

An Interview with a World Historian: Deborah Smith Johnston, a World History Association Awardee as a “Pioneer in World History”



Deborah Smith Johnston was recently recognized by the World History Association as a “Pioneer in World History.” A full-time high school teacher for the better part of the last 35 years, she excelled as a teacher of world history even before her graduate studies culminated in 2004 in a doctorate in world history from Northeastern University. Her dissertation addressed innovative approaches to teaching the world history survey at all levels of instruction. In the past, she has taught International Relations, Human Rights, International Terrorism, Humanities, US Foreign Policy, Middle East Studies, African History and Geography, as well as graduate and undergraduate courses for pre-service and veteran teachers. She has taught public school in New York and Massachusetts and at private schools in Washington, Shanghai, Beijing, and currently in Los Angeles. She has worked as a consultant for the College Board and for the National Geographic Society and has directed workshops for teachers all over the globe on teaching World history. She is also a published scholar, including articles in this journal, to which she, in this and other ways, contributed to its creation.

The following is an edited transcript of an interview that was conducted via telephone by Marc Jason Gilbert, the editor of *World History Connected*, on October 23, 2022.

The Interview

Gilbert: In May, 1984, you were the recipient of the Global Education Teachers of the Year Award at the Massachusetts Statehouse in Boston. Let us start this interview by asking you to talk about the influences (family, early education, and other experiences, such as travel) that led to this early recognition of your devotion to teaching world history.

Johnston: I was born in Canada, but a major early influence was my fantastic world history teacher in grade 10 in Plano, Texas. He was the kind of teacher who danced on the table dressed up as King Tut and had me take on the role of a Swiss judge putting Hitler on trial. That was my first exposure to there being multiple perspectives in history and to not make assumptions about there being only one view of history. Then right after that my family moved overseas and, I think living in both London, England and Cairo, Egypt I was immediately thrown into even more culture shock than having been born in Canada and moving to Texas, which I still say is the biggest culture shock I have ever experienced. So, those were transformative moments for me on how I thought about the world. Another formative experience was in a Model United Nations role play conducted by my International Relations teacher in grade 12. This was in 1979, and my assigned nation was the Soviet Union, which required me to defend the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. I look back at that now with what is happening in Ukraine, and I know that having that kind of world view and having to look at multiple perspectives even when we disagree with something is really valuable in history. That is certainly what I try to teach my students, helping them to develop a world view and look at things from multiple perspectives.

Gilbert: Did a teacher influence your subsequent path to the Global Education award in 1984?

Johnston: Yes! At that time, I had been teaching for four years in the Plymouth, Massachusetts school system and had an amazing mentor, Patricia Dye, who was the head of the social studies department. She was really influential in helping me to find myself professionally, to begin presenting papers, and thinking about networking in a variety of ways. About that time, I was working with a local geography organization, was just becoming a National Geographic consultant, and doing some work with the Massachusetts Social Studies Council. These were things that initially drew the attention of education officials, but the award may have come from my work with students, which included traveling to Belize to work on a rain forest conservation project. Anyway, it was a combination of things.

Gilbert: From 1985 to 1989, you laid much of the academic foundation of your career, winning a prize in Peace Education at Teachers College at Columbia University and, in 1989, earning an MA with an emphasis on the Soviet Union and Security Studies from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs. By 1989, you had also begun a career as a teaching consultant alongside your regular teaching positions. How did these experiences add to your portfolio not only as a world historian, but as a teacher?

Johnston: I think a lot of the work I did in both college and graduate school at that time contributed to my later collaboration with teachers. In college I had gone to Yugoslavia when there was still a country called Yugoslavia. In college, I lived in an international dormitory. I was a Russian studies major and had my honeymoon there. As a result of those experiences, I ended up going to Columbia and doing my degree in international relations there at SIPA (the School of International and Public Affairs.)

The CIA tried to recruit me because of my knowledge of Russian and my work with security issues but at that point I had already found another calling. I had decided that what I really wanted to do was not so much the peace education part of things as it was education itself. I began working with another incredible woman, Betty Reardon, at Columbia's Teachers College. She really inspired me to begin working with teachers and doing workshops for teachers. This was at the same time that I audited Kevin Reilly's course in thematic world history at Columbia, and I began to really see the light [Editor's Note: Kevin Reilly was and remains a leading figure in what became known as the New World History and a foundational influence over its teaching, though his published research and scholarship of teaching].

