

Appendix A: Using *This Fleeting World* in the Classroom

World history is perhaps the most difficult course for history teachers and educators to organize, plan, and then teach. It is not easy to bring the whole world's history into focus while avoiding the "one darn culture [or thing] after another" trap that plagues so much history instruction. Of course, developing coherent history courses at any scale, whether regional, national, or local (e.g., courses in the history of Western civilization, the United States or, say, the city of Poughkeepsie), is a challenge. As former history teachers now working with prospective and practicing teachers, however, we think the teaching problems are more acute in world and big history. Most teachers seem to think this is because they must fit more "stuff" into a course on world history than they need to for a history course with a national or regional scope. Compared with when they are dealing with national or regional histories, teachers seem to lack an overarching picture of world historical change over time that might guide them in determining what, from among all that "stuff," they should include in their courses and to help them see how the history fits together.

Consider, for example, what happened at a workshop we recently conducted for over seventy-five world history teachers. We began by asking them to tell a five-minute story of the history of the United States. Everyone got right to work, quickly identifying familiar eras and events, and then explaining relationships between them. Most teachers quickly and easily constructed a familiar story that explained the growth and development of the United States: almost all their stories included Native Americans, European settlement and colonization, the war for independence and the Constitution, the Civil War and Reconstruction, expansion and industrialism, the World Wars, the Depression and New Deal, the Cold War, civil rights, and more recent events. When we then asked them to create a five-minute story

of Western civilization, again the teachers got right to work. In this case too, they were able to craft a story of Western history quickly; their stories included similar turning points and events, with almost all including the River Valley civilizations, classical Mediterranean civilization, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, nation-states, exploration, democratic revolutions, and industrialism. These history teachers, who ranged from relative novices to seasoned veterans, seemed to have readily available and useful “big pictures” of the history of the United States and the West that they employed to narrate change over time and to locate, within the big story, historical details visible only at smaller scales.

When we asked the group to create a five-minute story of world history, however, the reaction was different. Few got right down to the task. Some struggled over where to begin the story, others confessed a lack of knowledge in certain time periods or regions of the world, and still others told a Eurocentric story that they made world historical by mentioning China or India. Unlike when they were tackling U.S. history or Western civilization, the teachers did not use a large-scale story to frame their thinking of the world’s history. Without a readily available big picture, these teachers reported feeling bogged down with details, unsure about what to include, what to leave out, and how things were connected to one another.

If world history courses are to be anything more than a cultural cavalcade or a factual data dump, then teachers must find useful ways to determine what to include in their courses and how to make coherent connections across historical events, cultures, and facts. In our careers as history teachers and teacher educators, and through our research on the teaching and learning of history, we have come to see how important comprehending the big picture is to meaningful and coherent instruction. Unfortunately, as others have pointed out, the places where teachers have typically gone for help—teacher training, state standards, textbooks, or curriculum projects—do not provide world history educators with the big picture they need to make curricular and instructional decisions.¹

¹ See for example, Robert B. Bain and Tamara L. Shreiner, “Issues and Options in Creating a National Assessment in World History,” *The History Teacher* 38, no. 2 (2005): 241–72.; Lauren S. McArthur, “Thinking in World History Education: Using the Work of World Historians to Inform School Practices,” paper delivered at World History Association Annual Conference, Long Beach, June, 2006. A notable curricular exception is *World History for Us All* curriculum project (<http://worldhistoryforusall.sdsu.edu/dev/default.htm>) directed by Ross Dunn.

That is why we are so enthusiastic about David Christian’s interpretive essay *This Fleeting World*. In advancing a theory about the shape of “big” history, *This Fleeting World* offers teachers and world history educators a valuable tool—one that we have used successfully with teachers—for organizing and teaching coherent courses in the world’s history.

This Fleeting World as a Teaching Tool

This Fleeting World presents a big-picture narrative of world and big history not found in any textbook, curriculum guide, or set of state or national standards. It offers history teachers and other educators at all levels a useful way to think about the design and structure of world history courses. By focusing on a large spatial scale, David Christian not only succeeds in telling a coherent story of the history of the universe (in less than one hundred pages), but also demonstrates ways teachers might manage critical challenges inherent in planning and teaching world history.

Many teachers, textbooks, and history courses stay at the nation-state or civilization level, rarely zooming out for a broader picture. They thus keep the instructional focus on national or civilizational politics and cultures—an approach that tends to reduce world history to a serial study of civilizations or nation-states, with little attention to interconnections except for an occasional comparison to emphasize political and cultural differences. *This Fleeting World*, however, takes a different stance. World history, Christian argues, goes beyond “telling the history of this nation or that community” to focus on “the interconnections between people and communities in all eras of human history.” Its purpose, in Christian’s words, should be to “explore . . . the histories of women and men across the entire world, the stories that all humans share because they are human.” The focus is on the story of us all and on the crucial turning points in the human story—of major changes in the ways we humans produced and distributed food; organized ourselves in communities; defined and explored and populated our environment; experienced, responded to, and often created “worldwide” crises; and increased or decreased in numbers. In transcending the civilization or the nation as the unit of analysis, *This Fleeting World* presents this story in three big acts: the era of foraging, the agrarian era, and the modern era.

Like all good historians, Christian offers valuable historical detail and rich evidence to support his argument: this is no vague thematic history that ignores historical content. Christian uses details precisely as they should be used: to support and illuminate the narrative of human history in a way that makes it comprehensible. In focusing on this big story, however, Christian does not ignore other scales on which students should study the history of the world. Although his narrative centers on events so large that even civilizations—let alone nations, cultures, and individuals—are difficult to see, throughout the essay he uses regional, national, and local examples to explicate large-scale patterns.

