

The World in A Year:
Exploring Contingency, Context, and the
Politics of History in a Reimagined Global History Class

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THE YEAR 1948 featured a number of significant events in global history, from Gandhi's assassination to Israeli statehood to the start of apartheid in South Africa. Some events were "global" in the conventional sense: countries around the world signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and participated in the first post-war Olympic games. Some events were part of global movements, like the Communist movements that occurred concurrently around the world, from *la violencia* in Colombia to the Canwell Communist hearings in Seattle, Washington. And several events in "small places" that at first don't seem "global"—a deadly environmental crisis in Donora, Pennsylvania or a public healing movement that challenged colonial rule in eastern Congo—can in fact usefully illuminate broader trends of the global modern era.¹

This set of events—alongside a desire to re-imagine standard approaches to introductory global history classes for undergraduates—formed the basis for my class, titled "The World in A Year: A Global History of 1948." My goals for this class were two-fold. First, I wanted to give students exposure to a set of events that, when

scaffolded strategically, highlighted themes and processes featured in most global history courses: imperialism, environmental change, social hierarchy, nationalism, and so on. Second, and more importantly, I wanted to center skills and questions at the heart of the process of “doing history”—encouraging students to grapple with the process, politics, and consequences of constructing historical narratives.

The year 1948 in particular proved to be a useful timespan for achieving these course goals, for reasons I will discuss in this article. Yet I believe that the same strategies could be used to create a similar class of any other year, with equally interesting benefits for the teacher and students alike. This article explains how and why I constructed a class focused on the history of the world in a year. It is my hope that some of the activities, frameworks, or guiding principles might also be useful for others seeking to explore the politics of historical knowledge production with their students, regardless of the year in history they choose to highlight.

The Idea

Scholars of global history have noted its recent popularity in academic publications and inside classrooms,² often attributing the growing interest in the topic to globalization, efforts to “challenge earlier Eurocentric and teleological narratives,”³ or “increased interest in global processes” in the aftermath of the Cold War and September 11, 2001.⁴ In *What Is Global History?* (2016), Sebastian Conrad argued that “Global history is both an object of study and a particular way of looking at history: it is both a process and a perspective, subject matter and methodology.”⁵ Global history survey courses offer students exposure to relevant subject matter. Yet these courses far less frequently engage with the methodologies and perspectives involved in the study of global history. That the issues of perspective and methodology are harder to tackle is perhaps unsurprising; it echoes concerns within broader scholarship on teaching and learning, which has long lamented the challenges of teaching students what is involved in actually “doing history.”

Other priorities of global history scholarship reflect its often-unfulfilled quest to challenge Eurocentric narratives of the past. Scholars of African and Latin American histories have long lamented how global history overlooks or neglects these parts of the globe.⁶

When global narratives do include these regions of the world, they sometimes fit them in “inconveniently,” explore them through a narrow focus on state-builders or royalty, portray them as being “acted upon or as lacking,” or incorporate them in ways that lead to “the erasure of local specificities.”⁷ As a recent critique argued, global history can often serve as merely “another Anglospheric invention to integrate the Other into a cosmopolitan narrative on our terms, in our tongues.”⁸ Scholarship decentering Europe, emphasizing global connections between actors in the Global South, and examining (and correcting for) the exclusionary practices of “global” narratives have been important contributions to global history scholarship in recent years.⁹ Still others have continued to debate the best ways to undertake global history scholarship, with various approaches that explore questions of mobility, space, and periodization; focus on the global environments; or bring in questions of race, gender, and sexuality—to name but a few examples.¹⁰

While following these conversations and participating in various introductory global history courses with curious undergraduates, I recognized that these debates about global history are at the heart of what it means to “do history” and think about the consequences of different approaches to doing history. Hannah Farber has argued that in teaching global studies, sometimes “it is better to run towards the problems rather than away from them.”¹¹ I wondered if there was a way to take these challenges of global history—how we craft our historical narratives, what we choose to exclude and include, how we debate periodization and contextualize events—and “run towards them,” elevating them into the very framework of an undergraduate course.

It was in this spirit that I decided to highlight these concerns by drastically limiting the scope of a modern global history course to a single year. Initially, this seemed like a useful way to undermine traditional periodization that often prioritizes European actors, categories, or events. I could focus on a year that was not dominated by an event in Western Europe or the United States and—following some of the most exciting scholarly work in global history—make room for biography, microhistories, and discussions about how we construct historical narratives.¹² Choosing one year could also help me teach contingency and context in historical inquiry. Ultimately, I was motivated by a belief that this framework

could help push students to grapple with a fact that, far from being a natural, memorizable set of facts and dates, history is in fact “a fluid, culturally constructed, interpretive discipline”—made up of choices about what perspectives, events, and people we include in those narratives.¹³ This is, of course, a perspective that is obvious to professional historians, but takes much longer for undergraduates to fully appreciate. Framed in terms of Conrad’s definition of global history, organizing a class in this way was as much about what we were learning (content) as it was about how we were learning it (methodology).

Using an approach centered on one year of history is not an entirely novel concept for historical inquiry. Several works of academic and public history have used a one-year framework to great effect.¹⁴ Yet many of these works chose their year because of a singular large-scale or watershed event—or series of events—that elevated that particular year to world-historical significance. While certain weeks of this course did focus on such events, my goals were often different: some weeks, I wanted to use 1948 as an excuse to examine lesser-known (or even nearly forgotten) events. Other weeks, the goal was, in the spirit of Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s “connected histories” framework, to explore how a one-year framework could facilitate a greater attention to the connections and interdependence of simultaneous events—many of which may be obscured in a course that moves quickly through time, from one event to another in quick succession.¹⁵

The Planning

I chose the year 1948 for several reasons: I wanted a year in which no immediately obvious or famous events occurred in western Europe or the United States that could overshadow the other topics. I also wanted students to grapple with the tension between the promise of global community in the modern era and the reality of continued violence and inequality. I chose 1948 because of concurrent events that encapsulated this tension: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights being signed the same year as the start of apartheid in South Africa and the creation of the state of Israel. I also believed that this year, in the aftermath of the World Wars and on the cusp of the Cold War, would be well positioned to prompt students to think about contingency.

