7. ‘Wrestling the World from Fools’

Teaching Historical Empathy and Critical Engagement in Traditional and Online Classrooms

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Abstract
This chapter focuses on the pedagogical implications of examining action and agency. It poses some vital questions for those engaged at any level with the work of the humanities, but particularly for educators who face the daunting but urgent task of connecting our students to a meaningful past, even as we recognize the need to help that past speak to their contemporary realities. Building on my own experiences as an educator, as well as the scholarship and pedagogical strategies of others, I ask how we can engage our students in meaningful critical inquiry, encourage their cultivation of historical empathy, and draw vivid connections between the past and the worlds that we currently inhabit, particularly in addressing such themes as identity and lived experience.

Keywords: historical empathy; presentism; student engagement; pedagogical strategies

The current climate of pandemic, economic crisis, and political incompetence at the highest levels provides daily opportunities to look closely at our presuppositions about teaching history, and other humanities fields, as well as offering many challenges in a period in which historical memory is intensively contested: it inspired the title of this paper, based on a song lyric by the inimitable punk rock legend and poet, Patti Smith. Every day, it seems, we see assaults on the historical narratives that we have taken for granted, and attacks on the very notion of evidence-based reality. We historians might say that empiricism itself is under assault, even though we may have some doubts about empiricism ourselves. This moment, I would
argue, provides a greater sense of urgency than many of us can remember for engaging our students in meaningful, critical inquiry, encouraging historical empathy, and drawing vivid connections between the past and the worlds that we currently inhabit. In this context, the call for ‘wrestling the world from fools’ from Smith’s anthemic ‘People Have the Power’ (1988) resonates ever more powerfully.

In this essay, I would like to pose some questions for those engaged at any level with the work of history and the humanities, but particularly to educators, who face the task of connecting our students to a meaningful past even as we recognize more than ever the need to help that past speak to their contemporary realities. In the process, I will also offer a few reflections from my own teaching experiences and suggest some innovative teaching strategies from other scholars and educators that offer to deepen student engagement.

I teach a range of upper division European and world history courses—including several courses that focus on women/gender/sexuality—at two good-sized state universities that attract primarily commuter students, many of them working class, first generation, and often from immigrant families, in Sacramento, California, and Portland, Oregon. At the latter, I teach exclusively online courses. While some of my students are demonstrably aware of contemporary politics and global affairs, and engaged with student activism, most are not. I find that they are sometimes reticent to express opinions about which they worry that classmates may take offense, or that might breed controversy. Students who are not history majors tend to come to my courses with the usual misconceptions about history as a discipline, based upon what are often negative or uninspired experiences in secondary school. While the history majors are obviously better disposed toward the discipline, they do not necessarily come with a very deep understanding of historical method or refined skills of interpretation. Interestingly, students in the online environment often seem much more willing to connect the historical material that we are studying with our contemporary situation, but whether that speaks more to the older demographic of many online students in general, or to the format of those courses which provides greater sense of privacy, I cannot say with any confidence.

Recent teaching experiences had inspired a series of questions that have been vexing me, as I reflect on what has worked well in my teaching over the years and how I would like to stretch myself to be more effective in this current climate, whose contours I sought to sketch above: First, how do we as humanities educators fight against the attacks on evidence-based scholarship that our students are imbibing in the wider culture, while also
helping them to cultivate an empathetic disposition in their study of the past (toward those relatively few individuals to whose words and thoughts we have at least some access, but even more so toward the majority of individuals in the past, to whom we do not)? In other words, how do we both advocate for the value of the historical method,\(^1\) something about whose specific features reasonable historians can disagree, and attend to what one historian has referred to as familiarizing our students with lower case ‘h’ history—reminding students that their forebears were living, breathing individuals, reminding them that, as one educator eloquently put it, ‘when you pricked these people of the past, they bled; their lives were not textual even though we receive them in that fashion’.\(^2\) Historical individuals, we want to impress upon them, are not just characters in some ‘novel’—our students’ all-purpose term for any single monograph, fictional or not—or actors in a Hollywood movie.\(^3\) We understandably ask ourselves how we might accomplish these ambitious pedagogical goals, given the limited time that we have with our students. We are also mindful of meeting other objectives that we must fulfill, like the demands of comprehensive coverage of course material, and/or meeting learning goals that may be set by departments and colleges.

