WNDB, its origin, mission, and the CCBC statistics that WNDB uses, see their site, <http://weneeddiversebooks.org/faq/>.
- ⁵ This statistic, which itself was compiled by the CCBC, is from Marianne Martens, “International Children’s Literature and Subversive Cultural Exchange,” in *Reading the World’s Stories*, ed. Annette Goldsmith, Theo Heras, and Susan Corapi (Landham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 15–20.
- ⁶ See for example, <http://www.district196.org/District/CurriculumAssessment/Curr-SocialStudies/Elementary/ElementaryCurriculumOverview.cfm>.
- ⁷ Linton Weeks, “Who Won the Civil War? Tough Question,” *NPR Radio: The Protojournalist*, November 18, 2014. [https://www.npr.org/sections/theprotojournalist/2014/11/18/364675234/who-won-the-civil-war-tough-question\)?t=1605638462200](https://www.npr.org/sections/theprotojournalist/2014/11/18/364675234/who-won-the-civil-war-tough-question)?t=1605638462200).
- ⁸ Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, (New York: Viking, 1985).
- ⁹ Marc Aronson and Marina Budhos, *Sugar Changed the World: A Story of Magic, Spice, Slavery, Freedom and Science* (Boston: Clarion Books, 2010).
- ¹⁰ See the lesson plans, for example, at <https://www.engageny.org/resource/grade-9-ela-module-4-unit-1-lesson-8>. Nikole Hannah-Jones, Matthew Desmond, Linda Villarosa, Jamelle Bouie, Wesley Morris, Kevin Kruse, Jeneen Interlandi, Bryan Stevenson, Khalil Gibran Muhammad, Trymaine Lee, Mary Elliott and Jazmine Hughes, and Nikita Stewart, The 1619 Project, *The New York Times*, August 2019–ongoing, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>.
- ¹¹ Alexandra Alter, “Novels Bring World War II to Life for a New Generation,” *The New York Times*, June 16, 2016.
- ¹² Marc Aronson and Marina Tamar Budhos, *Eyes of the World: Robert Capa, Gerda Taro, and the Invention of Modern Photojournalism* (New York: Henry Holt, 2017).

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