Different course goals will lead instructors to choose different years that serve those goals. If an instructor wants to privilege a particular region of the world or a particular topic, they could select an event that would highlight those priorities and build the course around the year in which that event occurred. I recommend that whatever year you choose, it should provide opportunities to dig into a few conventionally significant or global events, while also leaving time and space to encourage students to think about the global implications of events that may at first seem to have only local relevance.

With the year 1948 chosen, I began planning the course by compiling a long list of events of 1948 before eventually selecting the events that best fit with those goals. I made this list in a few ways: I first noted the most famous events that I knew about or that a quick Google search produced. I also went looking for other topics that fulfilled specific learning objective goals. For example, although I had not initially thought of what event related to environmental change I would use, only a small amount of research yielded William Vogt's warning about finite resources and overpopulation in *Road to Survival* (1948), as well as the deadly smog incident in Donora, Pennsylvania. Oceania was under-represented in my initial list, but a few minutes of research into 1948 in Australia taught me about the country's national conspiracy surrounding the mysterious death of the Somerton Man, which I used in a lesson that drew parallels between the work of a historian and the work of a detective. I sought out other events of 1948 because of particular reading material: I knew I wanted to assign some of Marcy Norton's work on the global histories of tobacco and chocolate, which she narrated "in reverse of conventional narratives," tracing them against the usual imperial flow and going from the New World to the Old, rather than the other way around.¹⁶ With a bit of digging, I identified an important 1948 study linking lung cancer to tobacco use.

In planning for the course, I made the decision that while course material within each week would be arranged chronologically, the weekly 1948 events themselves would not proceed according to chronological sequence. In part, such an organizational scheme would have been difficult or misleading, as many of these events spanned multiple months or were planned long before their "official" date in 1948. Moreover, this decision allowed me to instead think

about what content and skills students needed for each week and organize the course accordingly. I wanted students to have a preliminary understanding of colonialism before we discussed alternative understandings of strikes in West Africa in 1948, so I placed that week after our discussions of British imperialism that were featured in the week on apartheid. I wanted the week on the Marshall Plan to build off previous discussion of the World War, so I arranged those relevant weeks accordingly. The reading about Palestinian women's oral histories was theoretically more challenging than other weeks, so I placed it later in the course, after students had already had experience discussing different kinds of sources.

This process of searching for events of 1948 based on pre-established goals may feel counterintuitive to historians who are used to letting the evidence determine our arguments. Yet the benefit of this backward design approach was that in escaping the mandate of chronology and embracing the spirit of "uncoverage," I could let my priorities of engaging readings, important lessons about power/perspective in source analysis, and useful skill-building lessons dictate the content I chose, rather than the other way around. And, the exercise of thinking about how I would fit these seemingly small or insignificant events into explanatory historical frameworks was in fact a useful one, and would inspire later assignments that I developed for students themselves.

The Class

On the first day of class, I explained to my students that the year 1948 was important in that it featured several significant events of the modern era, but, more importantly, it was a useful device for us to ask much broader questions about the historical discipline. I told students that I wanted them to question how historical narratives are built, to articulate how events of 1948 fit into some of the main themes of the modern era, and to practice analyzing a variety of primary sources.

Each of the chosen events of 1948 formed the basis of one week of class. This allowed me to begin each week's historical background at a time and place that made sense for that particular week. So, while our unit on the deadly smog outside of Pittsburgh, PA began with the Industrial Revolution, our lesson on scientific research

linking smoking tobacco to lung cancer began with Indigenous tobacco uses in Mesoamerica before the Columbian Exchange. By avoiding a standard, linear approach to the historical narrative of the modern period, I hoped to better encourage students to think about the choices involved in constructing our historical narrative. Students still learned about many standard events of global history, but they did so through an unconventional structure. They learned about the World Wars through lessons on Coca Cola's global history (though in other course iterations, they could learn about the wars through the 1948 Olympics, nicknamed the "Austerity Games"), about the Cold War through a discussion of the Marshall Plan, and about decolonization from the perspective of events in Burma and West Africa rather than Britain. Themes of racism and segregation were explored through the start of apartheid and the flooding of a predominantly Black town in Oregon on May 30, 1948. The topic of Communism made its appearance in both Colombia and Seattle, Washington.

In line with my initial goals, I selected a number of events that privileged the Global South in our historical narrative. At the same time, I did not want to construct a global history of the modern era that ignored the reality of an increasingly powerful (and influential) United States. So, I included several events that would help us explore how this global reach of Western—and especially American—military, political, cultural, and economic power was an undeniable feature of the twentieth century. Yet, as these events showed, that power was constituted through often-overlooked interactions with the rest of the globe. The global year-long slice of history was helpful here: zooming in on a one-year slice of history allowed us to see how many aspects influencing the status of the United States were constituted through interactions with the rest of the world—whether in a top-grossing song of the year that was inspired by a Maori women's folk song ("Now is the Hour" was recorded by several different artists in 1948, including Bing Crosby) or with scientific advancements achieved through unethical experimentation on populations in the Global South.