I also had the opportunity to work as an intern with a group called "Educators for Social Responsibility" in New York City. I was working in the projects in Brooklyn as well as on the West Side. I did a workshop with them on teaching controversial issues which has influenced much of my teaching ever since.

I think the reason that I have loved working as a teacher consultant is because I am able to share with them some of that excitement, energy, *and passion* I have when working with students. But I could never work as admin or only as a consultant because I do not think I would be credible if I wasn't in the classroom with students. I have missed collaborating with AP teachers the last two summers during COVID. It is the first time in 25 years that I have not. But I still get excited working with colleagues at my school and in joint presentations with colleagues from across the country.

Gilbert: In 1993 you launched at your own high school a sophomore world history survey, what was that like: its challenges and satisfactions?

Johnston: That was the first time I was teaching a world history survey. Over the course of the last 20 years, I have had the good fortune to be able to work with colleagues who support the world history project, as some would call it. There is always that tension between how much breadth and how much depth. Which case studies do we do in order to make sure that we are representative of the world? But we also need to be sure that we are being developmentally appropriate for early learners, who cannot do 1,000 pages in a year or the content of all of world history in even two years.

My experience teaching the world history survey has always been a positive one. I believe in the survey. I also acknowledge that there are challenges. How do you provide that big picture and what are the criteria behind which case studies are chosen? I think every year I make different decisions and at every school I move to, based on discussions with team members and the background of the students. I had a conversation with a colleague the other day and we were going back and forth on how much is too much and how do you approach this current unit I am doing with my grade 9 students on belief systems. How do you choose which religions not to do when you cannot do them all?

What is most important for grade 9 students to learn about and what are the questions we want to ask them? At root, the most important thing is for students to learn the skills of being an historian-- developing a worldview by looking at multiple perspectives, evaluating source materials, and We are doing a thematic approach at my current school and there are some people who are really frustrated by the thematic approach because they can no longer do everything and have to make choices about what are the right case studies to do for each theme as we go through time and how chronological does it need to be or not. While we all understand that students don't need to learn everything, we want to ensure that they are exposed to a diverse range of places and topics that help all of our students celebrate their own identities and also appreciate others.

Gilbert: Before we get to the Advanced Placement World History course and your involvement in its development, there is always an argument in the milelong and an inch deep and an inch deep that you just described and that some world history textbooks address better than others. but the challenges of choosing what to teach and I have always encounter this as I give teaching workshops I ask what the major challenge is, and it is this belief that if it is in a textbook you have to cover it amongst teachers. Have you experienced that much?

Johnston: There are teachers who believe that is a weakness of the world history survey. You see this sometimes on the world history chat groups, the AP World history chat groups. They ask, "It's January, and I am on Chapter 22, where are you? That is not how I operate. I love using the textbook as a reference and a resource for students. I would never have a test on Chapter 5. Instead, it would be a test on belief systems from

which we might be drawing page from Chapter 3, Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 depending on the topic. I absolutely believe that younger students in particular have to have a chronological approach to history and within that chronological approach you can spiral themes and case studies to help them interested. When I was working on my dissertation, I made the argument that when you choose a theme, it needs to be one theme at time. You cannot have five themes necessarily for one unit because that is too much for younger students. But with juniors and seniors in high school and college you can be much more flexible.

With grade 9 and 10 students you really need to have to give them a framework with which to connect things. If you give them 3, 4, or 5 themes than you are just giving them key questions to focus upon. But if I can make a unit that is a theme, for example this current one that I am doing with grade 9 is Finding Meaning. We are doing that through belief systems and legal codes. It allows them to really hook on to that particular idea when there is a verb there that allows them to *debate* things. I also allows them to link things to the present. So, this weekend I was looking at the current events they focused on, something we do at least once a unit, allowing them to make connections between finding meaning in today's society with what we are doing historically. Students focused on protests in Iran, and in their own community with antisemitism, and with other global events. These kinds of connections allow students to see contemporary linkages: that can really make thematic teaching powerful. This in turn can make the survey feel less like an onerous march through time and more like something dynamic for students to work with.

Gilbert: Within history there has long been an assault on presentism, which is really at the heart of current events and using current events to teach the past. Some teachers actually flip the course and start with the present and work back. Personally, I do not think that is a very sound way of looking at world history education, but have you ever flipped a course like that?

