

## THROUGH BLACK AND BROWN EYES, AS WELL AS BLUE: AMERICAN HISTORY FROM STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

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*There is a scene at the beginning of the movie "Old Gringo" that shows several men on horseback looking down the side of a barren hilltop toward a train that has momentarily stopped to pick up passengers. These passengers are mostly families with little baggage. They wear heavy clothing even though the temperature is very hot. Their heads are dripping wet from having dunked them into the nearby water hole. They are tired, hungry, and sad to leave their homes but nonetheless they are hopeful and determined that what lies ahead for them will be better.*

*As I watched this scene, I thought to myself, 'This is what my aunt was describing! Tia Lupe's story is exactly this scene!'*

Maria's opening paragraphs in her second paper were validation to me of the worth of my family history assignments, for she had found a connection between events in her own family's background and those in a larger view of U.S. history.

Southern California community college students are not necessarily typical of freshmen college students at other colleges and universities. My classes generally include students of all ages, and most, like Maria, are first-generation college students. A majority are "minority" students: more than half are Hispanic; perhaps a third are Asian; and approximately one-third are recent immigrants to this country. There is a sea of black and brown eyes in front of me, with only a scattering of blue.

Our texts, however, emphasize the economic, political, social, and military events of the United States as seen from the perspective of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants—including those texts that have purported to include minority and women's viewpoints. We study "The West" in some detail, but nearly always from the perspective of the people moving west from the Atlantic seaboard. We seldom view it from the vantage of those already living in the West: those Native Americans who often felt justified in trying to charge a toll for travelers who crossed their hunting grounds, or the Hispanic population of New Mexico whose roots were deep in a land whose capital was established earlier than the Pilgrim landing. We seldom consider the problems encountered by Chinese coolies after their work on the transcontinental railroad was finished and they had to find employment and security on their own. We do not consider the plight of Japanese immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century who were dependent upon picture brides for establishing a family in the new land they had chosen. Yet these are the players on the stage of U.S. history to whom my students would relate.

On the other hand, many of my students' families have made the decision to live in the United States in fairly recent times. With the exception of Native Americans and most



African-Americans, nearly all of us descend from people who *chose* to live here. Because of this, it is easy to understand that our study of U.S. history concentrates on those factors that have made America attractive: freedom of religion, of thought, of speech, and of assembly; the development of free enterprise and industrialization; and democratic principles of government.

Still, I wanted to find some way to incorporate the cultural backgrounds of each of my students into their study of U.S. history. I wanted them to understand that part of the myth of America is the universality of the "American dream." Even the most recent of immigrants should feel there is a place for them, and that their heritage is important. I wanted to capitalize on my students' prior knowledge and experience and to relate these to events we were studying in order to facilitate their learning. To achieve these goals, I developed two strategies I believe contribute both to greater multicultural understanding and to a better grasp of U.S. history.

My early American history survey course, which studies American institutions and events from 1492 to the Civil War, covers a period of time that is far earlier than many of my students' association with this country. Hoping to incorporate some of their backgrounds, I assign my classes the task of writing historical fiction—a two to three-page biography of an individual who *could* have lived during the period studied. Students are given an opportunity to choose one from the following:

- a white female living in New York in the 1800s (feminist issues)
- a white slaveowner living in South Carolina in the 1800s
- a white living in Massachusetts in the 1600s
- a white living in Pennsylvania between the 1750s and early 1800s
- a black slave living in Georgia in the 1800s
- a free black living in Pennsylvania in the 1800s
- an Hispanic living in Texas after 1790
- an Hispanic living in New Mexico after 1790
- a Native American living in Alabama in the 1800s

No Asian Americans are included due to a scarcity of material for the period covered in this class. Once they select a category, students gather in groups determined by all who pick the same category, to identify the sex of their subject, to give their subject a name, date of birth and death, a level of education, a choice of religion, and family details of childhood, marriage, and children. This information is transcribed on a sheet of paper to be handed in to me, together with the names of each person in the group. Here I can review what they hope to do, pointing them to possible sources of information, perhaps suggesting an alternative if I think they are unlikely to find much material.

If one group has more than six members, I split it into two groups, each of which may use the same general category but must develop different characters. As students need not cover their character's entire life, even a group of two or three can be successful.