Throughout the course, I invited students to reflect on the difference between the events we were discussing in our class and those usually discussed in a typical global history course. The goal was not to argue that the emphases of traditional global history

syllabi were poor choices—rather, it was to help students see that they were indeed choices in the first place. Students then put this into practice themselves through a “syllabus comparison” activity, where they evaluated a variety of different kinds of global history syllabi (found via Google, school archives, or preassembled by the instructor). This assessment helped students further think through different approaches, their merits, and their pitfalls. Such conversations encourage students to (a) think about the benefits and pitfalls of various approaches to historical inquiry, and (b) engage them in the learning process, reminding them that history is a “fluid, culturally constructed, interpretive discipline.”¹⁷

The Drawbacks

My experiences teaching this class were influenced by the fact that both classes occurred in the context of online teaching and the COVID-19 pandemic. In some ways, the flexibility of the one-event-per-week format made it easier to teach this class in an unpredictable environment; when I had to cut a week out of the syllabus after my institution cut a week from our calendar, it was perhaps easier to cut one week’s case study than it would have been to cut content in a typical history course. Because the lessons, objectives, and even many of the events and processes prior to 1948 were built upon and reinforced in multiple weeks, it was slightly less disruptive to eliminate one particular week. The week on the 1948 Olympics, for example, did have to be cut in one course iteration, but it was not the only time the students would learn about the World Wars and their economic effects. The week on the conspiracy theory about an international spy in Australia was not the only time we discussed the emerging Cold War context, and the lesson on Puerto Rico’s protest of the U.S. flag was not the only lesson they had on U.S. imperialism. Of course, despite the benefits of this flexibility, there were still a number of ways that the online format limited this course.

Yet even in a face-to-face setting, there are certainly potential drawbacks to a course format like this one. Some of them can be mitigated through thoughtful discussions, strategic scaffolding, or assessment strategies. I will highlight some of the concerns raised in my course here and outline how I tried to mitigate those pitfalls with strategies that could be adapted to other similar course contexts.

Selecting accessible readings that provide sufficient historical background for each event of 1948 is one of the most difficult tasks for seminar versions of this class. In lecture courses, it is easy to remedy this shortcoming by delivering important contextual information through lecture. With content taken care of, the assigned reading can then be used for primary source analysis practice or exposure to scholarship that grapples with archival silences or knowledge production issues. In a seminar setting, I had to use a variety of different strategies to provide context for primary sources. Sometimes, I used mini lectures or guided primary source activities. This became less necessary as the course went on, as students began to develop a working knowledge of the global landscape of the 1940s. In other cases, I assigned student presentations (either individual or group) to present about a particular topic. Because encouraging student-led discussion and learning was an important objective in my course, using the “jigsaw method” to help students learn about multiple historical contexts or background events worked well.¹⁸

Teachers committed to emphasizing particular historical content of the modern era might be understandably concerned about how the year-long framework shortchanges more “traditional” (and perhaps more important) events that did not occur in 1948 in favor of lesser-known events. For example, studying a public healing movement in eastern Congo or the development of De Beers’ “A Diamond is Forever” campaign took away time and space from more in-depth or particularly extended discussions of certain traditional topics—the Russo-Japanese War, the World Wars, Marx and Engels, or the Great Divergence. However, in an era of “uncoverage” that moves away from “banking” models of education, we might find this trade-off less egregious than earlier generations of history teachers may have presumed.¹⁹ Nonetheless, if there was particular content I wanted students to understand well, I reinforced the importance of the event with more time spent on active learning exercises or I made sure we revisited that same event during the historical background section of multiple weeks. Some of this latter strategy occurred naturally: unsurprisingly, discussions about the World Wars and the emerging Cold War context came up in a number of different weeks, given their relevance to a number of different weekly topics. Another way to ensure increased understanding of particularly important

events is to have students complete key term IDs, essay questions, or response papers on those topics, should an instructor choose to include those kinds of assessments.

Keeping track of chronology is one of the most serious challenges for students in this class. To address this, I chose to assign “themed timelines” as an ongoing group project. Using an online timeline platform, groups of students constructed timelines focused on course themes that included imperialism, environmental change, nationalism, the rise of the U.S. as a global superpower, and so on, by collating information from throughout the course, making ongoing connections between weeks and topics.²⁰ This did not solve for all confusion regarding chronology—students in the group about environmental change, for example, could easily still become confused about how the global power of the United States developed over the course of the twentieth century, since this was not the focus of their timeline. But it did help students to spend time on an ongoing project that asked them to rearrange class material from across weeks into a more standard chronology. Students charged with the imperialism timeline assembled material from the week on the Industrial Revolution’s emphasis on colonies, information from the apartheid week on Dutch and British colonialism, primary sources on scientific racism from the week on U.S. medical experiments abroad, and so on, to construct a narrative about how imperialism changed and developed over time.

This assignment offered the additional benefit of having students construct historical narratives of their own, justifying when and where they started their story. The same timeline group that focused on imperialism was asked about how many of their events included white Europeans as the main drivers of historical change and how they represented resistance or agency within colonized populations on their timeline. Instructors especially interested in having students grapple with issues of chronology and periodization might include a peer review component that would also help students learn an additional course theme that wasn’t their own. This would offer two benefits: (1) students would have to justify their decisions about how they constructed their narratives to their peers, and (2) as students reviewed timelines on other topics, it would further reinforce the chronology of events in their minds, despite the thematic organization of the course.

Other shortcomings of this approach are likely unavoidable, and in those cases, I have found that they at least can be used to start important conversations in the class. For example, the year-long approach undoubtedly privileges more modern histories, when calendar dates are the norm and multiple primary sources for events around the world are plentiful. This approach also privileges conceptualizations of history that feature calendar years and prioritize events over processes that don't have easily discernible ruptures or dates.²¹ Reflecting on these particular limitations of this class can generate important conversations that Catherine Denial has grappled with in her classes by exposing students to the ways that our study of history can “privilege a Western, linear vision of time.”²² Assignments and in-class activities can help students learn additional lessons from the weighing of these course limitations. For example, in addition to the “syllabus comparison” assessment, which encourages students to analyze and compare global history syllabi, I ask students to critique our own syllabus as well. This does not make up for the short-shrifting of the pre-modern period, nor for the privileging of Western conceptions of time, but it reminds students to be cognizant of the payoffs and pitfalls of every approach to global history—including my own.

