THE SUBJECTIVE SELF: TEACHING STUDENT HISTORIANS TO ASK ‘WHO AM I’?\(^1\)

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INTRODUCTION

Historians had long been grappling with the idea of objectivity in historical scholarship when I, as an undergraduate, was first introduced to the issue. Objectivity, said my professors, was the goal toward which we must all strive, putting aside our politics and personal feelings in the service of crafting clear-sighted, enlightened histories. I was taught to simultaneously look for the bias in someone else’s writing while stripping it from my own. We might never reach goal of a truly objective piece of scholarship, my professors taught, but we should do nothing less than try. "I" had no place in history—and just as my professors taught me to write a paper without the use of that pronoun, they taught me that the rest of my work should resist the subjective influence of self as well.

My professors were drawing on a rich professional heritage of objectivism. As Peter Novick writes in his key work on objectivity in historical endeavors, *That Noble Dream*, "[i]t was the rock on which the venture was constituted, its continuing raison d’être. It has been the quality which the profession has prized and praised above all others—whether in historians or in their works. It has been the key term in defining progress in historical scholarship: moving ever closer to the objective truth about the past.”\(^2\) Rooted in the nineteenth-century belief that good historical scholarship had much in common with the scientific method, “historians shared the optimism of the generalized sciences . . . that methodologically controlled research makes objective knowledge possible.”\(^3\) Despite many criticisms of such an approach from the perspective of cultural theory and literary criticism, the idea of objectivity is still one to which many historians cleave.

Yet I posit that rather than discard the subjective self, we should consciously reflect on and value it—that we should consider the "I" in history. As Nigel Raab argues in *Who is the Historian?*, too uncritical

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1 Thank you to the students of HIST 285: The Historian’s Workshop, winter term, 2015, for permission to discuss their work, and to Jennifer Dowell and the anonymous reviewers of an earlier version of this essay.


an acceptance of the idea of objectivity leads readers to forget “that a historian stands between the past and a text.” I discovered this as I taught my students—first as a graduate instructor, then as a professor—to be critical consumers of historical works. Just as I had them think about context when evaluating the meaning of a primary source, I asked them to think about context with regard to secondary texts. Who was the author to tell them anything about the subject at hand, I asked? What was their training? Where did they work? What else had they published—both academic and popular? What did those things tell us about an author’s authority to inform us about the past? And as I strove to make students understand that the text they read was not produced by some god of history decanting ideas onto the page, but rather by a real-life human working under particular circumstances, I expanded this exploration to the personal. My courses often began with me asking a class what a historian did with their time, and alongside conference attendance, research, travel, writing, teaching, and mentoring, I had students list out laundry, making dinner, raising a family, and walking the dog. History is a human creation, I explained. Professional historians do it between all the other things—committee assignments, writing letters of recommendation, and running to the grocery store—that make up our lives.

Since my students are—at least for the duration of the time they are in class with me—working historians, I wanted to find a way to extend this conversation and have them critically reflect on what had influenced their own perspective on history. I hoped that this would make them think seriously about what was involved in historical scholarship, and their own position on historical issues in comparison to others. If someone could Google them, what would they find out that would help them be informed readers of that student’s paper? The assignment outlined below helped make this happen.

## CONTEXT OF THE ASSIGNMENT

I assigned a formal paper on these issues in HIST 285: The Historian's Workshop, winter term, 2015. The Historian's Workshop is a course on historiography, methods, and ethics required of history majors and minors and Integrated International Studies majors at Knox College in Illinois. The course prepares these students to take upper-level research seminars at the next stage of their college careers. Every member of the history faculty teaches the course on a regular basis, with each instructor tracing the historiography of a different field. While I teach the American West, colleagues teach the historiography of U.S. Slavery, WWII in the Pacific, Ancient Judea, and Winston Churchill (among others). The goal of all iterations of the course is the same—to allow students to discover history as a fluid, culturally constructed, interpretive discipline.

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5 Knox College is a small, residential liberal arts school. At the beginning of the 2014-2015 academic year, the college had 1399 degree-seeking students, 58% of whom identified as female, and 42% as male. (The college does not currently track individuals of other gender identities). 35% of the students were U.S.-born students of color, while 13% were international students. All statistics provided by the Knox College Office of Institutional Research.

