A Case Against Facts: Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Survey

"[E]very normal person does know some history, a good deal in fact. Of course we often hear someone say: 'don't know any history; I wish I knew some history; I must improve my mind by learning some history.' We know what is meant. This person means that he has never read any history books, or studied history in college; and so he thinks he knows no history. But it is precisely this conventional notion of history as something external to us as a body of dull knowledge locked up in books, that obscures its real meaning."

Former AHA President Carl Becker,
"What Are Historical Facts?" (1926).[1]

Eric Otremba
Macalester College

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I had the opportunity to instruct the early U.S. survey course for the first time. I had worked as a teaching assistant for a few semesters already, and like most graduate students in my position, I was eager to place my own mark on a class where I had full had control over the material. But more than excited, I was nervous. I was afraid of being unable to engage a group of 18-year-olds for an entire semester, of being unable to communicate my own passion for history, of being unable to imbibe our profession's most basic tenets into students' minds. While my emotions might be dismissed as first-time jitters, previous experiences had convinced me that they were far from unique. Students browsing Facebook, textbooks that are purchased but never opened, exams that fail to demonstrate the class's most fundamental concepts—these experiences seem to be uncomfortably common within current college history classes. Now, these issues may be part and parcel of the larger contemporary educational experience; certainly, biology and mathematics instructors stress over similar situations. And yet as history teachers, there is something unique about our situation: unlike most disciplines, people outside the classroom often profess a genuine *like* for history, particularly

The History Teacher Volume 48 Number 1 November 2014

the American history genre. From the success of authors like David McCullough to the recent run of antebellum slavery films, it seems clear the problem of student motivation may have less to do with history *per se* than with how it is approached within the classroom.[2] After all, nobody's getting rich by crafting blockbusters about the Pythagorean Theorem or Periodic Table. "I *love* history," a distant relative once told me at a family gathering. "Well, except for my high school history class, but I read a lot of historical fiction."

We have all heard similar versions of that story. And while such comments may chagrin some, I believe they are nevertheless symptomatic of larger problems within the relationship between history as an academic discipline and history as it operates within the public. While preparing for my first survey, I spent a good amount of time thinking on this relationship between academic and popular history, and subsequently testing my insights within a variety of classroom lessons and activities. Since then, I have spent several years compiling my ideas and practices into a new kind of U.S. survey class, one that abandons the traditional class structure and places popular history at the course's core. In the following pages, I want to flesh out this relationship between popular and academic history, pointing out some of the fundamental disconnects between these two practices and showing how they underlie many of the perennial problems we historians face as educators in the classroom. Next, I will show how I've addressed these problems within my early American history survey, adopting a course that eschews facts by making the problematic relationship between academic and popular history the primary target of class inquiry. Structured this way, the survey becomes less about introducing students to a canon of essential American events, and more about demonstrating how history operates on the ground within our twenty-first-century environment.

Let's start by returning to the above-mentioned relative in love with historical fiction. Comments like this are so common that they almost represent a kind of bad joke amongst historical professionals. Yet there are reasons so many of us experience some form of this particular situation. Simply put, people react to history when it *is* a fiction. While Hollywood's historical renditions may contain varying levels of historical "facts," what gives them mass appeal is popular history's ability to appropriate historical data into familiar narrative formats, complete with protagonists, adversaries, and well-defined story arcs with beginnings, middles, and ends. Such narratives make history familiar by translating the foreignness of the past into recognizable tropes and didactics, creating meaning for the present by squaring the past with contemporary mores and values. However—and this is key—this public preference for history as a familiar narrative is ironically coupled with the firm public belief that the history they know is *not* comprised of fictions, but of facts. Despite being drawn to narratives that are manufactured from a careful culling of highly manicured historical data, the public pays little attention to the production side of historical presentations and typically accepts history as a straightforward presentation of neutral historical objects. Historical fictions aside, most documentary presentations are imagined as the final word on a given topic, and notions of professional disagreements or diverging historiographical schools is all but unknown beyond academic walls. My fiction-loving relative would likely be in agreement with an old co-worker of mine who, when I left work for graduate school, asked me what kind of research early Americanists could possibly do, given that "most of that is already known."

This is more than an inconsistency. The public's understanding of history is an example of what sociologist Bruno Latour calls a Janus-faced entity.[3] To Latour, objects are Janus-faced when they rely upon social influences during their creation, but later disavow those connections by arguing that their existence is socially autonomous. In the case of popular history, this is seen in the public's penchant for stories that are specifically created to resonate with present cultural values, while simultaneously ignoring or denying that popular history exists for this purpose. It is this Janus-facing that causes the public to desire the history of "what really happened," while simultaneously rejecting most of academia's more comprehensive textual outputs. Within education, it fuels student expectations for "real" history from academic courses, and is why those classes perennially disappoint. After all, how many of us have had friends or family ask us to recommend a "good" history book, and how often are these people ultimately unsatisfied with our suggestions?