In so doing, *This Fleeting World* also helps teachers tackle a second challenge in teaching world history, namely, helping students develop meaningful links between big history and stories occurring on smaller and more familiar historical scales. Put differently, world history teachers often struggle to help their students understand the relationships between macro- and micro-explanations of historical change. Sprinkled throughout *This Fleeting World's* big narrative are suggestions for close-up study or for considering relationships between structure and culture. Christian offers ideas for pursuing historical questions at a different temporal-spatial scale, for making comparisons, or for paths one might follow to locate evidence that might even challenge his big story. Just as a photographer uses multiple lenses—close-up, wide-angle, and zoom—to tell pictorial stories, world history teachers and students need to observe the world's history through several different lenses to understand the whole most completely.²

Using This Fleeting World to Plan and Teach World History

When we used *This Fleeting World* with the seventy-five teachers mentioned above, they were enthusiastic about it, claiming the essays gave them a frame that could guide them as they crafted their history courses, exactly as they had for U.S. history and Western civilization. We found that the table of contents alone offered the teachers a needed but missing picture of global change and connections.

That is not to say everyone agreed with Christian's perspective. Some felt he gave short shrift to world religions as agents of change; others took

² We are grateful to Craig Benjamin for suggesting this useful metaphor.

issue with the fact that in Christian's narrative, economic forces trumped cultural or intellectual forces. Still others expressed concern over the relative absence of individuals in the narrative. At the grand scale on which Christian's story unfolds, it is difficult to see the accomplishments and actions of individuals, and for some teachers, that raised important historiographical and pedagogical questions about human agency and cause and effect. These points of disagreement do not detract from the usefulness of the book, however; on the contrary, they make the book even more valuable because they encourage teachers to use or to seek historical evidence to challenge the case Christian makes.

How else might history teachers or history teacher educators use *This Fleeting World* as an instructional tool to enhance course designs, lesson planning, and teaching? The list that follows is just a small selection of ways we have begun to or plan to use this piece to improve world and big instruction.

FOR PLANNING INSTRUCTIONAL MOVES ALONG DIFFERENT SCALES OF TIME AND SPACE

Learning to recognize global patterns, over both time and space, and connect those patterns with inter-regional, regional, and local developments are among the most important and challenging habits of mind developed through the study of world history. In providing a large global narrative and offering suggestions for more fine-grained studies, *This Fleeting World* provides both a model and a framework for including within a history course layered and connected movement up and down geographic and temporal scales. Since designing instruction that enables students to move through nested scales of historical time and space is quite difficult, the support *This Fleeting World* offers teachers in meeting this challenge might be its greatest asset. Certainly that has been the opinion of the world history teachers with whom we work.

For example, consider how *This Fleeting World* treats the Industrial Revolution through a brief description of three waves of global industrial change. Starting with this global pattern, teachers might then ask themselves (and their students) to move down a level to see up close what industrialism looked like in Western Europe, Russia, or Japan. Zooming down even more, teachers could plan to have students look more closely at the effects of industrialization on particular colonies, such as India, or on gendered or class relationships within and across societies. Then, teachers

could have students return to the big picture to reconsider it after having seen industrialism in and across regions.

FOR CREATING COURSE AND UNIT DESIGNS

Not only does *This Fleeting World* help teachers construct a vertical view of world history through the technique of nested temporal-spatial scales, the essay also helps teachers develop a linear view of big changes over time. Thus, teachers might use the chronological and topical divisions in *This Fleeting World* to frame periodization and topical schemes for their courses. Throughout each chapter, Christian makes strong arguments for significant turning points in human history that teachers might use as logical breaks in instructional time (e.g., units or ends of terms). Teachers might also look to *This Fleeting World* for important global topics, such as “The Earliest Cities” or “Creation of Global Networks,” to frame instructional units or shape assessments. The descriptions Christian provides of early cities or global networks can help teachers think about the big and lasting ideas students could develop from investigating these topics and may spark ideas for the details a unit of study on early cities or global network might include.

FOR STIMULATING STUDENTS’ THINKING

Many teachers will want to use *This Fleeting World* itself with their students, and we think that is a very good idea. Students also need big pictures of the history they study, and so teachers might use *This Fleeting World* with their students just as we have been using it with teachers—to build a large-scale picture of the human story. We can think of many good reasons why teachers might want to use this book in some form or another with students at the outset of a course, revisiting sections of it at the beginnings and ends of eras and units. Doing so should help students attach the details of what they learn to a larger frame, which in turn will help them remember historical details and make those details them meaningful.

We also think teachers might use sections of the book to provoke student thinking, stimulate investigations, and encourage critical thinking about the use of history. For example, the section entitled “Coca-Cola Culture and the Backlash” is a succinct discussion of the growing global influence and consequences of the diffusion of Western values and products that would make a wonderful topic for students to take up.

FOR HELPING TO PREPARE PRESERVICE TEACHERS

In the United States, world history is the fastest-growing subject in the social studies curriculum, if not the entire school curriculum. Yet, too few teachers have training in world history, even those certified to teach world history courses. For example, teachers in Michigan need only to have taken a two-course sequence in a region outside the United States or Europe to become certified to teach world history. While *This Fleeting World* is not a substitute for substantive course work in world history, it can help prepare preservice teachers by offering a global story and plenty of ideas about world-historical topics and resources. In courses we teach to prepare future history teachers, we intend to use this book in conjunction and comparison with popular textbooks and national and state standards in world history.

Conclusion

Obviously, we are excited about the possibilities *This Fleeting World* offers world history teachers, teacher educators, curriculum specialists, and students. We are confident that people will find additional productive ways to use this book to improve world history education and help students develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the history of humanity—a vital and essential goal for us all.

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