6 I have previously written about an earlier iteration of this course in "Atoms, Honeycombs, and Fabric Scraps: Rethinking Timelines in the Undergraduate Classroom," *The History Teacher*, 46:3 (May 2013): 415-434.
I laid the foundation for an assignment on the subjective self on day three of the class. Having read essays by Jill Lepore and Same Wineburg, students were asked to find out as much as they could about those authors, and to come to class prepared to discuss what they’d found. They reported back on the qualifications and employment history of each author, which prompted a conversation about the difference between adjuncts, assistants, associates, and full professors, as well as providing students with the tools to assess ideas of prestige and institutional focus when comparing institutions. The students knew which nonprofits the authors worked with, some of where they had traveled in the world, and a handful of facts about their personal lives, gleaned from interviews. When asked if this changed their perception of the authors, the students responded with a resounding "yes!" They had become more human, one said, more fallible. Their ideas seemed less intimidating; the students felt more able to challenge their ideas once they realized the authors were also students of history, albeit at a different level. The students also felt greater trust in the authors, knowing the specifics of their authority to tell them something about the past.

We then pursued similar explorations of the self through the formal channel of our course readings. Students read not only Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis but Wilbur Jacobs' reflections on Turner as a teacher and Allan Bogue's article on Turner's years in Wisconsin. These readings personalized Turner as a teacher who brought his own research into the classroom and who was happiest wrestling with primary sources, as well as a faculty member whose career goals, politics, and concern for a wife with virulent hay fever shaped his professional life. We plumbed the depths of Turner's historical arguments, weighing his evidence and debating the soundness of his thesis, while also keeping in mind the time and place in which he wrote—the backdrop of the World's Columbian Exposition; the apparent end of the great Plains Wars; the heightened anxiety of white middle- and upper-class society regarding race and masculinity; the rumblings of imperialism that would play out throughout the 1890s. None of these considerations caused students to dismiss the flaws in Turner's work, but rather to understand the limitations of what he could potentially imagine or was interested in.

**THE ASSIGNMENT**

The midterm assignment had two parts. First, students were asked to fill out a Social Identity Wheel commonly used in Intergroup Dialogue programs to prompt conversation about identity, privilege, and discrimination (see Figure 1).

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I used the wheel to encourage students to consider all the identities which accompanied them into the classroom, identities that shaped who they were in terms of class, race, sexuality, gender, religion, and first language, identities that influenced what they thought was important in the past. The questions in the center of the wheel allowed us to have a conversation about privilege and discrimination—commonly, although not exclusively, the answers to the first question reveal the areas where students experience the most privilege, whereas question two points to places where they might experience oppression. There was no requirement that students share all these identities with me; rather, the wheel and the questions inside it were a prompt to get them thinking about what made them who they are, and how that might influence the way they both received and created history. Second, I offered the following paper prompt:

Reflect critically on who you are as a historian. What has influenced the way you approach learning, research, and writing? What privileges do you possess, and what prejudices do you face? How do these, and other considerations, shape your historical work?

FIGURE 1
SAMPLE OUTCOMES

The results were extremely thoughtful, and caused students to deeply engage with their subjective selves.\(^\text{10}\) "When reading a book [or] article . . . you must first think about the writer's background before you begin to agree or disagree with them," wrote Natasha, a sophomore. "As a historian, you try and do research [in] as unbiased [manner] as you can, but in reality, you can't really take all bias out of anything." Melinda, a first-year, similarly questioned whether you could remove bias from the things you created. "Is this really possible? In all honesty, I feel as though that is humanly impossible. . . . It is inevitable that our backgrounds shape our perspective and guide us through our lives."

Students recognized that educational opportunities (or their lack) had shaped the sort of historian they’d become. First-year Maria identified her years in the International Baccalaureate program as foundational for her as a historian. "Those were the classes when I was first taught to recognize historiographical differentiation; those were the classes where I (forcibly) learned how to judge documents. I think that the approach my teachers used greatly improved my skills in a very short time." Junior Beth concurred. "I think that one of the most significant influences on my identity as a historian is my educational experience. Both at my high school . . . and at Knox, teachers in a wide variety of subjects have encouraged me to engage with texts and ask questions about who wrote it, under what circumstances, and to what end." Steve, a junior, situated his educational experiences within a historical framework. "The beginning of my formal education marked the beginning of . . . No Child Left Behind," he wrote. "Myself and other students were taught more rote learning and how to 'take a test' rather than actually learn the material, possibly skewing our views of what we assume to be knowledge." Melinda also cast a critical eye over her education. "I . . . feel like I was cheated in the education system," she wrote. "Because of my socio-economic background and where I lived at certain points of my life, I went to schools that didn't truly care about education and providing the best for their students. . . . I believe this has shaped me as a historian because I feel like I have to work 10x harder to retain and get the knowledge that many students already have. Many times I feel stupid, or behind, because I was unable to get that rich curriculum."