These revelations are obviously not new to academic historians.[4] The distinction was noted almost a century ago in Carl Becker's 1931 presidential address to the American Historical Association, entitled "Everyman His Own Historian," which categorized popular American history as "an engaging blend of fact and fancy," collected from "information, picked up in the most casual way, from the most unrelated sources."[5] According to Becker, this "Everyman's" history differed from academic history as its most important characteristic was not factual accuracy, but its utility for contextualizing present issues and values. It is worth adding that Becker warned academic historians to ignore popular history at their own peril. Since Becker, there has been a wealth of theorizing and research within academia upon the myriad ways in which past and present interact, and for decades, there has been a professional consensus that the ontology of both facts and narratives are inseparable from the linguistic milieus in which they are produced. Yet despite these developments, things outside academia have changed little, and most still believe their history to be neutral collections of *priori* objects. Strangely enough, when teaching history to undergraduates, we historians rarely redress this still-common public conflation. Instead of focusing on the ways history can relate, reinforce, or contest present cultural mores and paradigms, introductory history surveys are typically engineered around a series of disparate "must-teach" topics. The logic usually goes like this: many students in survey courses are not history majors and typically enroll to fulfill a gen-ed requirement. Therefore, as this may be the only college history class they ever take, it is crucial for the instructor to cover a specific array of historical episodes, lest students walk away with an inadequate knowledge of the past.

Obviously, this is a pedagogy filled with problems. First, there are simply too many of these "must-teach" moments to cover in a single course, and attempting to cover all or even most of them within a single survey necessitates flattening their complexities and nuances, reducing each to a one-dimensional symbol. These stunted representations are then placed in rapid succession within lectures and textbooks, making history a flurry of people, places, and events with little context or relevance because of their highly distilled nature. As the objects whiz by, so do academic history's more complicated concepts. While students may expect such a litany from history classes on the surface, their Janus-faced understanding of history also means they are subconsciously used to understanding history as meaningful narrative, and thus they quickly tire of this approach. It is the classic case of history being "one damned thing after another."

I once worked as one of several TAs for a large American survey class. Each week, we would gather with the instructor to design a common lesson template for the course's upcoming breakout sections. One day, we gathered to plan a lesson for our week on World War II. The lead professor asked the TAs which ideas she or he thought were worth dedicating time to. One TA suggested that class should focus upon the war efforts of the U.S.S.R. and other allies, thereby putting American history into a global context. A second stated that we should talk about Japanese internment camps, as this was something students may not have an opportunity to hear about elsewhere. A third advocated for Rosie the Riveter and women's contributions on the home front, saying that no discussion of WWII would be complete without it. A fourth argued that if women and Japanese were to get their space in class, then it was only fair that we talk about African Americans and their fight for the Double Victory. Since nobody wanted to trample on anyone else's ideas, we decided that the TAs should attempt to cover all of these topics—within a single fifty-minute course. Later while teaching this lightspeed lesson, and watching eyes glaze over as I covered these topics at only the most superficial levels, I realized I was participating in our long tradition of turning history-loving people into lethargic history students.

Beyond coverage, a deeper issue is at stake. Approaching the survey as a series of "must-teach" moments—or even as a sequence of well-defined events or chapters as they are typically laid out in a history textbook—reinforces the conventional understanding that history amounts to nothing more than researching and memorizing a set of *a priori* historical objects. It proceeds from the necessary assumption that historical events exist outside the observer, that their existence has an independent importance, and that this importance is what necessitates their coverage within the survey. Identifying this latent philosophical position within the standard survey structure is crucial to rethinking it, because by prioritizing content for its own sake, we reinforce the above-mentioned paradox whereby the public conceives of history as a collection of static facts while simultaneously consuming popular narratives that are the result of a deliberate productive process.

Again, these ideas are not novel to academic historians. In particular, the idea of omitting course material for purposes of intellectual cohesion has been the product of numerous pedagogical works and seminars.[6] Yet while history teachers may subscribe to these ideas in theory, we often find implementing them to be more difficult in practice. Many external factors contribute towards the perpetuation of the traditional canonical approach, not least of which is the array of state-managed educational boards and policy initiatives that focus on standardizing liberal arts curriculums so as to facilitate their inter-collegiate comparison and management.[7] Such initiatives are also helped by the litany of media outlets that perennially chastise history teachers by highlighting students' inability to recognize even basic historical objects.[8] Yet even history teachers themselves, as both subjects and objects within this ongoing objectivity discourse, frequently fall into this "standards trap" and are thus wary of abandoning the traditional survey's structure. In a recent roundtable article on teaching American history, one participant commentated at length on the reasons for subordinating comprehensiveness to other issues, only to continue by saying, "I was shocked that the recently publicized poll of college seniors revealed that fewer than 30 percent could correctly identify Reconstruction on a multiple choice test, and I begin thinking that some way of drilling content into students' minds must be pursued."[9] What strikes me about this statement is that despite this excellent educator's genuine desire to rethink the survey's goals and uses, his reform is nevertheless impeded by notions of history as knowledge founded upon a shared series of official nomenclatures. In this case, "drilling content" is less about getting students to interact and contextualize the events and issues of the Reconstruction period, and more about having them link the textbook category of "Reconstruction" with a particular set of standardized associations.