The Payoff

Despite these drawbacks—or, in some cases, because of them—I believe that this class format can productively introduce students to what it means to do historical inquiry, improve their learning, and prompt them to think more deeply about history's complexities. Here, I will highlight three of the main benefits, discussing how the course helps students think about contingency, context, and the politics of crafting historical narratives.²³

Contingency

As historians, we know not to let our knowledge of what ultimately happened shape our understanding of events and possibilities as they happened. Yet contingency is famously difficult to teach.²⁴ Richard Bond discussed this challenge, saying that before his innovative “make-believe cult” assignment, he had “incredible

difficulty teaching students to see the past as a series of choices with unforeseen consequences rather than as a predetermined script of human actions.”²⁵

I have found that another way of breaking a student habit of seeing history as a “predetermined script” is to adopt a syllabus that eschews that script, avoiding straight-forward chronological organization, which—when ingested by students unquestioningly—can unwittingly help to reinforce the sense that history naturally progressed from one week’s material to the next. In adopting an unconventional approach to a global history—in calling into question the very construction of a chronological course—we can achieve what Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke described as the benefits of teaching contingency: “a powerful corrective to teleology, the fallacy that events pursue a straight-arrow course to a pre-determined outcome, since people in the past had no way of anticipating our present world.”²⁶

A year-long slice of history does a better job of this kind of interrupting the narrative about the past, capturing a “moment-in-time” approach to history that interrupts the progression from cause to assumed effect. For example, a global history survey course that proceeds chronologically would likely teach the West African railway strikes of 1948 as a way to set up the following week on decolonization, highlighting the ways that these strikes served as a precursor to the independence movement. Yet ample scholarship has shown that this is not necessarily how the strikes were destined to turn out, nor was it how the strikers themselves envisioned their project.²⁷ Asking students to examine those 1948 strikes on their own terms, rather than as a chronological precursor to the following week’s material, can help emphasize this kind of historical thinking. The course structure’s emphasis on contingency can be reinforced with “scholarly debate” assignments, which ask students to take a set of primary sources and assess how they fit with two opposing historiographical interventions. In the case of the 1948 strikes, reading these sources with attention to how these strikes advanced the cause of anti-colonialism—and how they connected to other kinds of politics surrounding labor disputes, community support, and gender dynamics—provides students with a useful example of incorporating contingency into historical interpretation.

Context

A class of this nature gives students practice in thinking about context every single week. When they encounter a new event each week, they are doing so equipped with contextual knowledge about the 1940s that they have been developing throughout the course. I found that this helped them think about the context of the primary sources from 1948 we analyzed: students analyzed Margaret Sanger speeches, for example, while remembering the William Vogt and overpopulation readings they had done weeks prior. They later used those discussions to contextualize sources about birth control experiments in Puerto Rico. This contextualization has been shown to be an important component of how historians analyze primary sources. A course of this nature is particularly well suited to help students practice learning to perform this step.²⁸

Yet learning to contextualize events and practice thinking about everyday occurrences in the context of broader historical legacies may have other benefits too. As a history teacher, I hope—along with many others—that my students will “use what they know about the past to make sense of current events” without exhibiting the “sins of anachronism and decontextualization.”²⁹ In this course, students could move beyond the large-scale events, famous wars, and elite political decisions to explore how everyday, mundane events can be connected to broader historical trends, structures, and systems.³⁰ A year-long slice of history revealed many options for doing so. For example, in one activity, students engaged in a “scavenger hunt” where they were given an event of 1948 and had to employ research skills (which we had been developing throughout the course) to research the event, discuss its relevance to course themes, and decide on how to contextualize it historically. A scavenger hunt about De Beers’ “A Diamond is Forever” campaign generated particularly productive discussions: some students decided to focus on the relationship between diamond mining, imperialism, and racialized capitalism, drawing on our week on apartheid and its historical precedents. Other students decided to discuss American consumer culture, drawing on information from the week on the Marshall Plan and American popular culture. Still others thought about post-war gender roles and the history of family units.

Politics of Crafting Historical Narratives

Whether debating how to interpret the West African railway strikes or discussing the De Beers' campaign, these class discussions always involve debates about the consequences of what we are studying and how we are studying it. Discussions about the politics of crafting historical narratives is easier to explore and assess when these considerations are built into an non-traditional course like this one.

Discussing the politics of periodization provides one such opportunity. With no clear "starting point" for our class—and with each week beginning with a different point in history—class discussions naturally tackle the politics of periodization that can sometimes remain hidden in modern global history survey courses. I explicitly make questioning periodization the central objective of a few class sessions. For example, we debate whether the discussion of the 1948 study linking lung cancer to tobacco should begin with Native American tobacco technologies, Western biomedical research into cancer, or with some other event entirely. Similarly, we debate whether to start the week on the 1948 railroad protests in West Africa with the start of colonialism or with the long-standing Indigenous practices of resistance that pre-date the arrival of Europeans and speak to a broader Indigenous practice of resisting abuses of power.