Second, within this larger challenge of defending the virtues of inquiry and justifying the marshaling of evidence comes yet another challenging question: how might we negotiate the delicate balancing act of, on the one hand, explaining to students how evidence in primary and secondary sources is contested, partial, and biased, and, on the other hand, still defending the idea of a certain kind of empiricism? The irony of this moment is that while we have spent years trying to problematize a simplistic notion that we can use source evidence unproblematically and whole cloth to arrive at truth about the past—an idea about which many of our students come to us convinced—we are now faced with a new cohort of students for whom the ‘fake news’ mantra may lead them to be highly skeptical of any and all truth claims.

In what follows, and with a renewed awareness of the balancing act in which we are engaged in asserting the value of empiricism without fetishizing it, I first want to return to the theme of historical empathy and ask what exactly we mean by this contested term. How best can we teach our

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\(^1\) I would define historical method simply as building our analyses of the past out of available evidence, while remaining careful to pay attention to context in the fullest sense of the term and remaining self-reflective about what informs the perspectives that we bring to our study of the past.

\(^2\) Volk, ‘How the Air Felt on my Cheeks’, p. 194.

\(^3\) Volk, ‘Empathy and Engagement’, p. 6.
students to engage with the past and its inhabitants in the most engaging and fruitful ways? How expansively should we define historical empathy? Should educators teach students to engage with the past on its own terms, according to a conventional definition of historical empathy that stresses its critical and analytical virtues, while cautioning us about the dangers of abandoning the supposedly objective ground on which historians should ideally stand? Or should we also seek to give students a more intimate connection to the past by finding opportunities for them to inhabit that space and understand it at a deeper, perhaps more personal level?

Then I would like to explore briefly some of the teaching strategies that I have found helpful in engaging students actively and cultivating historical empathy as I understand it: as some combination of the capital ‘H’ history that trains students in critical inquiry into the past, and the skills that this requires, and the more flesh and blood empathy that helps students to understand how contemporaries may have experienced those lived pasts. I will examine teaching strategies such as creating non-traditional writing assignments that build in historical empathy as a tool for understanding the past, using historical simulations, and analyzing the use of historical avatars/fictional personae, and assess whether these might be helpful in engendering empathy in our students.

**Historical empathy**

Before we can cultivate historical empathy, we need to decide what this concept means. There appears to be no singular definition, though I have sketched out one of my own. In all of my course syllabi and many class assignments, I integrate the worthy learning goal of cultivating historical empathy and I do so for very deeply held reasons, but I also realize that even the idea of encouraging students to respond empathetically to history has been controversial in the secondary and college classrooms, whether in the United States or abroad. This has particularly been the case since the 1960s and 1970s, when such approaches gained greater visibility. Since that time of experimentation in education and the rise of a variety of new, critical approaches to studying and teaching history, critics of the empathetic approach to teaching history opposed what they saw as its purely ‘affective’ quality; that is, they cautioned against its apparent tendency to elicit emotional responses in students.4 We are all too familiar with the pejorative (and,

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I would argue, all too frequently misused term *politically correct*, which seems to be the proverbial elephant in the room when such critics consider an empathetic approach to studying history. Critics contend that cultivating historical empathy is antithetical to encouraging rigorous inquiry into the past, although that false dichotomy seems artificial in practice.

According to this skeptical approach, teaching students historical empathy has been viewed as an academically ‘soft’ approach that has led more to the cultivation of ‘historical imagination’, which could slip too easily into—god forbid—‘literary invention’.5 While critics have acknowledged the necessity of engaging students in active learning, they have worried that ‘enthusiasm for a “process”—and sometimes for a certain sort of “product”’ of learning has tainted the idea of historical empathy.6 According to this view, historical empathy should not constitute anything as warm and fuzzy as ‘affective engagement with predecessors’, if it sacrifices teaching the nuts and bolts of historical method.7 The crux of the matter is the fear that history educators might actually choose to encourage students to empathize with certain historical actors over others, a familiar argument that we hear today—involving yet again the grossly overused and nebulous charge of ‘political correctness’. Certainly, we can see the risks of engaging students intimately with historical actors, given the tendency of some students to ‘slide into “us and them” conceptions of the past’.8 But I would argue that there is not any inherent contradiction between learning to empathize with figures in the past, including those from whom we have little direct testimony of their lived experiences, and teaching rigorous skills of critical inquiry. In this I agree with Lee and Shemilt, who provide a way out of the conundrum between fostering empathy and critical thinking skills by defining *historical empathy* as incorporating an understanding of what motivates historical actors (whether as individuals or collectivities), as well as reconstructing historical mentalities, including appreciating, if not agreeing with, the reasons why people did what they did, or felt as they did.9