A Different Survey

With such ideas in mind, I set out to create a different survey course from what I had seen before. Given the issues listed above, it was important for me that this new class would not be the mere winnowing of topics into a more manageable agenda, but rather a fundamental rethinking of the survey and its role within history education. This in turn meant I needed to be ready if this new survey began to appear radically different from past courses, and to resist any temptation to balk at the severity of my conclusions. Rethinking a class from scratch inevitably means turning to that most basic question educators ask: what do I want my students to learn? Pondering this led me to think about the interplay between facts, audience, meaning, and finally back to the Janus-faced history of the American public. For most historians, it is indeed true that the introductory survey is our greatest chance to disseminate academic history's ideas to the largest number of people. Most students we encounter will not become history majors. For many, this will indeed be the only time they are exposed to history that is not produced within the popular sphere. As mentioned above, it is this "only chance" anxiety that often leads us to cram so many topics into surveys in the first place. But what if, rather than merely trying to replace public understandings with facts from our own academic canon, we engage this Janus-faced popular history straight on? What if a series of engagements at this level became the basic building blocks for a new survey?

Here is an example of how the new class works. Around the middle of the semester (shortly before engaging the American Revolution), I teach a lesson on Anglo-Native diplomacy in the eighteenth century. The theme for this lesson is hybridity, and for the rest of the day my historical facts are subjugated to this concept. I want students to see examples of natives and colonists living in proximity, blending each other's practices and cultures, and most importantly, I want students to see how this hybridity is written out of present-day historical productions.[10] Class size averages around thirty, and the format is mostly interactive lecture in which I ask a question or two every couple of PowerPoint slides. Examples of cultural and racial hybridity are easy enough to find along the Canadian borderland during this time: colonial laws which forbade colonists from running away and "going Indian," Abenaki abductees who later refused to come home, Iroquois who dressed in European wool coats and silk stockings, Mohawk sachems who traveled to London and were welcomed as European royalty, to name only a few.[11] The point of these examples is to stress cultural blending in the borderland, not to give students a comprehensive geopolitical understanding of eighteenth-century North America, and thus facts are only used to give students the most basic of groundings. The class reading (which I sometimes use depending on class length) comes from James Merrell's *Lancaster Treaty of 1744*, which reinforces my hybridity message by detailing the complex cultural and political interplay at work between Iroquois, Maryland, and Virginia representatives during an important mid-century diplomatic encounter.[12]

By the time we are halfway through the class, I have given enough examples that students are generally intrigued about this aspect of Anglo-Native relations—which most have never heard of before. Moreover, they naturally start to question *why* this part of Native American history has never been brought to their attention. It is at this point that I bring conversation up to the present, showing images from late nineteenth-century pulp novels, mid-twentieth-century renditions of *The Last of the Mohicans*, and Disney's recent *Pocahontas* series. These examples demonstrate how modern media effaces the hybridity of the historical record by portraying colonists and Indians as people who live very separate and often opposing lives. Finally—and most importantly—class spends the final section (approximately fifteen minutes) theorizing via discussion why this is the case. Why strike hybridity from the popular narrative? What cultural groups or values are served/disserved through this process? Why does popular history invest so much energy essentializing this binary? Ultimately, these topics lead to more questions than answers, so I encourage students to hypothesize generally and to bring in their own personal (non-academic) experiences from outside the classroom. (Here, you must stress that these are not right/wrong answers, and encourage them to be creative. Usually, I exclaim that "I don't know the answers!" and that I am looking for them to help me.) Depending on the skill level of your classroom, such conversations can lead to basic theorizing and/or explaining of the concept of Otherness, how Otherness may affect Native Americans living in the present, or even how these issues play into public portrayals of Native Americans, such as with sports team mascots.