These focused weeks set the stage for broader conversations about the politics of periodization, which students can tackle through their syllabus comparison activity as well. How would starting a global history course with the Industrial Revolution, for example, set up a narrative that shows white men in machines, boats, planes, or political offices as the main drivers of historical change? There are surely some good, historically grounded reasons for such an approach, but encouraging students to weigh those reasons with some of the potential drawbacks—rather than presenting it unquestioningly—can help them grapple with central dilemmas of historical interpretation and delve into debates about periodization that dominate scholarly literature, but do not always make their way into undergraduate classrooms.³¹ The ultimate conclusions that students come to—and they indeed do come to different conclusions about where we should "start each story"—matter less here than the fact that they have been pushed to consider alternatives to standard periodization and the consequences of those associated choices.

Thinking about topic selection provides another exercise in thinking through the politics of knowledge production: what regions of the world, what kinds of events, and what sorts of historical actors are most frequently included in historical narratives? The year-long slice of history that abandons the idea of content “coverage” also leaves space for less-often studied events to make their way onto history survey course syllabi. Public healing movements in eastern Congo in 1948 illuminate long-standing Indigenous practices of ensuring collective community well-being that were leveraged in response to colonialism. A 1948 town-destroying flood outside of Portland, Oregon sheds light on the confluence of racist housing policies and environmental change. Neither are featured in standard global history courses—but could and should they be? In both the class discussions and assignments, students are asked to consider the events and voices that are included and are not included in standard approaches. Would they do things differently?

These conversations about our course structure prepare students for an assignment in which they make their own arguments about what should be included in our course’s historical narrative. For this assignment, I ask students to pick one event of 1948 that we did not cover in class and make an argument for why it should be included in future iterations. In doing so, they are not simply learning about an event of the past, they are also putting forth an argument about what is worth studying and why. As part of this assignment, students are also asked to include a one-page write-up reflecting on how they went about choosing that particular event. Students address how they found the event: If they chose an event they already knew about, how did they get that previous knowledge? If they used Google, what kinds of factors—the language of the search, the terms of the search, the nature of the event (such as who was most affected or who wrote about it), censorship, literacy prevalence, availability of primary sources, etc.—might shape what they did and didn’t find?

Students sometimes need to be pushed to go a bit deeper than a surface-level reflection, but when they do, they can come up with important insights about how power and perspective can structure our archives and, in turn, our historical narratives and course material. Some students, writing in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, chose to write about the creation of the World Health

Organization. In their reflection papers, they argued that it was important to include because of its relevance to the world today, but they also reflected on how their research process was undoubtedly shaped by the pandemic context and presentist concerns. Another student chose the *Empire Windrush*, a boat carrying some 500 passengers from Jamaica, and its arrival in Britain. She argued that this symbolic starting point to Caribbean migration in the twentieth century tied together course themes of migration, global interconnections, nationalism, and imperialism. She also reflected on how the later “Windrush Scandal” further highlighted course themes of inequality and nationalism while also demonstrating how scandal and crisis tends to stand out in the historical record.

Many of these assignments that prompt students to think about periodization and topic selection can be used in any history course, and not only in histories of a single year. But I have found that students perform better on these kinds of assessments in my 1948 course than when I have used them in other classes, in part likely because the format of the course has already prompted them to think through these questions regularly.

There are a few additional benefits to this course design beyond the historical thinking skills it promotes. Specifically, aspects of this course format embrace recommendations from recent scholarship on teaching and learning that focus on how students can best learn and retain course content. “Spacing” the material and revisiting that same material regularly throughout the term helps with memory and retention. Similarly, studies have shown that “interleaving” material by rearranging the order or context in which that material is encountered also helps students understand the material better.³² Thus, when we studied the Industrial Revolution in the week on the environment and returned to it again in a week on imperialism, or when we discussed World War II in the week on West African strikes and again on during week about the state of Israel, students were spacing and interleaving their practice of key historical concepts and events from our class. Of course, this course design is not the only way to use these strategies in history classes. However, it does naturally set up a pattern of content delivery and practice that may facilitate student learning in several helpful ways.

The Final Reflection

In their final assignment, I asked students to draw on our conversations about context, contingency, and the production of historical narratives to create a “time capsule” that included five to eight primary sources about an event in recent history of their choosing. Students assembled digital time capsules filled with newspaper clippings, text messages, letters, material objects, videos, oral testimonies, and journal entries—and included a paragraph analyzing the source and explaining why they chose each one.³³ They also turned in a final reflection paper in which they discussed what a historian 100 years from now would and would not be able to understand about the event of their choosing, based on the sources (the archive) that they provided. The assignment was a useful culminating activity for a course spent thinking about how we put events into historical context, how we interpret primary sources, and how power and perspective condition the construction of historical narratives.

I chose to focus on recent events for several reasons.³⁴ Because I was focused less on teaching archival research skills (which was not possible due to COVID-19 pandemic regulations), I did not want students to struggle to find a diversity of sources. Giving them the liberty to choose an event of the past two years helped open up a range of sources that they could access on the Internet and in their own inboxes. I also did not want the benefit of hindsight to help them in their final reflection paper. A course of this nature features ample discussions of contingency, where I reminded students that in 1948, the historical actors we were talking about didn’t necessarily know what would happen next. Assembling sources for such a recent event—and thinking about what future historians would say about it—seemed like a promising way of capturing that uncertainty about what comes next.

Students reflected on why certain sources were easier to find than others, detailing how they then chose to use Google Translate, personal diary entries, or parent newsletters, etc., to shed light on alternative perspectives that they could not access through a regular Google search. One student chose the first cancellation of a school day because of COVID-19 and reflected on how different

the information provided at that time was from what was later said about the virus. One student chose to focus on Black Lives Matter protests, and her refusal to include the actual footage of George Floyd's murder prompted reflection about the nature of violence in the archives—and the choices we make to include or exclude such violence.