As we have seen, some critics have cautioned against crude approaches to cultivating historical empathy in the classroom, but I believe that we can do this effectively without sacrificing the critical tools of analysis that students so desperately need in order to navigate a particularly fraught historical

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5 Ibid., p. 39.
6 Ibid., p. 40.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
moment. One of the most fascinating scholarly exchanges that gets at the heart of the controversy surrounding the project of cultivating historical empathy can be found in the 1988 debate between Natalie Zemon Davis and Robert Finlay over Davis’s retelling of the story of Martin Guerre, Bertrande de Rols, and Arnauld du Tilh in *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983). This debate, brought forth in an *American Historical Review* Forum, but also referenced in an excellent chapter on teaching historical empathy by Merry Wiesner-Hanks and Urmi Engineer Willoughby in their volume *A Primer for Teaching Women, Gender, and Sexuality in World History. Ten Design Principles* (2018), posed a number of questions about Davis’s methodologies in reconstructing this famous story of mistaken identity in sixteenth-century rural France. At its heart, however, the exchange between Finlay and Davis became an argument over the ideal nature of the historian’s craft and the place of historical empathy within it. So where did each scholar come down on these pertinent questions?

Finlay critiques many aspects of Davis’s historical reconstruction, though he credits her creative reconstruction of the context of sixteenth-century French peasant life in its complexities and her efforts to bring to a wider audience the fascinating story of the impostor, Arnaud du Tilh, Bertrande de Rols, the woman to whom he posed as husband, the real Martin Guerre, and the trial that exposed Arnaud du Tilh’s imposture. In particular, he challenges Davis’s claim for Bertrande de Rols’ apparent complicity in the crime and the author’s efforts to fill in the gaps in our knowledge of Bertrande’s possible motivations and mindset. Finlay takes issue with Davis’s interpretations that presumably contradict the primary account of the trial of Arnaud du Tilh by the jurist, Jean do Coras, as well as critiquing what he characterizes as Davis’ illegitimate, twentieth-century perspective on the key characters in the saga, especially Bertrande. Toward the end of his essay, Finlay argues against Davis’s apparent focus on ‘self-fashioning rustics’, again suggesting that her historical ‘invention’ directly contradicts the evidence in the primary source upon which she bases her book: ‘What Davis terms “invention”, the employment of “perhapses” and “may have beens,” is of course, the stock-in-trade of historians, who are often driven to speculation by inadequate and perplexing evidence’.

What troubles Finlay is not so much the idea of speculation where no clear evidence exists in the record, but what he perceives to be Davis’s knowing refusal of the

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10 Davis, ‘On the Lame’; Finlay, ‘Refashioning of Martin Guerre’.
12 Finlay, ‘Refashioning of Martin Guerre’, p. 571.
conclusions drawn by Jean de Coras, the key contemporary chronicler. He laments that Davis has gone too far in her empathetic treatment of the key characters in the saga (or is it, perhaps, empathizing in a manner not true to the integrity of the historical record, as he sees it?), adding:

Regrettably, in The Return of Martin Guerre, Davis has permitted an excess of invention to obscure the lives of the people who engaged her sympathy and imagination. If readers feel a kinship with Bertrande and lament the return of the man with the wooden leg, if they feel that they truly understand the lives of those long-dead peasants, it is all, unbeknownst, at the expense of respecting their historical integrity, their very different motivations and values.13