Thus, the kind of survey I propose is not really about historical events at all, but rather about how differing historical objects are appropriated for contemporary purposes. Initially, practicality is what motivated my shift in emphasis. Outside of academia, individuals encounter popular American historical productions in, as Becker says, "the most casual way, from the most unrelated sources."[13] Everything is fair game: from didactic vignettes employed by political pundits, to appropriations by both Civil

Rights and Tea Party advocates, even to advertisements for President's Day furniture sales. Of course, constructions of this type are also a source of endemic irritation to most history teachers, and we devote substantial energies towards "myth-busting" many of these contemporary public narratives, such as the many faulty assumptions about the Constitution that Tea Party activists have used to critique the modern welfare state. Unfortunately, given both the volume of these misunderstandings and the limited reach of academic history, much of our work here necessarily devolves into a litany of defensive maneuvers where we try to "correct" these misunderstandings one at a time.[14] Perhaps even more damaging is that through this corrective exercise, we unintentionally reinforce the idea that history is comprised solely of facts, thereby making it easier for later public productions to convince people of their legitimacy. Rather than exhausting ourselves in this fashion, wouldn't our time be better spent on teaching students *how* to unpack such presentations themselves? After all, students will continue to encounter these public historical constructions long after they have completed our history surveys. It seems to me that failing to teach *how* and *why* popular history is employed within contemporary culture is a greater lost opportunity than omitting any particular textbook topic.

There are other benefits beyond practicality. By de-centering the historical record, and focusing upon contemporary historical presentations, we give students a toolset and vantage point for exposing and analyzing the cultural discourses that shape popular history. Thus, history becomes a trans-historical tool for thinking broadly about concepts like race, class, gender, freedom, government, violence, religion, etc. Each day, I begin class by introducing a specific historical object or vignette, but that object is always put to service elucidating a larger academic question or issue. As with the above lesson plan, class begins in the past but then moves intentionally into the present. For example, one day begins by introducing the 1820's "Transportation Revolution," a popular early American textbook topic. But rather than merely showing how America's proliferation of turnpikes and canals affected Early Republic life for better and worse, class then moves to a discussion on how contemporary globalization technologies affect us in similar ways. The next class might jump to the Jacksonian Revolution and the founding of formal American political parties, and the episode is then be used as a prompt for questioning whether or not a purely democratic rule is preferable to one based on elites and/or expertise. The following week might involve antebellum antislavery debates, where I frame slavery to the class as an incredibly difficult nineteenth-century socio-economic problem. While American society slowly became convinced of the immorality of slave-holding, they also found themselves incapable of eradicating a practice that, by that point, had become firmly embedded within the nation's economic and political infrastructures. Class then turns to similar issues today that result in stymied reform efforts despite popular approval, such as policies on global warming or third-world sweatshops.

At other times, connections between past and present can be more explicit. In the latest version of my survey, I took time during our unit on the Constitution to cover the present controversy over gun control and the Second Amendment. I lectured about the changing Supreme Court interpretations of the Second Amendment from the nineteenth century up to the 2009 *District of Columbia v. Heller* ruling. Students also read a variety of contemporary newspaper/blog articles that used Founding Father imagery to either support or oppose present-day gun control.[15] Students debated not only the pros and cons of each argument, but discussed how historical figures are specifically appropriated within these debates. I have used similar tactics for interrogating the use of the Founding Fathers within contemporary debates on religion and the First Amendment, showing how our early Presidents are marshaled by both sides to both support and deny that America was created as a "Christian Nation." On these days, class begins with an interactive lecture contextualizing Thomas Jefferson's famous expression about a "wall of separation between church and state," while students read book excerpts from Richard Dawkins and Newt Gingrich—both of whom use the Founding Fathers to argue on the role of Christianity within public and/or state-sponsored rituals.[16]

Emphasizing links between history and present discourse also facilitates the study of historical memory, commemoration, and the concept of imagined traditions.[17] At points throughout the semester, students are introduced to various historical memory theories, and are asked to link these ideas to their own memory and the preconceptions of American history they bring to the course. Here again, when encouraging students to engage in these activities, it is important not to stress right or wrong, as many students will initially feel that their personal constructions are unfit for the classroom because they don't count as "real" history. But as Carl Becker states, everyone knows some history. It may not be academic, but all Americans—even our most recent immigrants—are familiar on varying levels with certain mythological icons from America's past.[18] Analyzing these icons as cultural symbols—and discussing how students from different backgrounds view these symbols differently—allows them to see how even seemingly innocuous public historical traditions are in fact carefully crafted to give credence to beliefs such as, for example, American exceptionalism, the power of the individual, the free market, or teleological narratives on technological progress.

Take, for example, the History Channel's 1997 documentary *The Irish in America,* which presents itself as a factual presentation of the plights and tactics of America's first-generation Irish immigrants.[19] Yet despite this stated purpose, the show primarily caters to middle-class Irish descendants by painting a triumphant narrative whereby plucky Irish newcomers persevered within early America's unforgiving environment. Thus, the ninety-minute production mainly showcases a litany of "rags to riches" stories, each time praising the hard work and ingenuity of Irish individuals who succeed at the American Dream by following the rules of the free market. This framing is done at the expense of silencing other, more complex aspects of Irish immigration such as American nativism, the racialization of Irish immigrants, or the role of Irish newcomers within nascent machine politics. Because of these choices, the show disavows historical connections between the Irish story and a variety of present-day issues, such as how race is employed to demarcate recent immigrants, or the crucial role of organized labor as a tool of upward mobility among society's poorest strata. Instead, it works to reinforce the American dream that, regardless of one's social position, wealth and power are possible if you work within the context of the status quo. Now, rather than dismissing this documentary as poorly constructed "popular" history and therefore unfit for the classroom, I showed it to get students to understand how corporate media interests can appropriate history for private ends. I began by reviewing the business history of the History Channel, including its financial standings and that of its parent corporation, A&E Entertainment. The point of this mini lecture is to remind students that the primary purpose of this media entity is not public education, but private profit. Next, they watch the documentary and, while doing so, I prompt them to write on how these external factors affect what they see.