In a class where it is important to prioritize more historical content, this assignment could be adapted for the year under consideration. Had students had better access to archives, a time capsule assignment focused on 1948 could have also worked as an excellent summative assessment, giving students significant exposure to archival research and, potentially, oral history practice. Yet even focused on recent events, the assignment served as a useful culmination for a class that was, after all, always most concerned with thinking through the choices and politics involved in building historical narratives—skills with relevance that extends far beyond any single year.

Notes

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1. For “small places,” see David A. Bell, “This Is What Happens When Historians Overuse the Idea of the Network,” *The New Republic*, October 26, 2013.

2. Lynn Hunt, *Writing History in the Global Era* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014); Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016). This scholarship generally acknowledges global history as different from world history, with varying rationales that usually focus on global history's increased effort to decenter Europe and emphasize mobility and global

connectivity. In their editorial for the first issue of the *Journal of Global History*, William Gervase Clarence-Smith, Kenneth Pomeranz, and Peer Vries argued that efforts to historicize “Processes of globalization” help “establish a subtle difference between the closely related endeavours of global and world history.” See “Editorial,” *Journal of Global History* 1, no. 1 (March 2006): 1. However, as Richard Drayton and David Motadel have written, “in practice,” global history and world history have “sheltered very similar initiatives.” See “Discussion: The Futures of Global History,” *Journal of Global History* 13, no. 1 (March 2018): 7.

3. Francesca Trivellato, “Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?” *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011): 1, <<https://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/0z94n9hq>>.

4. Conrad, *What is Global History?*, 1.

5. Conrad, *What is Global History?*, 11.

6. Matthew Brown, “The Global History of Latin America,” *Journal of Global History* 10, no. 3 (November 2015): 365-386; Patrick Manning, “Locating Africans on the World Stage: A Problem in World History,” *Journal of World History* 26, no. 3 (September 2015): 605-637; Erik Gilbert, “Putting Africa in World History and Vice Versa,” *World History Connected* 2, no. 1 (November 2004), <<https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uillinois.edu/2.1/gilbert.html>>.

7. For Africa becoming “inconvenient,” see Candace Sobers, “The ‘Inconvenient Continent’?: Teaching ‘Africa’ in Global and International History,” *The History Teacher* 53, no. 3 (May 2020): 471-496; for Africa being “acted upon or lacking,” see Judith Byfield, “African Studies and the Challenge of the Global in the 21st Century,” *Africa Today* 63, no. 2 (Winter 2016): 55; and for the erasure of local specificities, see Steven Feierman, “African Histories and the Dissolution of World History,” in *Africa and the Disciplines: The Contributions of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and Humanities*, ed. Robert H. Bates, V. Y. Mudimbe, and Jean O’Barr (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 167-212. See also Takondwa Semphere, “Beyond African Royalty,” *Africa is A Country*, September 25, 2020, <<https://www.africasacountry.com/2020/09/beyond-african-royalty>>; Gilbert, “Putting Africa in World History and Vice Versa.”

8. Jeremy Adelman, “What is Global History Now?” *Aeon*, March 2, 2017.

9. Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); Cindy Ewing, “‘With a Minimum of Bitterness’: Decolonization, the Right to Self-Determination, and the Arab-Asian Group,” *Journal of Global History* 17, no. 2 (July 2022): 254-271; Dorothy L. Hodgson and Judith A. Byfield, eds., *Global Africa: Into the Twenty-First Century* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017); Omar Gueye, “African History and Global History: Revisiting Paradigms,” in *Global History, Globally: Research and Practice around the World*, ed. Sven Beckert and Dominic Sachsenmaier (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 83-107; Brown, “The Global History of Latin America.”

10. See, for example, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 3 (July 1997): 735-762; Alison Frank Johnson, “Europe without Borders:

Environmental and Global History in a World after Continents,” *Contemporary European History* 31, no. 1 (February 2022): 129-141; Franz L. Fillafer, “A World Connecting? From the Unity of History to Global History,” *History and Theory* 56, no. 1 (March 2017): 3-37; Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men’s Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011); Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, “Crossing Borders in Transnational Gender History,” *Journal of Global History* 6, no. 3 (November 2011): 357-379; Amy Stanley, “Maidservants’ Tales: Narrating Domestic and Global History in Eurasia, 1600-1900,” *The American Historical Review* 121, no. 2 (April 2016): 437-460; Jerry H. Bentley, “Cross-Cultural Interaction and Periodization in World History,” *The American Historical Review* 101, no. 3 (June 1996): 749-770.

11. Hannah Farber, “Caught Between Pedagogy and Politics: The Challenges of Teaching Globalization in the Twenty-First Century,” *The History Teacher* 53, no. 3 (May 2020): 431.

12. On global microhistories, see Stanley, “Maidservants’ Tales”; Trivellato, “Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?”; Amy Stanley, *Stranger in the Shogun’s City: A Japanese Woman and her World* (New York: Scribner, 2020); Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007); Caitlin C. Monroe, “Searching for Nyabongo: An Unconventional Ugandan Intellectual and the Limits of Global History,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 42, no. 2 (August 2022): 389-403.

13. Catherine J. Denial, “Atoms, Honeycombs, and Fabric Scraps: Rethinking Timelines in the Undergraduate Classroom,” *The History Teacher* 46, no. 3 (May 2013): 416.

14. See, for example, Valerie Hansen, *The Year 1000: When Explorers Connected the World—and Globalization Began* (New York: Scribner, 2020); Josh Levin, “One Year” (podcast), *Slate Magazine*, <<https://www.slate.com/podcasts/one-year/>>; Kris E. Lane, *Quito 1599: City and Colony in Transition* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2002); Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (New York: Vintage, 2006); Charles Kaiser, *1968 in America: Music, Politics, Chaos, Counterculture, and the Shaping of a Generation* (New York: Grove Press, 1997). A few works on the year 1968 take on a more global perspective by exploring the global context of student protest or the multiple similar events across the world. See, for example, Pedro Monaville, *Students of the World: Global 1968 and Decolonization in the Congo* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022); A. James McAdams and Anthony P. Monta, eds., *Global 1968: Cultural Revolutions in Europe and Latin America* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021); Gueye, “African History and Global History.”