Johnston: I have not because it is important to start at the beginning both in terms of big history, as well as world history. I think by starting there you provide the students with the building blocks of understanding how the present has come to be. That said I do begin with them as individuals. My ninth graders began the year thinking about themselves and their personal histories, their personal timeline, and how their world view has been shaped. So, we do an activity where they have to draw a suitcase with their cultural baggage in it. For example, they would share within the suitcase what are their different identities as to what sibling order they are in, it might be religion, sexuality, ethnicity, travel, sports whatever so as to include all those things that shape how they see the world. So, once we have grounded them in who they are and how they

view the world, we start at the beginning of history and move forward, making those contemporary connections along the way.

It is really important that students know why they are studying history. We might want to say they are studying history because it is important but unless you can show younger students in particular why it is important and why history still lives in the present it is tough for them to be invested. So, in our first unit we did a UNESCO presentation and had the students investigate a World Heritage site. Learning about its significance and then advocating for its preservation in order to get funding from the board. So, they did a presentation showing the significance of this historical site and why it continues to be important to advocate for it. So, there were the Tombs of Buganda, the city of Potosi, the old city of Jerusalem, the Palestinian site of Battir, and others which are on the World Heritage risk list. Students got so impassioned by these sites that they are continuing to bring them up as comparative examples when we are studying ancient river valley societies. It is really exciting for them to see the relevance of what we are studying today even it might be 5,000 years in the past. There are still relevant connections to today whether that is in terms of tourism or in terms of cultural preservation.

Gilbert: In Star Trek, the Russian navigator, Pavel, remarks, when any new device comes up, “We [meaning the Russians] invented it.” What happens when you have Pavels in your class in an era in which Nail Ferguson argues that European history is all that matters, and other societies countries have nothing to contribute. This despite Western Civilization’s obvious (to us) non-European roots? How do you respond to their exceptionalism?

Johnston: It is a great question. It is one that I am struggling with more now than I have ever in part because I think historically that even if there were holocaust deniers in the room you do not give credence to an argument where there is no historical evidence. But as a teacher you want to give a place for multiple perspectives in the room, but, yes, it feels like a different age right now in terms of how people are arguing for different things even if there are no facts to back it up.

I felt that way when I was teaching in China to a degree. I had younger Chinese students who were obviously very nationalistic and had been brought up on the nation’s curriculum believing that “China invented everything.” On the other hand, I had Chinese students who were older, who as part of their response to that indoctrination as they became older, wanted *only* to know Western stuff. Like Ferguson, they believed there was little to learn from Latin America and Africa. That is in part due to some of the racism that is present in China against Africa and other places. But it is also due to their thinking that Western Civilization must be where all the answers are. So, we worked

with that a lot in terms of how do you treat the world respectfully, taking a positive approach, showing how they can benefit from a global perspective.

I am not sure what the answer is to this problem, but I do think we that can engage different perspectives through evidence. So, I talk to my students about things they can respect, such as sewage systems in the Indus Valley and toilets in east Africa in Kilwa in the 1300 and 1400s. Impressive stuff. Then I ask them what were people in London were doing in the 1800s, suffering with cholera epidemics due to poor “drainage.” Students love getting down and dirty with toilets, being young. That kind of comparison across time and civilization, has the potential to shut the Pavels up.

Gilbert: That is as good an answer that anyone can give in terms of seeking practical and effective classrooms techniques when encountering arguments by students for whom evidence does not matter, whose nationalist emotions run deep, and/ or who automatically assume the information we are providing them is distorted: none of them entirely new phenomena, but seemingly more intense today, at least to us.

Johnston: I think that is the great crisis of education right now. We need to ensure that students are understanding how to evaluate their sources more than ever as now -- they access to the world at their fingertips, but we want them to think critically about those lenses on the world that they encounter. This is not just a world history issue but a crisis we are seeing throughout education.

Gilbert: I would like to return to your formative experiences by addressing your work at Northeastern University, where you not only received your doctorate in world history and contributed to the development of its World History Center, but also helped in developing training for the Advanced Placement Course in World History, all while collaborating with the Director of the Center, Patrick Manning, known to most world historians as Pat.

Johnston: I just happened to be at the right place at the right time. I started working with Pat when I began work on my doctorate in 1997. I worked closely with him at Northeastern when he was on the AP drafting committee. He gave me insights into some of the committee’s discussions. It helped that my dissertation was on an examination of teaching in world history, so that it was natural that working on that with Pat I learned from what he was talking and thinking about in the AP committee meetings.