Most recently, our class tackled the issue of slave-holding and slave-trading by watching Quentin Tarantino's film *Django Unchained*. As it was still in theatres at the time, students were first required to watch the film outside of class as a homework assignment. Next, students were assigned sections from Walter Johnson's *Soul By Soul* (1999), an academic work that also deals with the ugly details of antebellum slave-holding and slave-trading.[20] Students were also required to read a few short articles about the Tarantino movie by both historians and film critics at large.[21] This preparation led to a day of discussion whereby students compare Tarantino's and Johnson's works, examining the following questions: What kinds of violence are present in each work? In each case, which forms of violence are portrayed as just? How are slave sales portrayed as a negotiation in each work, and to what extent can slaves themselves participate in this negotiation? What are some specific racial assumptions (explicit and implicit) made in each production? How are the gendered aspects of slavery portrayed within each work? *Django Unchained* was also billed as a film that investigated the details of slavery like no other, and by comparing it to Johnson's book, students are allowed to judge whether or not the film lives up to this claim.[22] In sum, by seeing where *Django* succeeds and fails in portraying antebellum slavery, a popular film is turned into an example of how historical constructions are used within public space, in this case as a form of for-profit commemoration that nevertheless feeds into present cultural ideals of suffering and revenge.

Assignments are also structured this way. They mostly consist of short papers every couple of weeks, where students reflect on the recently discussed connections between present and past. Sometimes, these papers have specific prompts, such as asking students to examine the Othering of Native Americans in the colonial period and to compare this to ways mainstream America Others people at present. Sometimes, the paper prompt is left open, and students write on a connection between what they learned in class and something they've encountered *outside* of class. These latter papers require a bit of outside research on the students' part, and they typically search Google News or the equivalent for items that are pertinent to class topics. One of the best aspects of this assignment is that it makes grading papers more enjoyable, as students often bring creative topics or insights that I hadn't considered before. I've received papers that compare present fears over terrorist attacks to previous fears of slave revolt, and even one that connected Mitt Romney's recent denouncement of "The 47%" with statements made in the aftermath of Shay's Rebellion regarding the perils of popular democracy.[23] Another option for these papers is that students are allowed to compare what they've learned in this class with ideas and concepts from other courses. This has netted me papers that combine historical insights with theories from sociology, anthropology, criminology, gender studies, and (once) even geology. These types of papers also make excellent discussion/presentation fodder should you need to spark class engagement.

Discussions are enlivened by these strategies and exercises. In the past, I've found many students are reticent to talk about early American history as they feel their factual knowledge is insufficient for contributing anything. However, by subordinating historical facts to a broader understanding of contemporary issues, this problem is mitigated. Instead, students become empowered to contribute as they bring their own personal historical notions to class, as well as knowledge taken from other, more contemporary focused courses.[24] I recently completed teaching this version of the early American survey for the seventh time. At the end of each semester, I conclude class with an anonymous questionnaire, asking students how this history course compares to others they have taken. So far, the overwhelming consensus has been that it was indeed a different kind of class, and that most prefer this approach. In particular, students enjoy the absence of a textbook and, not surprisingly, make frequent comments on how they were happy "not to have to learn a bunch of dates or facts." More importantly, they enjoy connecting history to current issues, and said it was easier to have class discussions when they could compare history to their own lives. Many also claimed that previous history classroom experiences had silenced them by convincing them that objects outside of course texts were inappropriate for classroom discussion. They also enjoyed being able to make connections across disciplinary lines. Finally, students appreciated the emphasis on history as a production process and were often shocked at the amount of cultural biases that go into everyday historical narratives. "Usually I read things and just absorb whatever info is put in front of me," one student wrote in their evaluation. "However something I've taken from this class is that history has been modified by whoever is retelling it. Therefore, you need to proceed carefully."[25]

Reflections and Conclusions

There are some who would caution about approaching the history survey in this way, and a few caveats should be mentioned. First, this course is built on an interactive class format, with class discussion and reaction papers as the primary evaluation components. This in turn may limit the class's effectiveness for larger auditorium-style classes. However, as mentioned earlier, students are often reticent to participate in history classes as they feel like the history they know is not fit for the classroom, and this anxiety grows exponentially in auditorium halls with hundreds of peers. Since the class I describe lessens this kind of anxiety, it could also yield positive results from these larger student bodies. Recent technology innovations can also help in this regard, particularly lecture tools such as Socrative and i>clicker, which facilitate the exchange of thoughts and opinions within larger classrooms. While I have not yet used such devices, I believe they could simulate much of the interactivity of a smaller course. Similarly, there is a growing body of literature on pedagogy techniques for improving auditorium-sized classroom interaction, which make the ideas in this essay more tenable for larger classes.[26] I could see, for example, word cloud technology being useful by having students write their interpretation of various American history moments, and then generating a cloud to see what common strands of discourse underlie how we collectively imagine the past.