15. Sanjay Subrahmanyam “Connected Histories.”

16. Marcy Norton, *Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008). Quote on p. 12.

17. Denial, "Atoms, Honeycombs, and Fabric Scraps," 416.

18. In this exercise, several (three to five) small groups of students read a different reading about one topic or event. In class, each group discusses their assigned reading in their "expert group," ensuring they have a good understanding of the main argument and its relevance to that week's focus. Then, students "jigsaw," moving into new "learning groups" composed of students who each read different readings. Students can then teach each other about their assigned reading, and by the end of the exercise, they have a more complete picture of the historical landscape at hand for that week. See Leilani A. Arthurs and Bailey Zo Kreager, "An Integrative Review of In-Class Activities that Enable Active Learning in College Science Classroom Settings," *International Journal of Science Education* 39, no. 15 (2017): 2073-2091 for more on this method and active learning.

19. Lendol Calder, "Uncover: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey," *The Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March 2006): 1358-1370; Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970). Antoinette Burton also cautioned against the "'cafeteria' coverage" approach in her guide to teaching world history: Antoinette Burton, *A Primer for Teaching World History: Ten Design Principles* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

20. We used the TimelineJS tool by Northwestern University's Knight Lab at <<https://timeline.knightlab.com>> for these timelines.

21. On "event-based history," see Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 61.

22. Denial, "Atoms, Honeycombs, and Fabric Scraps," 415.

23. Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke identified both contingency and context as two of the "Five Cs of historical thinking." See "What Does It Mean to Think Historically?" *Perspectives* 45, no. 1 (January 2007), <<https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2007/what-does-it-mean-to-think-historically>>.

24. John Fea, "What is Historical Contingency?" *Current*, August 18, 2020; Daisy Martin, "Contingency," Teachinghistory.org, <<https://teachinghistory.org/teaching-materials/ask-a-master-teacher/24118>>.

25. Richard E. Bond, "How to Create a Cult: Make-Believe, Contingency, and Complexity in the History Classroom," *The History Teacher* 46, no. 4 (August 2013): 532.

26. Andrews and Burke, "What Does It Mean to Think Historically?"

27. Frederick Cooper, "'Our Strike': Equality, Anticolonial Politics and the 1947-48 Railway Strike in French West Africa," *The Journal of African History* 37, no. 1 (1996): 81-118.

28. See, for example, Cate Denial's method of primary source analysis featuring sourcing, observing, contextualizing, and corroborating ("SOCC"): Cate Denial, "SOCC It! Primary Source Analysis with My Students," CatherineDenial.org (blog) September 15, 2017, <<https://www.catherinedenial.org/blog/uncategorized/socc-it-primary-source-analysis-with-my-students/>>. For more on contextualization and context, see Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and*

Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001).

29. Veronica Boix-Mansilla, “Historical Understanding: Beyond the Past and into the Present,” in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 390-391. For one discussion of this goal and a creative assignment to realize it, see Laurie Arnold, “Preparing Students for Informed Public Discourse Through Native American History,” *Syllabus* 7, no. 2 (2018).

30. This falls in line with the American Historical Association’s “Tuning Project” that articulated a key objective for history majors to have the ability to “Use historical perspective as central to active citizenship.” “AHA History Tuning Project: 2016 History Discipline Core,” <<https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/tuning-the-history-discipline/2016-history-discipline-core>>.

31. Kären Wigen, “Mapping Early Modernity: Geographical Meditations on a Comparative Concept,” *Early Modern Japan: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 5, no. 2 (December 1995); Ihediwa Nkemjika Chimee, “African Historiography and the Challenges of European Periodization: A Historical Comment,” *TRAFQ – Blog for Transregional Research* (blog), July 31, 2018, <<https://trafo.hypotheses.org/11518>>; Richard Reid, “Past and Presentism: The ‘Precolonial’ and the Foreshortening of African History,” *The Journal of African History* 52, no. 2 (July 2011): 135-155. For a discussion of how teachers can bring periodization into the classroom, see Trevor R. Getz, “Chapter Four: When Was Africa? Designing With Time,” in *A Primer for Teaching African History: Ten Design Principles* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

32. These concepts are summarized particularly clearly in Pooja K. Agarwal and Patrice M. Bain, *Powerful Teaching: Unleash the Science of Learning* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2019).

33. This was done in an online format, so students submitted digital versions of these time capsules. Were we to meet in person, I would likely have had them turn in the actual physical objects.

34. I did offer an important exception: the year 2020 was of course filled with some potentially traumatic events, so I offered the option to choose a different event of the last few years if thinking about anything between the years of 2020 and 2021 was too distressing for students at the time.

Appendix: Course Outline

THE WORLD IN A YEAR Semester Course Outline

What do Gandhi's assassination, the start of apartheid, the first Kinsey report on sexuality, a town-destroying flood in Oregon, the founding of the Israeli state, and the invention of the modern frisbee have in common? They all happened in 1948. This class will explore what the seemingly unrelated events of just one year can tell us about global environmental change, imperialism, social hierarchy, nationalism, and other themes of the modern era. Each week will focus on a single event of 1948, its history, and its consequences. We will re-evaluate familiar episodes from standard modern global history courses and have the opportunity to learn about lesser-known, but no less significant, events. This unconventional approach will give us the opportunity to consider that there are different ways of doing history, and how the kinds of histories we tell (and don't tell) can influence our understanding of the world today.