Responding to Finlay’s critiques in her essay, ‘On the Lame’, Natalie Zemon Davis asserts that she intentionally played with questions of how we ascertain historical truth and foregrounded the uncertainties raised within the story of the Return of Martin Guerre, asserting that her book ‘is an exploration of the truth and doubt: of the difficulty in determining true identity in the sixteenth century and of the difficulty in the historian’s quest’.14 Invoking Finlay’s own question to highlight her methodology, Davis remarks: “In reconstructing historical writing where does reconstruction stop and invention begin?” is precisely the question I hoped readers would ask and reflect on, the analogy with the uncertain boundary between self-fashioning and lying built into my narrative’.15

Meticulously taking on each of Finlay’s critiques with a reasoned defense of her methodological choices, Davis provides a particularly robust defense of deploying historical empathy rooted in careful reading of relevant primary sources, as well as displaying an in-depth command of the deeper and broader context of sixteenth-century French peasant life and structures when she considers what drove Bertrande de Rols’ actions and decisions.16 Highlighting how Bertrande displayed a pragmatic view of matters that was consistent with her gender and social status within the confines of a patriarchal, pre-modern society, Davis notes that Bertrande’s actions are clearly motivated to a large degree by the imperative of maintaining and defending her honor at all costs. In this case, then, readers are led

13 Ibid., p. 571.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., pp. 576–587.
into a thoughtful illustration of the historian’s craft in all of its complexities, including the challenges and virtues of striving to really understand contemporaries on their own terms (as much as possible for a modern scholar, that is). Sometimes, cultivating historical empathy may mean taking methodological risks, as Davis has so famously done throughout her career as one of the greatest historians of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but if it is done transparently and skillfully, it bears tremendous fruit.

Engaging students and cultivating empathy

At this point, and drawing upon the lessons that I have highlighted from the Finlay–Davis exchange of 30 years ago, I want to propose a few strategies to engage students and cultivate historical empathy that we can do with just a bit of tweaking of our course designs and syllabi, as well as consider some more radical restructuring ideas from other history educators. By describing some of the values and also potential drawbacks of these approaches, I am hoping to motivate myself to take the plunge and integrate these innovations into my course design. Perhaps you, the reader, will be inspired to do so as well, or see your own experiences reflected here.

For the short term, I have found that adapting course materials, activities, and formal assignments can provide a useful method for engaging historical empathy and asking students profound questions about how historians know what we know, how much speculation is legitimate, and to what degree our own contemporary worldviews can and should intrude upon our investigation of the past. Teaching The Return of Martin Guerre in both early modern European history courses as well as courses on gender in pre-modern Europe, in conjunction with the Finlay–Davis exchange, offers an excellent opportunity to consider just these kinds of questions. I had long asked students to think about what Davis’s monograph can teach us about changing constructions of identity over time (and with the arrival of modern forms of technology that make authentication of the individual seemingly much more certain), but including the detailed and lively debate about methodology and historical empathy, and asking students to consider who makes the most compelling case and why, offers students a more in-depth opportunity to practice historical thinking and practice. One of the virtues of Davis’s essay is that she lays bare the motivations and strategies of one very prominent, highly talented (but also self-aware) scholar’s approach to sticky historical material, providing a rich vein for students to draw from in considering the historian’s craft at an intimate level.
One very simple and perhaps obvious strategy, but which can still be surprisingly controversial among some history colleagues, is using novels as windows into the time periods under study. While using fictional works in history courses without providing sufficient context risks students’ generalizing from one seemingly unreliable source or viewing the novel as a direct representation of the reality of the age, if we are honest with ourselves, we find that this is true with any kind of historical source. But fiction can also inspire a deep and meaningful engagement with the past for many students, leading them to develop some excellent written work.

In a recent semester, I had great success in teaching and assigning written work related to Sibilla Aleramo’s pathbreaking early twentieth-century autobiographical novel, *Una Donna/A Woman* (1906), in my upper-division ‘Women in Western Civilization—Renaissance to the Present’ course at CSU–Sacramento. This assignment allowed for valuable exercises in comparative analysis, which could be adapted when teaching about early modern women. For one of their essays, students were invited to write either a conventional essay on the book or an alternate writing assignment on how Aleramo’s novel reflected the complexities and challenges in the life of an educated, middle-class woman in Italy at the turn of the twentieth century. I invited them to discuss the novel in light of some of the key themes that we had discussed in class, including the political and cultural climate in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italy, the rise of the New Woman, and the legacy of earlier generations of Italian feminists, beginning with fifteenth-century humanists like Laura Cereta and moving all the way to the nineteenth-century feminist Anna Maria Mozzoni. Students were also encouraged to incorporate other common course materials, such as the main text and/or optional journal articles.