At this point, the group work ends. All students are individually responsible for writing a paper covering a decade in the life of their subject. Groups are encouraged to develop their ideas by working together so there is continuity, but since each is individually responsible for a different decade, continuity is not one of the grading criteria. The assignment indicates that I am looking for relationships to the various events we have already studied or will be studying in the remainder of the course, and for the effect these events might have had on the lives of their fictional characters.

I announce the grading criteria: content is worth thirty points, based on specific historical events and the likelihood of their effect on the character; creativity is worth ten; grammar is ten; and the bibliography ten. The bibliography must include at least three sources, excluding encyclopedias and texts, in the form prescribed by Turabian. I encourage the students to consider that even in those earlier days, some people moved from one location to another fairly often and that perhaps their character had done so as well. This provides the individual within the group a bit more leeway in creating the character.

In preparing for this assignment, I select a variety of background materials to be available for students on reserve in our library. Most of the books relate to a particular assignment, including such works as Paul Hogan's *The Centuries of Santa Fe*, W. Eugene Hollon's *The Southwest: Old and New*, Carey McWilliams's *North from Mexico*, and Bobette Gugliotta's *Women of Mexico: The Consecrated and the Commoners*. I shall be adding Ronald Takaki's excellent book, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, this year.

Students are enthused about the assignment, perhaps because of their control over the choices. It actually entails more research than a standard short research topic because they need to apply specific facts they have discovered to the life of their subject. For example, students who discuss the childhood years of their subject must learn about typical education and children's responsibilities of the era and place, as well as about events that could affect the character's family. Relating events on the national stage to an individual helps students to understand more of their impact by adjusting and relating theories and facts from their sources into personal characteristics of someone they "know."

Assessing these papers is rewarding for me because each one is different. An additional benefit is that there is little danger of plagiarism as students must apply specific facts to their created character. In spite of the leeway given each individual, most of the papers from the original groups usually have relatively good continuity over the lifetime of the character. In establishing this continuity within their groups, personal relationships within my large classes have an opportunity to grow as well. When the papers are returned, the groups often want to gather once again and see what happened to their character in each other's papers. It is an opportunity to look at U.S. history through a personal and often minority viewpoint. I believe it makes the events more relevant to my students today. My students have commented about the assignment by wondering why more of this history is not included in their text book. My open-end questions on the evaluation at the end of the semester have elicited responses ranging from "I never knew about the Indians' removal although I knew there weren't many Indians back east. I'm glad I did this paper" to "Even



my parents did not know about how nice it could be in Santa Fe before the United States took over!" Student enthusiasm for sharing the various episodes their character lives through by reviewing each other's papers in a group setting is another means of providing positive feedback to me regarding this assignment.

In the second half of the two-semester survey course, covering American institutions and events from the Civil War to the present, the assignment for my sections involves writing a total of four papers. Each is short (one to three pages), however, and can depend entirely upon oral research, though students are encouraged to include library research on events that might be found in more formal sources. These students are assigned to do family research by oral interview and write about events in their family that occurred in the 1880s, 1910s, 1940s, and 1970s. They are not to rely on their memories for any papers, but instead are assigned to interview someone else about each of the designated periods in history. The focus of these papers is to be on how lives were lived during these decades; what was important to their subjects and why; how they reacted to national or international events. The decades were chosen in hopes that they would be approximately one generation apart. However, many of my Hispanic students had much shorter generations; some could go back to their great-grandparents and still not reach the 1890s. Since so many of my students are fairly recent immigrants, their papers could be set in any location, not necessarily in the United States. This is an immediate concern for many students who think they cannot do the assignments if their family had lived in China or Bangladesh or Mexico during the assigned decades. They react with relief that they can do the paper after all and often with pleasure that their family story is valuable to me.

The value of the assignment has been expressed at various times by my students. One Vietnamese student stopped me after class one day saying that, although his grandmother did not speak English, she would like to meet me because of my interest in her stories. He asked if he could bring her in to see me. Another student stopped me in the hallway a semester or so after having taken my class: "If you hadn't made that assignment I would never have known my grandmother had such an interesting life! She died last week, and I just wanted you to know how much I appreciate your making me talk to her." Yet another brought in a picture of her aunt, taken in the 1940s when she was a vocalist on the East Coast: "She had such fun remembering things to tell me for my paper that she went through her cedar chest and found things to send to me. It was fun for me too, to get the photographs, the record, and the news clippings!"