Class Schedule

Week 1: Introduction and the "Universal" Declaration of Human Rights

Our first two classes will introduce global history. What makes a history global or not global? How have global historians tried to rectify some of the challenges of Eurocentrism and nation-state history that dominated history department course offerings in the past? How do issues of periodization, geographic coverage, and "macro" versus "micro" approaches feature? We will also investigate what is perhaps the most self-proclaimed "global" event of 1948: the Declaration of Human Rights.

Week 2: Smoking and Tobacco

During our second week of class, we will use the case study of a 1948 study documenting the negative health effects of tobacco to explore the politics involved in choosing where and when we start our "global" stories, tracing tobacco's history back to the era of the Columbian Exchange.

Week 3: Smog and Fog

The year 1948 also saw environmental crises around the globe, including a deadly fog in London and deadly smog in Donora, Pennsylvania. To make sense of these events, we'll place them in the context of the changing global environment since the Industrial Revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Week 4: Apartheid

With the election of the Afrikaner Nationalist Party in South Africa's 1948 elections, the country's Apartheid era formally began, following decades of

gradual laws regulating segregation between its white, black, and “coloured” inhabitants and discrimination against the latter two groups. This week explores global Dutch and British imperialism, and both Apartheid and anti-Apartheid activism of the 20th century.

Week 5: The Olympics

The first post-world war Olympics were held in 1948 in London. Because Britain’s economy and infrastructure was still recovering from wartime losses, these Olympics became known as the Austerity Games – participating athletes had to bring their own food and equipment, and Britain built no new infrastructure for the summer Olympics. The London Olympics were characteristic of the post-war moment in other several ways too, including the way that new ideas about race and gender circulated through media coverage of the games.

Week 6: Railway Strikes in West Africa

Protests against colonial violence and exploitation were a common feature throughout the colonial period, and resistance reached a notable high point in 1948 with the Accra riots and the French Railway Strike. This week will explore the colonial dynamics in both British and French Africa, Africans’ resistance strategies, and the various (sometimes contradicting) ways that historians have proposed we analyze these strikes.

Week 7: Latin American Cold War

This week explores the Green Revolution in Latin America during the Cold War, examining the role of Latin American scientists, American philanthropists, and the combination of global and local politics.

Week 8: Globalizing Culture

This week will examine examples of increasingly “global” American culture to show how they were often constituted through interactions with the rest of the world. To do so, we will look at the rise of Coca-Cola abroad; the global history of a Zulu migrant laborer’s hit single (which broke records in 1948 by selling more than 100,000 copies) that eventually turned into *The Lion King*’s famous “In the Jungle” song; Bing Crosby’s 1948 hit “Now is the Hour,” which was inspired by a Maori folk song appropriated by white New Zealanders; and the life of Haitian painter and Vodou priest Hector Hyppolite, who died in 1948 after a career that inspired popular ideas about Zombies and the undead.

Week 9: Israel/Palestine

On May 14th, 1948, the head of the international Jewish Agency, David Ben-Gurion, proclaimed the establishment of the state of Israel, transforming what had been a territory under British mandate rule for much of the 20th

century into a newly independent state founded on the premise of Jewish unity. The resulting war of 1948 drew in seven different Arab countries fighting against Israeli forces and resulted in a decisive victory for Israel and a catastrophic loss for Arab forces. It also led to the tragedy of “the Nakba” and the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees, whose political status remained unresolved in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations for decades to come.

Week 10: Overpopulation and the Birth Control Pill in Puerto Rico

In 1948, William Vogt published his famous book *Road to Survival* decrying concerns about the environment and overpopulation. At the same time, feminist movements – and, also, an accompanying racist eugenicist desire to limit certain populations from reproducing – increased the desire for a way to control reproduction.

Week 11: The Kinsey Report and Global Sexuality Studies

In 1948, Alfred Kinsey published the first of two of his reports on human sexual behavior. The reports prompted a conversation about sexuality in the United States and, to a lesser extent, beyond. This week places this report and its consequences in global context.

Week 12: Communism in 1948

Exactly one hundred years after Marx and Engels published their *Communist Manifesto*, 1948 saw a number of communist movements around the globe. This week will look at the development of communist ideology and its various implementations over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, culminating in an examination of several different case studies of the year 1948, from Colombia to Seattle, Washington.

Week 13: Drugs around the World

In publishing his *Drug Plants of Africa* in 1948, Thomas S. Githens joined a growing group of scientists and legislators around the world interested in the study and regulation of plants and related drugs. Starting with perhaps the most famous global history drug war, this week will begin with the Opium Wars and the subsequent changes in Britain and China’s relationship. We will then look at the Rastafarian movement’s use of marijuana and its inspiration in a 20th-century healing leader from Rwanda named Nyabingi. Finally, we’ll conclude with the increasing efforts of international bodies to legislate against illegal substances.

Week 14: Zooming In

What can “small spaces” and microhistory tell us about global trends of the era? This week, will look at three events of 1948 to answer these questions: a 1948 ban on the “Kitawala” public healing movement in eastern Congo;

a 1948 flood that destroyed the predominantly Black town of Vanport, Oregon; and Australia's most famous mystery case that began in 1948 when a man was found dead on Somerton Beach. These cases will help us explore additional important themes of the modern era: archival silences, environmental racism, and questions about how technologies and cultural practices helped mark and define identity in an increasingly global world.

Week 15: (De)constructing 1948

Our final week of class will revisit the first event we studied in this class: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. What can we say about the Declaration of Human Rights, passed in December of 1948, now that we have a better understanding of the events that preceded it? How can we make sense of the abstentions by South Africa and the Soviet Bloc given our previous weeks' lessons? Is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights the most global event of 1948? Why or why not?