Racial identity proved a powerful influence on many students, both in understanding where they came from and thinking about what kinds of history were important to them. "I'm a cisgendered white male reading mostly about other cisgendered white males in my textbooks and library books," wrote James. "So from that rather typical and, in hindsight, really restrictive view of history I guess I'm trying to expand my understanding." Steve also talked about his whiteness. "I am white. Being aware of this as my bias—as well as privilege—[comes] from the fact that institutional racism is still very prominent in our society. . . . It is vital for me to acknowledge those who do not have this privilege because they are put at a huge disadvantage and may not have the [same] opportunities to have their story heard." Natasha commented on the distance between conventional narratives about American settlement and her own lived experience. "It's almost fascinating . . . doing research on the colonists who were first beginning to settle in America, while my ancestors had been here for hundreds of years already," she wrote. Melinda offered another perspective. "I experienced racism from teachers and people I called . . .

\(^{10}\) All quotes are taken from the papers of students in HIST 285, winter term, 2015. These papers are in the author’s possession, and copies are available upon request. There were seven students in the class. In transcribing the students’ words for this article, I have corrected spelling and punctuation, but preserved the structure of sentences. All student names have been anonymized.
friends [when I was younger]," she explained. "I believe this shaped me as a historian because I was able to feel that racial injustice . . . [and] open my eyes and be aware that it is present and it is a problem [even now]."

Students offered thoughtful reflections on the impact of their gender and sexuality on their work. "We still live in a somewhat misogynistic world," wrote Natasha "so people like me who, one, is a woman and two, is Hispanic, have a lot to prove." Steve offered the flip side of that statement. "My gender, being male . . . is very important considering we live in a patriarchal society. When it comes to major factors of our society males receive a large benefit over females." Beth saw a direct connection between her gender and sexuality and the history she wanted to write. "I constantly think: where are the women? Are there stories about queer individuals that could help me understand the historical issue or period more? . . . I make it a goal, not just in my history classes, but in every one of my classes, to look for what documents tell me about female life at that time." James summarized a common theme: "It's a little cliché, but the idea that Africa and pre-USA America were void of civilization, women were passive in history, and LGBT people are a new development really needs to be changed and I hope to [play] a role in that."

This exercise helped students understand how their identities played out in the way they approached history, both as creators and readers of historical texts, and listeners of oral history. "Looking in previous papers I have written, I can begin to see the result of the societal conditions in which I live; we live in a culture of exclusivity that is trying to develop inclusivity, and, in each paper, I try to find a space for nearly every social class, gender, and race, sometimes where it doesn't even fit," wrote Beth. James offered a definitive statement of the historian he wanted to be: "I want to learn more about how women impacted history in both small and large ways, get more knowledge on world history as opposed to European, and other groups that have been excluded in my learning."

**LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES**

This assignment made it apparent to each student that they had individual experiences that shaped who they were, and that they related to history in different ways because of that. As a result, “perspective” replaced “bias” in our lexicon. Where bias sometimes suggested that sources might be unusable because of the baggage they carried, perspective implied an evening-out of expectations, an understanding that we are all creatures of our cultural moment, and a valuing of identity for how it shapes our work. Perspective is not a term we used in class uncritically – perspectives could negatively, as well as positively, color texts. But as Melinda summed up in her paper, "I believe it is important as a historian to realize that your background and experiences growing up shapes [sic.] you as a person, and can heavily influence your work as a historian."

It also became clear to the students through this assignment that their voices were unique and important. Assignments of all kinds can seem like a ‘check the box’ exercise on the way to a grade, I proposed to them, but the identities the students had shared suggested that each assignment was the opportunity for them to share their unique perspective on the past, to plug a tiny hole in our collective historical thinking. Each piece of writing students created was a product of unique circumstances, and the students of HIST 285 flourished as they realized each of their voices really mattered, because there was no other voice exactly like it.