Of course, some of my students have no families to ask. One girl, an Armenian, told me about her grandmother who was five when the great massacre occurred in Turkey in 1915. Her grandmother's parents had given her to neighbors to take away from their city; her parents were planning to leave the following day and join them. Unfortunately, the parents did not escape, so my student's family memories could go no further back than 1915. Other students are estranged from their families and would prefer to fail a course, or drop it, than to get involved with family members again. While some were willing, for the sake of their grade, to do the assignment and even found themselves back in their families as a result of it, some alternatives needed to be provided.



most valuable, what they liked least, and ask for suggestions for future semesters. For four semesters, at least forty percent of my students have voluntarily identified these papers as being most interesting and having most value to them. Since I do not give them a list of items to choose for answers, I believe that this is indeed a solid endorsement.

As my students come in to take their final exam, I offer them our semester's publication. During the semester I choose papers from students of various backgrounds and get permission from their authors to "publish" them in a paperback booklet. These are then made available for those who would like to take them with them to read at their leisure later on. Since they include papers from all of my classes, it is unlikely that students have heard many of the stories in our classroom discussions. Of course, the booklets are very popular with the authors who are included, but the real delight for me is watching the student who initially was not "into" history taking one out the door and into summer vacation.

While these assignments are used in my classes to incorporate my students' varied backgrounds, I believe they could be equally successful in a more homogenous setting. Their success in personalizing a history text is valuable for all students. These assignments have enriched my students in the sense of who they are and what their heritage is. Their heritage is recognized as important to the development of the United States. Underlying goals of further developing students' analytical skills, their research and writing skills, their critical thinking in making connections between local and national events in our country's history have also been met. They have applied their knowledge of family events to an understanding of U.S. history. Black eyes and brown eyes have seen much and contributed to the development of this land, just as blue eyes have. These assignments demonstrate the unity of our many, varied backgrounds and individual contributions within the overall kaleidoscope of U.S. history.



Alternative assignments involve regular research on an event that occurred during the assigned decade using a minimum of three library sources, excluding encyclopedias. An amazing number of papers on the building of the Brooklyn Bridge have helped me decide to go back to family events, so new alternatives include developing a genealogical chart showing at least four generations and/or a paper detailing events related to the arrival of a student's family in the United States or in California. Since so many of my students are comparatively recent immigrants, I announce that these alternatives can be substituted for any of their assigned decades. The "immigrant" assignment is a good opening for discussion of immigration in general as many of the problems encountered today are similar to the ones of the nineteenth century.

I keep genealogical charts in my classroom for students to use, together with several books on family history. Students with questions about how to get started can review *Your Family History: A Handbook for Research and Writing* by David E. Kyvig and Myron A. Marty. *Generations: Your Family in Modern American History* by J. F. Watts and Allen F. Davis is another excellent source. My assignment sheet also includes some sample questions to help students begin their work.

As with the first assignment I have described, here again with this activity, assessing the students' products is a very rewarding experience. No two are alike, and none can be plagiarized. I've learned incredibly much from my students' experiences and those of their families. The prejudice and harassment by Japanese soldiers of Chinese immigrants living in Vietnam during World War II was something I had not encountered before these papers. The violence enveloping workers in the tin "panglons" of Kuala Lumpur in the 1880s was easily relatable to the labor strife occurring in the United States during the same decade. The picture brides of Japanese immigrants around the turn of the century was fascinating to learn about and could be related to the general scarcity of women on the frontier.

Group discussions of returned papers were sources of wonder for my students, most of whom enjoyed hearing of others' cultural experiences. One student was excused from this when I returned papers assigned for the 1940s. He had written an eyewitness account of a well publicized unsolved murder. His uncle wanted anonymity, although he was willing to tell his nephew the story for the assignment. The student ended up telling the story to his group, but omitted many of the details. This peer involvement helps students to see history as something personal and interesting since family members were involved. I believe the assignments make it easier for them to relate to facts we discuss in class as well.

By sharing their work in class, students gain multicultural understanding and acceptance through these assignments. Students gain a better perspective of who they are and how their family's history actually relates to the things we are studying. They have an opportunity to see other students as individuals and to note that although our histories are different, reflecting a wide variety of cultural backgrounds, our fears and dreams and goals are very similar.

At the end of each semester, I give my students an anonymous, open-ended set of three questions for a class assessment. I ask them to identify what they enjoyed or found