Another caveat is that by stressing personal interpretations of history, the class may seem to lack an objective basis for grading. However, I can say from experience that this is rarely the case. As with most writing assignments, it is relatively easy to tell who is investing significant time and energy and who is merely going through the motions. The key in grading these response papers lies in the specificity of their connections. Broad and superficial comparisons are easy to make and easy to spot. One student may simply argue that present-day Americans are like those of the past because both groups have expressed fear of foreigners and/or immigrants. This statement, while not untrue, is nevertheless too broad to be insightful and deserves a lower grade. A more thorough response may compare tactics of dehumanizing immigrants past and present, or better yet would be a paper comparing how different groups have expressed fears that too many immigrants will subvert America's (imagined) fundamental principles. Specificity is key to detecting how much the student has processed course ideas, and pushing this specificity can be a semester-long process. Indeed, the kind of analysis asked here from students is often contradictory to the historical practices they have learned in other courses, and sometimes it takes a fair amount of coaxing to get them to adjust. However, by the end, the instructor will clearly see improvement as students hone their senses to find connections they may not have been able to notice at the beginning of the semester.

One final caveat is the extent to which these ideas are portable to online classes, particularly the MOOCs that have garnered so much recent attention. Like with larger auditorium courses, I am unsure how well my ideas will transfer because of this course's reliance on interpersonal discussion and short reaction papers. MOOCs in particular are poor for these kinds of pedagogy, as it is difficult to assess these activities when students number in the thousands. Online discussion boards would need several humans to have the minimum moderation needed to ensure students are generating the right kinds of ideas, while grading essay-style papers is currently out of range for MOOC classes. But again, I believe this says more about the shortcomings of massively large classrooms than it does about the quality of my proposed survey. I am presently undecided on the ultimate effectiveness of MOOCs within higher education because the technology is moving too fast to arrive at any concrete judgments, but my initial feelings are that they will be unable to replicate the kinds of conceptual learning done in traditional small classrooms. History classes in particular overwhelmingly rely upon essay-style responses to test the critical thinking skills which we historians strive to instill within students, and without humans to review the quality of these answers, I believe history MOOCs will fail to live up to expectations. More relevant to this essay is that MOOCs, like the traditional history survey, rely upon an educational model that stresses a core set of data to be learned and regurgitated, rather than teaching students how to process the forms of information and/or cultural discourses they encounter within daily life. While MOOCs may potentially cut costs, their structure would do little to mitigate the Janus-faced popular history I described above, and would be unhelpful when trying to undo many of the survey's traditional tenets that currently make history classes dull spaces of uncontextualized facts. In this way, carelessly structured MOOCs present perils not unlike previous attempts to standardize history classes on district or state levels, as both seek to control assessment by making course materials a litany of facts to be memorized, rather than a series of processes to be honed.

But the structural powers driving MOOCs and standardization efforts are vast topics, and reconceptualizing history on a national level would be a Herculean task far beyond the scope of this essay. What I offer instead is something more manageable, but no less important. More than a simple de-cluttering of the syllabus, this survey re-orientates history at a fundamental level. History's contemporary production is moved from a tangential role to the course's center, while contemporary social issues take precedence over a canon of must-know facts. A major benefit to this paradigm is that it lends itself to an almost limitless number of course lessons and topics, and this adaptability allows it to be translated into a variety of course themes and formats. Moreover, this kind of class excels at creating graduates who are critically aware of their surroundings, preparing them to live informed, involved, and reflective lives within our rapidly changing global environment. As historians, nothing we teach can better prepare students for that environment than to help them understand history's role in supporting the cultures, mores, and paradigms of our contemporary world. At present, we historians are the benefactors of decades of academic thought that argues that the importance of history is not to create a positivistic reservoir of historical data, but instead to deepen our understanding of the how history interacts with present life. As mentioned above, by structuring conventional survey courses around a series of must-teach moments, we unwittingly work against this literature, reinforcing the Janus-faced popular history that our students confront every day. Finally, history of this kind is fun to teach, as it engages students and the types of history they bring to the course. By marginalizing facts and making history relevant, problems of student sleeping and texting are avoided, and student inquiry increases dramatically. It is a philosophy that removes us from, as Becker says, "this conventional notion of history as something external to us," and gets us beyond history as the "body of dull knowledge locked up in books."[27]

