An interview with a World Historian: Trevor R. Getz

The following is the transcript of an interview with Trevor R. Getz, a historian of African and World History at San Francisco State University. His interests include history education, critical theory, and popular ways of thinking about the past, including modern imperialism and colonialism. He is currently the principle content manager for the *World History Project* and series editor for the Oxford University Press's *Uncovering World History* series. He is also a collaborator on both the Open Education Resource Project (OER Project), which is extremely rich in free digital modular content created and shared by educators, and *History for the 21st Century Project* (H21), which is a collaborative effort to help instructors "seeking to be responsive to the changing environments in which our students are learning and we are teaching."

The interview was conducted via telephone by Marc Jason Gilbert, the editor of *World History Connected* on February 11, 2021. Gilbert is referred to in the interview in relation to his work placing Asia in world historical perspective in ways designed to be accessible to students, such as *South Asia in World History* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

The Interview

Gilbert: One of the first questions I always ask at an interview with a world historian, and always receives an interesting reply, is did parents, childhood or family origins influence you to become interested in history?

Getz: I think if I were to point to one thing, it was definitely my grandfather, who was Jewish and Polish. He and his family had moved to South Africa to escape events in Poland in the 1930's. He fought for the British Army during WWII. I used to sit next to him while he would tell me long stories of the war, show me material objects like medals and bars of wartime and draw illustrative diagrams. I am not a military historian, but without a doubt that is what got me interested in the past. I think the first history books I read were all about the Second World War.

Gilbert: Can you describe your coming to America from South Africa?

Getz: In 1979 my parents decided to leave South Africa. They had been somewhat active in the anti-apartheid movement, which had led to many of their friends ending up being jailed or exiled. My mother's ex-boyfriend went to jail for a long time for trying to steal some apartheid era nuclear sites, so my family decided it was time to leave. We moved to the exciting metropolis of Walnut Creek, California, where my father had a position as an Assistant Professor in the agronomy program at the nearby University of California at Berkeley.

Gilbert: So, you naturally went to the University of California Berkley?

Getz: Yeah, it was in my backyard. I will say those were the days when it was a bit easier to get into Berkeley than it is now. Now it is just about impossible. At Berkeley, I studied anthropology and history. I took classes with Tabitha Kanogo who was the Africanist at Berkeley. Dr. Kanogo is actually a historian of Kenya but, among other things, she taught South African history. I think I took all of the classes she offered while I was there.

Gilbert: Did your experiences at Berkeley provide any base for understanding that the world was in Africa and Africa in the world?

Getz: I think I was definitely influenced by ideas I picked up from Dr. Laura Nader that in anthropology among others that you cannot understand the world if you are *just* looking at it from Berkeley or Madison or Ann Arbor. You have to see what it looks like from Libreville or Accra, or Nairobi or rural areas, if you are to understand how the whole thing works. I think that was exciting to me: the idea that these places are all connected and that by looking at them from a different location from the one you are at, you can gain some insight into your own life and your own community and how everything worked.

Gilbert: Did that understanding lead to do your take your Master's Degree at the University of Cape Town?

Getz: Yes, absolutely. I think I wanted to go somewhere and look at things from a different perspective. There were some exciting people in Cape Town whose work I wanted to know more about and certainly one of them was Chris Saunders, then doing pioneering comparative work on the United States and South Africa that grew in importance over time. When Chris agreed to supervise my MA in Cape Town, I didn't have any second thoughts; I jumped at the chance, though I came as a bit of a shock to him. Like some Californians, I was rambunctious, loud, and, informal. He was British and formal, scholarly and very careful. I have to say that is part of the reason I learned so much from him, because I really sort of had to become a more disciplined student to be a good graduate student under him.

Gilbert: Did you have the same experience when you next went to London University School for Oriental and African Studies (SOAS)?

Getz: I went to SOAS because I had seen Richard Rathbone speak in Cape Town and I was just blown away. Richard is a different sort from Chris. Richard's heart is all out there and he taught me to empathize and to really understand the experience and perspective of the people I was studying. From Chris I really learned method. From Richard I learned caring and ethics and the kind of things that drive you to really make sure that your work is relevant and authentic to the people you are studying. I could not have asked for a better grad school experience, but my two supervisors were certainly very different.