I was his sounding board and then he was mine. We just happened to get in on the ground floor. I had not worked on previous AP programs as had many of my colleagues had done. I was initially super excited by the course due to the fact that students were now being asked to take a rigorous look at world history and really think about this as an opportunity to develop skills as well as a global perspective. I think the

intent always of the founders of the course and of those early committees was to make sure that students did have multiple perspectives going into it and had the big picture version of what was happening in the world.

It is interesting that I taught my first world history course in Massachusetts (a tenth grade course) before the Advanced Placement World History course first emerged from a series of committees and workshops in the late 1990s. World history courses were already happening in schools around the country. This may have been one of the reasons why AP World History was made part of the ninth and/ or tenth grade.

The course needs a two year commitment for students to really be able to have an overview of truly global world history. To be honest, it was difficult for me after the course separated.

Gilbert: Here you are referring to the fact that the course began with pre-history and unlike many survey history courses went past 1945, but a few years ago it was decided to start the AP Modern course in 1400 which of course eliminated the creation of the world's dominant religions, and can mask the global influence the non-European world on world history, especially those of China, the source of much of the world's wealth and scientific knowledge as late as the mid-19th century. Having been around you and Pat at some of the early AP readings and having conducted two of the first series of National Endowments for the Humanities/College Board teacher -training workshops, I was as deflated to learn of this change as you were.

Johnston: Yes, because after the change, students would not have the same background coming into what was now a AP "World History Modern course. Without having anything before 1400, you cannot do that in a couple of weeks as a catch-up even in a one year "Modern" course (most schools do not have a two- year program).

I have always taught at places that do have a two year course, intentionally, because it is difficult to study world history with only a part of that history there. I do appreciate the fact that the AP World History course has moved more toward building skills in the same way that the other AP history courses have evolved. Over the past four years, I have taught the International Baccalaureate (IB) with the same emphasis, but I am still of the mind that the more foreshortened and prescriptive that the world history course becomes, even if it is intended to help teachers, it actually allows for less opportunities for teachers to feel the course is their own, and also it has provided an opportunity for some to provide a more Eurocentric narrative once again. I feel the AP course is not the course that it was when it started in 2000.

Gilbert: I would like to provide a brief summary of your activities since 2000 and then ask my final question. After your work at Northeastern, you became a recognized leader in the conduct of world history teacher training workshops. In time, these efforts spread

from the U.S. to China, where you moved with your family and taught world history at two excellent Chinese private schools as Department Head, as well as an Instructor. Your work there came to a close in 2022, but as a teacher you continued to excel: in 2018 you were the recipient of James F. Harris History Teacher Award for the National History Day Program, presented at National History Day Worlds. Now, you are teaching in Los Angeles at an exceptional school in one of the most diverse human environments in the world, doing what you love, teaching the subject that you love, and continuing to diversify the history curriculum, as has always been your aim.

Which brings me to my last question. Your development as a world history teacher, your passage to an academic degree, your success at teaching at a variety of institutions, and your marvelous teaching workshops-- all of which was to earn the ultimate WHA recognition, as a “Pioneer in World History-- was accomplished while helping to raise a family, and bringing home your share of the bacon.

How did you do it? What resources did you rely on? How did your children factor into your education and their own (as I know how much the latter have always meant to you); what influences not yet spoken here helped you on your way, and what skills or mindsets might you suggest are of value to building such a life. Such an answer might include being considerate, generous, and nice as you have been in granting and participating in this interview, for which you will have the last word.

Johnston: Having a supportive life partner has been crucial-- my husband was there for our family when I couldn't be. My children often traveled with me to conferences, gaining their own world perspective, preparing them to later live in China. My son went to his first AHA meeting at the age of 3 months-- I remembered diapers but not business cards that trip. His first WHA meeting was in Beijing when he was eleven. Our travel as a family was often guided by historical interests. For example, a trip to New Zealand provided an opportunity for my daughter to do oral history interviews with Māori people for her National History Day project, a documentary that earned her a trip to Washington DC to compete in the finals.

But professionally, what made my work life as a world historian not only possible, but worthwhile, was always being curious. I have welcomed the opportunity over the years to keep learning, at conferences, through reading, through travel, and through research. Keeping my own teaching fresh, collaborating with colleagues across the world, and always being willing to learn new strategies and new content has been key to my happiness as an educator, and perhaps my success as a world historian.