Students could write an analytical essay, a newspaper article from the time period, or a letter from a contemporary to the author, in response to the prompt question on how Aleramo’s novel reflected the complexities and challenges of the era. Almost without exception, those who chose the alternate writing formats wrote their best papers of the term in terms of the quality of the writing itself, but more so in terms of their level of engagement with the material and effort to dig deeper into the time period and the ideas with which at least some contemporaries would have been concerned.

For the last few years, I have been broadening the range of formats for written work in my courses in order to promote deeper historical engagement and empathy. As we know from research on learning and our own experience, many students work best when provided with a variety of formats in which to work, and the point is to help them produce their best, most meaningful
work. I have had mixed success with journal writing, based largely upon how much time I have carved out for it during class sessions, as students are loath to do much spontaneous writing outside of class, unless I clearly create those expectations. Many students enjoy the option of producing PowerPoint lectures as an alternative to writing longer essays, whether because their formal writing skills are somewhat iffy, or because they tend to prefer working with visual images. I have not found a good formula to convince them that a strong presentation, like an excellent paper, needs to have a clear analytical focus, however, so I tend to get information overload and very little historical analysis; perhaps you can relate.

Finally, historical simulations have offered an excellent, though all too rare opportunity to bring students closer to the possible, lived reality of their forebears. In my online upper-division class at Portland State University, ‘Witches and Witch-hunting in Early Modern Europe’, I have students complete a witch hunt simulation designed by Brian Pavlac at the beginning of each term. I teach this popular upper-division class each spring, and students almost universally find it a very useful exercise, often returning to reflect upon its impact throughout the remainder of the term. Many students enter the class with, at best, a distorted sense of the historical realities of the early modern European witch hunts gleaned from popular culture, and from some familiarity with the rather unusual example of the Salem witch trials.

The simulation serves as an excellent corrective at the outset of the class, providing students with a clearer sense of contemporary, inquisitorial legal procedures from seventeenth-century Germany, the widespread use of torture to extract confessions from the accused, and the variability of outcomes that suspects faced. This last feature creates a visceral sense of the randomness and contingency of witch trials in students who play the simulation (and some do so repeatedly), and builds in a depth of empathy for many students that written texts rarely achieve with the same degree of immediacy. Although different outcomes are baked into the simulation through logarithms, and students know this, they still compare notes and wonder how they could have done everything ‘right’ and still find themselves on the losing end as accused witches. I am particularly gratified when students make connections with more recent historical examples of the use of torture (such as in the case of Abu Ghraib, or in the so-called War on Terror) and their equally dubious efficacy in protecting contemporaries from ‘evil’.

17 Pavlac, ‘Witch Hunt’.
One of the most exciting approaches to cultivating an empathetic response in students that I have learned about in recent years involves integrating the use of historical avatars centrally into course design. These ‘avatars’, or fictional individuals, serve as witnesses and participants in a given history. History educators have radically re-envisioned their courses in order to let students anonymously inhabit these fictional personae/avatars and produce extensive written accounts of their life experiences that respond to instructor-driven questions and interventions tied to key moments in the course curriculum. This allows the instructor to move past the seeming contradiction between teaching the skills of historical inquiry and bringing forth an empathetic response to the ‘hidden histories’ of those who may not have left extensive, or any, records of their lived experiences. It also gives students considerable agency, and allows them the opportunity to develop historical imagination. A restricted course website, or publicly accessible WordPress site, allow class participants and sometimes others to review these personal accounts, while maintaining students’ confidentiality in the interest of producing the most honest and unconstrained reflections.