Gilbert: You earned your PhD from SOAS in 2000. What were your feelings then about entering the search for academic employment?

Getz: First of all, I should say that I got exactly one on campus interview, and one job offer. God bless the people of the University of New Orleans who made it. I will always be thankful to its History Department for giving me a chance. The job market was tight; it is even tighter now. I thought I was going to be teaching a lot of African history. They did give me an opportunity to teach African history, but they told me, "You are going to be teaching our world history survey." I then had two thoughts, first, "World History—what is this thing?," which I said out loud! And the other was that I better pick up Bentley and Ziegler and all the other text world history survey text books and see what the heck I am supposed to be teaching. My wife and I had our first child and my first semester was starting and I was in a new place and it was hectic for a little while there. But, I will say it was a great experience to be in a department that cared about world history, and was an overall great department when I was there. It still is.

Gilbert: But you subsequently moved to San Francisco State University in California.

Getz: The move to California was all about moving home. I was sad to leave a Department with a focus on world history, but when you have small children and you get the opportunity to move home you have to take it. I must say that I found immediately that is was a welcoming department. I have been very fortunate. I have seen all kinds of politics that a university can have, but I have always been in departments that seem to work. My first department chair at SF State made it possible for me to do interesting things in world history. He allowed me to experiment a little bit by proposing some new classes. That's when I really started to learn about how to construct a world history course that was more than just a broad survey of what happened and to really bring out questions of why did this subject matter, how skills students enrolled in such classes develop skills along the way that could serve them in life.

Gilbert: While you were developing these courses and hitting the essential point of global citizenship and critical thinking, you applied for a Fulbright to go back to Africa.

Getz: I can speak at some length about this. I think one of the most important experiences in my intellectual development was spending a year in South Africa. My proposal for Fulbright award was to go find out how global history was taught in South Africa. I was at the University of Stellenbosch and at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) . I think my time at the University of the Western Cape in particular was incredible as it made me reexamine the way I thought about world history. There are at least four ways in which that is true. The first is that the history department at UWC had really sat down and talked as a group about how their first year course would address the needs of their students. Over time, they had they had developed a course, more modular in approach, that was intentionally designed to help their students unlearn some of the lessons of rote learning and obedience to their professors that were emphasized under the Apartheid system. They sought to train students to question course content and bring into their classes their indigenous, local and family knowledge to their course subjects.

One of the most amazing things I saw right off were classes where professors debated each other, argued with each other, and there were special organized activities where students learned to question their book and to see that footnotes could be misleading so as to gain skills that the department knew they did not have. I thought they had really spent a lot of time to achieve these goals. Here is one great example. While I was there, many of the professors at that university and in my department who were English speakers were learning isiXhosa, the language, which was the students' home language. They did not see students' lack of strong English skills as a deficit. They saw their own lack of isiXhosa as a deficit. After that, I told myself that I would everything I could try to emulate that sensibility.

Gilbert: When you returned to the United States, you apparently did when writing a modular book with Brizuela-Garcia Esperanza of Montclair State University *entitled African Histories : New Sources and New Techniques for Studying African Pasts* (Prentice Hall, 2012).

Getz: Because Esperanza and I had been at the School of African and Oriental Studies together, we knew each other well and we were both really experiencing the full range of different methods and skills that could be developed employing African history. I think we decided to get together to write a book where we could share them with our students and also with other instructors. I actually worked on it while I was at UWC and I remember that part of the wonderful thing about being there was having access to resources and material while participating in the really vibrant academic life of scholars in Africa, which helped me I developed my approach using units that could help students take on method and theory and practice skills and also to learn content at the same time. It was focused

on African history, but later I became very interested in doing the same through a world history approach as well.