So try this class, either in full or in part. If you like it, pass it on. If enough of us adapt it, perhaps we can convince the public that their

Janus-faced history is not as it appears. That, I believe, would be a good thing, as academic historians have been absent from popular discussions of history for too long. At the end of "Everyman His Own Historian," Becker warned academia against dismissing or belittling popular history. "We do not impose our version of the human story on Mr. Everyman," he argued, "in the end it is rather Mr. Everyman who imposes his version on us….If we remain too long recalcitrant Mr. Everyman will ignore us, shelving our recondite works behind glass doors rarely opened."[28] In an age of state budget retrenchments and political claims that academia is out of touch with everyday Americans, Becker's statement remains more valid than ever. Fortunately, with this kind of class, I like to think we have the potential to not only keep students from texting in our classrooms, but perhaps even to reassert our public voice as well.

Notes

1. Carl Becker, "What Are Historical Facts?" *Western Political Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (September 1955): 327-340. Initially read at the 41st annual meeting of the American Historical Association in December 1926.

2. Several scholars currently argue that history is presently undergoing a renaissance in the public or popular sphere. See, for example, the interviews with David Cannadine and Richard Evans in *Recent Themes in Historical Thinking: Historians in Conversation*, ed. Donald A. Yerxa (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2008), 20-21, 24-25. On how academic historians have failed to respond to this development, see John Lukacs, "Popular and Professional History," *Historically Speaking* 3, no. 4 (April 2002): 2-5. The run of slavery films I reference here include Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012), Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012), and Steve McQueen's *Twelve Years a Slave* (2013).

3. Latour is specifically referring to science in his work, yet he also argues that this process is not unique to science. See Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988). For further reading on the public's interpretation and consumption of history, see David Lowenthal, "The Past of the Future: From the Foreign to the Undiscovered Country," *Historically Speaking* 56, no. 6 (June 2006); and Peter Seixas, "Collective Memory, History Education, and Historical Consciousness," in *Recent Themes in Historical Thinking: Historians in Conversation*, ed. Donald A. Yerxa (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 2008), 28-34.

4. The connection of history to language and culture was a major topic of contention during the so-called "history wars" of the 1990s, brought about by the challenges of postmodernism and the linguistic turn. Yet prior to this time, ideas on the connection between history and present culture circulated within history departments. See, for example, Hayden White, *Metahistory: Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975). On the culture wars and

their effect on how history is understood and approached within academia, see Lukacs, "Popular and Professional History"; and David Bates, "Historians and the Public," *History Today* 56, no. 7 (July 2006). On the culture wars more broadly, see Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: Norton, 2000); and Alan Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000).

5. Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," Annual address of the president of the American Historical Association, delivered at Minneapolis, Minnesota, December 29, 1931. From the *American Historical Review* 37, no. 2 (January 1932): 229. Debates about whether history is a subjective or scientific enterprise have roots that long predate the twentieth century, and are connected to the formation of history as a formal academic discipline. For an example of these ideas from before the twentieth century, see Eugen Weber, "Review Article: From the Culture Wars Front (review of Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, eds., *Reconstructing History: The Emergence of a New Historical Society*)," *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 3 (July 2000): 477.

6. See, for example, Gary Kornblith and Carol Lasser, eds., "Teaching the American Survey at the Opening of the Twenty-First Century: A Round Table Discussion," *Journal of American History* 87, no. 4 (March 2001): 1412; Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke, "What Does it Mean to Think Historically?" *Perspectives on History* 45, no. 1 (January 2007); and also the forum chaired by Robert Blackey, ed., "Thinking Historically in the Classroom," *AHA Perspectives* 33, no. 7 (October 1995), in particular, the essay by David Trask.

7. This was particularly true during the National History Standards debates in the 1990s. However, more recently, talks of looming budget cuts have also been used as a tool to wedge standardized history courses. On the Bradley Commission of the 1990s, see Weber, 472-473. More recent committees on the standardization of history include the American Historical Association's Tuning Project, <http://www.historians.org/projects/tuning/>.

8. The most recent famous publications of this type were those that sparked the National History Standards debates. See in particular Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr., *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know? A Report on the First National Assessment of History and Literature* (New York: HarperCollins, 1987); and Lynne V. Cheney, *American Memory: A Report on the Humanities in the Nation's Public Schools* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1987). However, these kinds of jeremiads have been endemic to public history education since its inception in the early twentieth century. See the interview with Sam Wineburg in *Recent Themes in Historical Thinking: Historians in Conversation*, ed. Donald A. Yerxa (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2008), 38.

9. Douglas Sackman, "Teaching the American Survey," in Kornblith and Lasser, 1412.

10. For examples of how historians have treated these topics in the professional literature, see Jean O'Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians out of Existence in New England* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). Similar ideas can be found in Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Vintage, 1999); Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1660-1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Carroll Smith-Rosenburg, *This Violent Empire: The Birth of an American National Identity* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), ch. 4.