In her 2009 article ‘Creating Lives in the Classroom’, Stanford historian Edith Sheffer first publicized this approach to building historical empathy. Sheffer discusses using avatars in a course on modern Germany history, in which students were provided with just the barest of information about their avatar’s gender, place of birth, religious affiliation, and parents’ occupation. All assigned avatars were born in 1900 and lived through to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. They were not allowed to take actions that would change the course of the known history of twentieth-century Germany, and had to live in the country, or at least not permanently relocate. They were asked to respond to key events in the history of Germany in the twentieth century, and also to prompt questions that offered some minimal guidance and structure to their personal accounts.

Among Sheffer’s main takeaways from teaching the class and having students post their avatars’ journal entries on a class website were the following: students demonstrated a high level of ownership in the course and their contributions to the website; they chose to engage in a variety of ways with ‘real’ history through the eyes of their avatars—some actively, and some in a more passive manner; students cultivated highly detailed personae over the course of the term, moving well beyond the minimum expectations for their ‘characters’. As Sheffer reflects upon the virtues of the use of historical avatars in her course: ‘The project inspired an unusual

Sheffer, ‘Creating Lives in the Classroom’.
level of commitment. Students often went well beyond the required material in developing their avatars. Their research included Internet searches for images, period-appropriate children’s names, and food specialties, as well as reading scholarly works on particular topics of interest.  

In sum, Sheffer felt that the shift of the course focus to students’ development of their avatars led them to a much richer, more nuanced engagement with German history than they would have had with a more straightforward course design, and complemented the ‘traditional’ work of the class, including lectures and exams. Sheffer further reflected upon the strengths and challenges of this kind of assignment in a subsequent piece, based upon the adaptation of the avatar-focused course design for a modern European history class at Stanford. She and her co-author Kathryn Cianca observed that some students seemed to have a much harder time transcending their decidedly US-centric, twenty-first-century worldviews in their avatar entries, but judged the educational experience a worthy one.  

Having read about Sheffer’s experiment, Stephen Volk adapted this method for an upper-division course at Oberlin College on four Latin American countries from the 1960s to the present, entitled ‘Dirty Wars and Democracy’. For this course, he posed several provocative questions at the outset about the nature of political regimes and how they change, mass violence, concepts of justice, and the dynamic ways in which family life is affected by social unrest and trauma. I could easily imagine adapting these questions to any number of pre-modern historical courses focused on Europe, or elsewhere, although there are discrete challenges to utilizing the avatar project in classes without a relatively condensed periodization. Volk insists that though his use of avatars, students in his course more strongly appreciated the importance of history, not only as a methodology through which they could approach an understanding of the past, but as a way of seeing themselves within history, as the product of multiple (often conflicted and conflicting) pasts. Given the depth and quality of the work that students produced and their own reflections on the significance of the experience, he felt that it was one of most gratifying teaching experiences in his long professional life.  

While I am very drawn to experimenting with the use of avatars in both online and face-to-face classes, I am challenged by the fact that, in contrast to

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19 Sheffer, ‘Creating Lives in the Classroom’.  
20 Ibid.  
21 Ciancia and Sheffer, ‘Creating Lives’.  
23 Volk, ‘How the Air Felt on My Cheeks’, p. 207.
Sheffer and Volk, my classes almost universally range over several centuries, much longer than the lifespan of any individual, historical avatar. One idea for courses with longer chronological spans would be to scale down the avatar project assignment to that of the natural lifetime of an individual (which in the pre-modern period might be only 40 or 50 years), but still give it a place of prominence in a section of the course. For example, in a Renaissance and Reformation class, or a course on women in Medieval/Renaissance Europe, I could imagine using the avatar assignment in a staggered fashion, so that all students would have an opportunity to follow their historical avatar’s progress through key historical moments and trace their engagement with the wider history of their age, but perhaps not all do so at the same time in the course. Using the online Learning Management System to this purpose would also offer students more innovative ways to interact than the standard discussion boards on which I have tended to rely for student discussions. At this stage, there are logistical challenges that are part and parcel of course design and organization to overcome, but these are not impossible. I am currently in the process of launching a new class on the history of sexuality in comparative perspective that is both global and spans the pre-modern to contemporary period, and I look forward to seeing how well I can integrate this kind of activity in the classroom setting. I am planning to include a modest version of the avatar assignment in the students’ class journal requirement.