Gilbert: You were also able to adapt your experiences in South Africa into a new direction, that of graphic novels and graphic histories. Your *Abina and the Important Men* (New Yok Oxford University Press; now in its 2nd edition, 2015), which became I think an instant classic. That book of course reflects your experiences at UWC , but it was also probably a product of many other influences. Moreover, how did you approach that work? How did you come to think that a graphic history might be a wonderful way of teaching active learning, and relevant learning, for students?

Getz: I did kind of position it just in that light. It reflected the time I was at UWC. I was really thinking about everything I was going to do in my classroom and my students' needs. By the time I got back to San Francisco State, I saw more clearly than I had before how my students were having trouble learning, and became determined to help them grasp the ways in which history could tend to silence certain people's voices and how historians could use historical method, ethics, and theory together to try to understand those voices and bring them out and make history more accurate in that way. To do so, I went back to evidence I started to collect in the 1990s while doing my dissertation and I found Abina's court case. The case had always entranced me due to the critical thinking behind the words of this young woman, Abina Mansah, said in court. I thought, "How can I develop this as a unit for my students?" I took what work on it I did to my students and colleagues who gave me input. I eventually told them that I wanted this to go out to more students and also did not really want to write my work up as an academic article for other historians. I wanted to find a medium could use that will both reach a broader audience and also that is naturally designed around empathy and identification. That is what the comic graphic book medium does wonderfully well and in so many ways. The use of art and text together allows us to really empathize with and connect with the subject of our studies, in this case, the subject of the book. And so, I just thought ,okay, take the risk and try it out. Fortunately, I had two great partners: the South African artist Liz Clarke, who could deliver on that vision, and Charles Cavaliere at Oxford University Press, who was willing to take a risk on it. The three of us managed to do it together really as a team.

Gilbert: I've always wondered how you were able to make people familiar with it and what doors it opened for you.

Getz: Here I have to thank Joe Schmidt, who works for the New York Board of Education, who is a comic book lover and a social science and history education genius, who really liked *Albina and the Important Men*. Also, Bob Bain, a great history educator who I think really pushed for us to get an award from the American Historical Association. Between

the two of them, they helped us spread the word of the book as a tool for high school or college classrooms. I guess it was through those connections that I came to the attention to the folks running the OER Project (Open Education Resource Project), and in particular, Bob Regan, the manager of that Project. He asked me to join the Board and asked me if I cared about high school education. I said you are darn right I do! I joined the Board and started to work with them. I just fell in love with the main ethos of that Project, which is in many ways focused on developing materials that teachers can use, and how they can connect with rather than just trying try to go around asking other teachers. Also, the idea was that materials would be developed by historians and educators working together so that it was really appropriate for the teachers and their students. Finally, OER hoped to create community around the use of resources: I think has been the magic of the OER Project. The materials are just part of it. The whole idea is to create places for teachers to talk about and develop on top of these assets we built for them. So that was the next step for me. Then, I started to really learn from teachers and that was the next moment for me. I could take what I learned from teachers and start putting it into my own projects again at the college level.

Gilbert: OER as an approach is associated with the H21 Project. Could you speak to that a little bit?

Getz: The H21 Project, or history for the twenty- first century, is a partnership and there are many of us involved. Urmi Engineer at Pitzer, Molly Warsh at Pitt, Steve Harris from my own institution, and Jesse Spohnholz at Washington State University. These are all names that are familiar to world history people. My involvement in it came largely through the fact that I wanted to apply some of these lessons I had been learning at UWC and from some high school teachers. The idea is to build modules that are designed to put method and theory and content together, and to pay the people who conceive and build them. So we pay the instructors, the academics to build them for each other to give away for free so that essentially we are building free to use adaptable units that you can put in your world history class and use within the broader survey. The idea is that you will find one that you like , you'll adapt it, you'll do whatever you want with it. It's yours to use. Maybe later you may want to build one for someone else as well and that's the H21 strategy.

Gilbert: The OER Project website is extremely rich. It modular approaches are well-illustrated. It reflects the same desire of digital community- building and open-source (free) sharing of unpaid materials developed by unpaid researchers and practitioners that *World History Connected* does, but using a dashboard-style vehicle, while *WHC* also offering scholarly analysis and case studies of use to both researchers in archives and teachers at many levels of instruction (articles are peer reviewed by college professors and high school teachers). I think both OER and *WHC* both offer tremendous tools for resolving that ridiculous

divisions between high school and university professors. I like to observe that many students in my world history survey are three months out of high school.