11. For these examples see Gerald M. Kelly, "Wheelwright, Esther, de l'Enfant-Jésus," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 4, University of Toronto/Université Laval, <http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/wheelwright_esther_4E.html>; Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Narrative History of Early America* (Cambridge, MA:

Harvard University Press, 2001); and Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia Press, 1996), ch. 4.

12. James H. Merrell, *The Lancaster Treaty of 1744: With Related Documents*, Bedford Series in History and Culture (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2008).

13. Becker, "Everyman."

14. See, for example, the host of (mostly reactive) academic criticism over the 2009 film *Anonymous*, which posited that Shakespeare's plays were not written by Shakespeare. See Jocelyn Noveck, "'Anonymous' Ruffles Academic Feathers," *Huffington Post*, 27 October 2011; or Alex von Tunzelmann, "Anonymous: Tragedy or Farce?" *The Guardian*, Film Blog, 3 November 2011.

15. See, for example, Jill Lepore, "Battleground America: One Nation, Under the Gun," *The New Yorker*, 23 April 2012; and Judge Andrew P. Napolitano, "Guns and Freedom," *Fox News*, Opinions, 10 January 2013.

16. On contextualizing Jefferson's initial expression, see Daniel Dreisbach, *Thomas Jefferson and the Wall of Separation Between Church and State* (New York: New York University Press, 2003). Class readings include excerpts from Richard Dawkins, "Secularism, The Founding Fathers, and the Religion of America," in *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 60-68; and Newt Gingrich, "Secularism: One Country without God," in *To Save America: Stopping Obama's Secular-Socialist Machine* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2011), 44-50. I am especially grateful to both Kirsten Fischer and Joe Haker for showing me the Gingrich and Dawkins articles and for helping me construct my lessons on religion and the Founding Fathers.

17. On the recent popularity of historical memory both inside and outside academia, see Kerwin Lee Klein, "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse," *Representations* 69 (Winter 2000): 127-150. For an excellent example of how history and historical memory work together, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1995). Much of my ideas here are also informed by Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001).

18. Of course, students from various backgrounds will often have differing opinions of these symbols. Having the class discuss these differences is often a useful way for pointing out the constructed nature of these symbols. To put the matter more directly, Sam Wineburg reminds us that no students lack historical narratives after having "lived through seventeen or eighteen Martin Luther King Days and Thanksgivings." See interview with Wineburg in *Recent Themes in Historical Thinking*, 43.

19. Note that within the last several years, the History Channel has largely abandoned its academic historical face, choosing instead to focus on shows about aliens and drug wars. To even casual American observers, these shows are understood to be more about entertainment than education. *The Irish in America* is an older piece, developed in a time when the History Channel was still attempting to present itself as a provider of serious documentaries. Even during this earlier time, however, their histories were often riddled with cultural assumptions and values which affected the presentation of the historical record.

20. Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). The Johnson work can be a bit dense for some undergraduates, so a full day is spent on simply discussing Johnson's work to make sure students are familiar with his argument.

21. See, for example, Matt Karp, "The Plantation as Crime Scene: Quentin Tarantino's 'Django Unchained'," *The Junto: A Group Blog on Early American History*, 9 January 2013; Remeike Forbes, "Why Django Can't Revolt," *Jacobin Magazine*, January 2013; and Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Towards a More Badass History," *The Atlantic*, 9 January 2013.

22. The recent release *12 Years a Slave* would also be a good production to show in class, as it also claims to show the more violent aspect of slavery and does so more successfully than *Django Unchained*. I plan on incorporating this movie over *Django* the next time I teach this course.

23. As a note of caution, one must be diligent in pressing students to make ever deeper and insightful connections, and to avoid superficial clichés when attempting to link past and present. See below in this essay.

24. This is especially good for students who are not history majors, as they can often bring in other perspectives into discussion. I've had students compare, for example, the early modern concept of the "Great Chain of Being" with contemporary biological taxonomies (which, of course, are joined via Carolus Linnaeus).

25. Evaluation comment, Gustavus Adolphus College, Fall 2007.

26. See, for example, Salman Kahn, "YouTube U beats YouSnooze U," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 57, no. 11 (November 2010): 36-38; Stephanie Cole with Gregory Kosc, "Quit Surfing and Start 'Clicking': One Professor's Effort to Combat the Problems of Teaching the U.S. Survey in a Large Lecture Hall," *The History Teacher* 43, no. 3 (May 2010): 397-410; David Dean, "The Clicker Challenge: Using a Reader Response System in the (British) History Classroom," *The History Teacher* 46, no. 3 (May 2013): 455-464. See also the work of Michael Wesch.

27. Becker, "Historical Facts," 338.

28. Becker, "Everyman," 235.