### Presentism

Alongside asking students to embody and reflect upon historical avatars, another valuable approach to cultivating historical empathy involves designing classes that explicitly draw comparisons between past and present societies by highlighting key themes that animated both. Carla Cevasco, an early Americanist, recently adopted this approach when she was tasked with creating a new class that would draw healthy student enrollments. This conventional enrollment imperative was made all the more pressing by the challenge of engaging students in the immediate aftermath of the violent, white supremacist activity in Charlottesville, Virginia during the summer of 2017, just before her class was to debut. In a blog post that describes the course she created and why it took the shape that it did, Carla Cevasco includes a provocative title, ‘How I learned to stop worrying and embraced presentism’.24

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24 Cevasco, ‘How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Embrace Presentism’. 
As her title suggests, presentism has been a concept and approach with which historians have been rightly concerned, but it is also a term that may too often be used imprecisely, leaving us overly fearful of acknowledging that history is always taught (and written) from the perspective of the present moment and fueled by the questions and concerns that we bring to it. Several years ago, Lynn Hunt expressed her concern over the rise of presentism in history, particularly in teaching. She argued that presentism tended to distort the past in the light of present concerns, and she bemoaned the continual focus on recent history instead of a longer historical perspective. She saw this approach as giving in to the wider culture's interests in the present day, tendency toward historical myopia, and sense of self-satisfied moral superiority toward our historical forebears. Hunt urged historians to fight against the presentist tide.²⁵

Yet not all historians have been as critical as Hunt about the notion of presentism, and some have problematized it in nuanced ways. The historian of science Naomi Oreskes, for example, argues that we can and should embrace what she calls *motivational presentism*, ‘simply because we live in the present and are motivated by the conditions of our own lives’. Such an approach is positive ‘because hiding our motivations hamstrings us intellectually and stylistically, isolates us from potential audiences, and undermines our ability to speak persuasively about the value of our work’.²⁶ I would add that masking the imperatives that frame our pedagogy distorts our teaching and leaves us feeling vulnerable that in any case students will suss out our intentions in the end.

So, to get back to that curious title of Carla Cevasco’s blog, which alludes playfully, if not overtly, to the film Dr. Strangelove, as the editor of this volume reminded me, speaking even more directly to how present-day debates and political crises can inspire a decided turn toward what some might call ‘motivational presentism’, Cevasco poses an important argument about the value of connecting thematic debates in colonial North American history with the thorny issues with which we are wrestling today, such as environmental degradation, exploitation of labor (whether enslaved or wage-based), the rights of sexual and gender minorities and marginalized groups, and income inequality.²⁷ She did in the Fall 2017 course that she taught at Rutgers. Cevasco explains that despite what she had been taught about the risks of presentism, some of which I have just highlighted, she felt

²⁵ Hunt, ‘Against Presentism’.
²⁷ Cevasco, ‘How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Embrace Presentism’.
compelled by pressing current events during the summer of 2017 to take a different approach to course design: ‘But our own political moment—I started teaching two weeks after far-right protests converged around Confederate monuments in Charlottesville—felt too urgent not to let our own moment into our discussions of the past. Instead of keeping the present in the subtext of my class, I brought it into the text.’

It is worth asking whether the current moment might lead us to cast aside cautionary notes about presentism that held more sway at other times, and in the case of Cevasco’s course, there does not seem to be any of the presentist arrogance about the past against which Lynn Hunt rightly cautioned us. Instead her course self-consciously stresses the common issues that concerned early colonial North Americans of varying states of mind and that also concern contemporary Americans, while also noting key differences across the centuries. This approach draws on research that notes the pedagogical value of comparing past and present contexts by consciously highlighting both similarities and differences. Perhaps some of you have already seen the value of this approach, or have designed courses that explicitly move the present ‘into the text’, alongside, but also in tension with, the past.