Getz: That is precisely right. I couldn't agree more. I do think we need more discussion between high school teachers and professors about vertical integration. What happens to a student who has already taken a world history survey in high school? Now they are taking a world history survey in college. Other than, that the students are actually very similar, right? Whether they are seventeen or nineteen they are not that much different.

Gilbert: Yes. All levels of instruction are share a common focus: remedial development of critical thinking and evidence-based analysis.

Getz: I couldn't agree more, and I think that is it also how to respond to new technologies the way Sam Weinberg's work at Stanford looks at, for example , "how to look for evidence online". You know we have to respond to these sorts of things. I will say that this is a particular focus of the project I am working on with Charles Cavaliere at OUP now, which is the Uncovering [World] History project, which is not free but, which we have been able to put more resources into than *History for the Twenty First Century* perhaps. Many of those modules are really carefully designed around bringing lots of media in and then having students go through the steps of evaluating the evidence I do think we have to be really focused on evidence and on testing evidence, testing claims using evidence and on helping students to construct narratives using evidence. Look, it is just time for us to admit, we have to go back to a focus on evidence and how to use it.

Gilbert: And most the evidentiary approaches—this is an odd way of saying it, is modular world history. Like Abina, you might find what looks like a very small example, but what a better way of teaching large world history concepts focused not only on grand narratives, but also on case studies or modules tailored to bring the gran narratives into sync with all levels of instruction. That was the meaning of dual mission of the World History Association (the promotion of teaching and research), cultivated under the leadership of Heidi Roup, Kevin Reilley, Ross Dunn, and Bob Bain, ably assisted, as Ken Curtis keeps reminding us, by veterans of Area Studies whose trans-national multidisciplinary work was grounded in a love of the evidence necessary to keep them intellectually honest, especially when examining cross-cultural exchanges, which leads me to my next question. Where do you see world history as a field in the future?

Getz: I think this is such an interesting question. If I were to nominate my world history heroes, one of them would be Pat Manning. You know there is a lot of data out there to deal with, especially in the fields in which he is a master, not just African history but world immigration. Pat is a person that has done some serious thinking about what we do with massive global data that is necessary to draw well-founded conclusions. I'm not a data

person. I'm a story person. I'm a humanities style historian. My evidence is usually qualitative, but I think we've got to grapple with the possibilities of quantitative evidence. But the other thing is that I continue to believe that we have to grapple with the fact that there is world history being made all over the place; the work Ross Dunn and you and others have done in looking at Asia world histories. I feel compelled to look at what Africans are producing in terms of world histories. Having this conversation about what world history looks like from different places is also important. But in the end the data provided opportunities and the question is can we grasp those opportunities or not. I think it behooves us to think more seriously than we have about that.

Gilbert: Is there anything you would like to add?

Getz: Other than thanks to you, Marc, I would also like to express my love and appreciation to a number of people who have helped me along the way, such as (the already mentioned) Chris Saunders and Richard Rathbone. Also to my co-authors like Esperanza Brizuela-Garcia, Heather Streets-Salter, as Rebecca Shumway, and my students who helped me understand how do I write what I talk about, all the folks at UWC, and my colleagues at the University of Ghana. When I have a student who does not like to have their work reviewed and who does not like to revise, I have to tell them my whole career has been about people telling me "you got this wrong" and me learning how to be able to change it. Laura Mitchell, President of the WHA, changed the trajectory of *Abina and the Important Men* by writing to me and saying "this is a book about a woman and it's got lots of great stuff, but it is not a gendered book." I had to say, "Oh snap, she's right." You just have to cultivate that kind of community. The community has to be able to talk to each other and we, as individuals, have to be willing to take the advice and learn from each other. That's the main lesson I guess.

Gilbert: Happily, it is a lesson that is being increasingly learned among researchers and teachers the world over through the examples provided by people like you.