I decided to put some of Cevasco’s suggestions about how to engage directly with cultivating historical empathy in new ways to the test in constructing a new course on the comparative history of sexuality, which spans the ancient to contemporary periods. One of the most relevant questions in this course concerns how different societies across time and culture have understood sexuality and the categories through which individuals and groups have identified and expressed their desires. As luck would have it, two scholars of the pre-modern period have offered quite distinct, but complementary, studies of the construction of ‘lesbian’ or ‘lesbian-like’ identities in Europe and the Arab Middle East. These allow students to investigate the seemingly contingent nature of sexual identity, past and present, as well as providing an opportunity to consider the specific challenges that scholars of the more distant past face in interpreting the intimate lives of historical actors.

In her essay, “Lesbian-Like” and the Social History of Lesbianisms’, Judith Bennett argues that direct references to same-sex desire and acts among women are quite rare in available documents from pre-modern Europe. This is true, she argues, because contemporary observers focused more narrowly
on sexual acts considered sinful and deviant; that is, those acts primarily associated with illicit sex between men and women, or among men, thus making it difficult to provide clear evidence for lesbianism as we would recognize it in the contemporary world. If, instead, we focus on what Bennett calls ‘lesbian-like’ relationships, she maintains that we will find historical antecedents across a wider range of social status groups and broaden our understanding of the focus of women’s erotic and affective interests.  

In her article, ‘Medieval Arab Lesbians and “Lesbian-like” Women’, Sahar Amer contrasts the medieval Christian tradition that viewed sexuality generally as sinful and spoke little of same sex acts, or identities, among women, with the medieval ‘Islamicate’ tradition. Amer focuses in her piece on medical/sexological tracts, as well as literary imagery. Building upon Bennett’s earlier analysis, Amer asks us to consider the distinctiveness of medieval Arab-Muslim understandings of same-sex desire and sexual acts, the places where one might expect to find mention of same-sex erotic practices in primary sources of the period, and the various ways in which such practices (or identities) were viewed by contemporary commentators.

The scholarly questions about identities and behaviors from the distant past posed by Bennett and Amer are, of course, not academic at all for our students, or ourselves, as they speak to the very challenges that marginalized groups face today, whether they are sexual/gender minorities, people of color, and/or students from working class/poor families. Again, I return to the larger theme of the uses of history with which I began this essay. As Judith Bennett argued in 2000, this work of reclaiming a usable past is valuable not just from a scholarly perspective, but because it ‘speaks to the emancipatory possibilities of history’.

History is not mere antiquarianism, fascinated with the past for its sake alone and assuming, naively, that there is a unitary past reality that can be approached, albeit not fully uncovered. In its best forms, history

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31 Amer, ‘Medieval Arab Lesbians and “Lesbian-like” Women’. Amer specifically invokes Bennett’s category of ‘lesbian-like’ in her title, using it as a conceptual tool and basis for comparing the European and Arab traditions during the medieval period. On her use of the term ‘Islamicate’ to emphasize the cultural and social implications of Muslim thought, as compared to strictly theological interpretations, see p. 215.
32 Bennett, “Lesbian-Like” and the Social History of Lesbianisms’, p. 4. While Amer does not explicitly cite the goal of seeing her work of historical inquiry serve the interests of contemporary Arab-Muslim, queer communities, I would suggest that her work implicitly shares Bennett’s larger vision.
transcends the antiquarian impulse, seeking, of course, to understand the past in its proper contexts but seeking also to play with the ways in which the past illumines the present and the present illumines the past. As V.A. Kolve recently noted, ‘we have little choice but to acknowledge our modernity, admit that our interest in the past is always (and by no means illegitimately) born of present concerns’.33

Our students desperately need the tools that we historians (and other humanities educators and scholars) can offer them in navigating the treacherous terrain of a twenty-first-century world in crisis. The questions that we can pose about the past often speak to their contemporary concerns, whether engaging with questions of identity, considering the often fraught choices that individuals and communities make in challenging times, examining how people negotiate the ethical norms of their respective societies, or assessing the treatment of strangers and those viewed as different. Perhaps the time has come to stop worrying so much about sliding into mindless presentism and instead acknowledge, per Cevasco and Bennett, that our own times, and the urgent questions that they pose for us, always inform our work of examining the past. Surely, the answers that historical actors offer may not always resonate with our own worldviews, may strike us as harsh, dissonant, or even disturbing, but how much less alone we feel when we make the effort to listen.

Works cited


33 Ibid.


**About the author**

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