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By

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Abstract

This paper questions the perceived strengths and weaknesses of topical 'closeness' when comparing, analysing, reviewing, or recording histories that relate to the historian as both a commentator upon and an actor within history. Discussing the trends of historian involvement within global history, the shortcomings of the field, and the divisions that remain, this paper questions the act of 'disconnecting' global historians from the topics they explore. It uses the conclusions drawn by other global historians to explore how positionality impeded or facilitated their research. Referencing the works and positionalities of other global historians such as Anne-Charlotte Martineau, Elizabeth Leake, Christoph Kalter, and Haneda Masashi, this paper concludes that alternative intellectual definitions of global history add nuance to these variations of approach. However, this variation does not undermine the role of the historian as an actor and, therefore, the inherent need to contextualise the authorial voice, regardless of spatial or topical closeness.

About the author

Aoibhín McQuillan is a graduate of the University of Warwick with a master's degree in Global and Comparative History. Research interests include culture, diaspora, national identity within propaganda, and global history frameworks.

Global history as a field is largely used to explore the movements of peoples, objects, and ideas; the relationship between connectivity and the historians themselves is often influenced by these expanded boundaries of space and time. In history writing, positionality is the acknowledgement that our experiences and biases impact and permeate our understandings of reality. As historians, this extends to the ways in which we narrate and move through theories, themes, and sequences alike. Bias is arguably unavoidable, but this paper is focused on the positionality of the historian as an actor, shaping historical events as opposed to scrutinising them as a commentator and observer. In global history, when discussing people or objects, the relationships between individuals or communities, or the creation of concepts or theories, there remains the question of how to expand upon or reduce findings to their core impacts. The configuration of the historian within these queries calls into question the act of history-writing: how does the historian's bias influence the history they are able to produce? This paper explores the methodological strengths or weaknesses of a historian conducting research whilst positionally 'close' or 'distant' from their topic.[1] These impacts will be explored through the reflections of academics who have negotiated this closeness and drawn conclusions facilitated by their positionality to their respective projects.

To discuss positionality in history-writing and historiography, we must first explore the presumption of inevitability towards bias. The discipline of history has been cleft between different perspectives on truth-seeking, authenticity, and factualism.[2] This predilection in approaches underscores the main ways in which we relate to the act of history-writing. Is history a narration of 'fact', events, and evidence, or are more subliminal layers of abstract theorisation the more appropriate route with which to explore the past?[3] Of course, these divisions overlap in complicated ways – there is no science without a 'theory' to prove or disprove – but the essence of the argument remains pertinent. These concepts of fact-seeking narration and abstract theorisation mirror the question of positionality of the historian: should we be detached or entrenched? The resulting conclusion is drawn by the individual.

However, these choices of approach are further complicated when the researcher considers themselves a global historian.[4] Within this discipline, there is also a main collection of approaches to 'doing' global history that is based around actors, places, and spaces.[5] The vagueness of the global field has complicated the relationship of the historian and these ideas of being 'tethered' to historical events instead of interacting only briefly; in comparison, when excavating resources, historians of nations either acknowledge their position as one who belongs to said nation or as playing the role of outsider looking in.[6] With global history, however, there is on-going discussion of what it means to 'do' global history, either as a discipline or as a theoretical framework. For some, global is self-evident of macro history, whilst others combine their global interests with the micro instead. The movement of ideas, objects, or peoples has dominated the field, alongside a preoccupation with comparison.[7] An argument for the emergence of global history has been a counterpoint to the prominence of national and imperial histories, to reframe

events and concepts outside of these confining ideas of nationalism and colonisation.[8] However, the act of tethering global history and the role of global historians within the field of history itself has proven a persistent problem.

Jeremy Adelman, in "What is global history now?", provoked his peers to question their academic hegemony, a concern that illustrated his fears that global history was at risk of becoming a discipline of the privileged, English-speaking, few.[9] This Anglocentric interpretation of global history, arguably born in the late 1990s, was bolstered by the interest of White male academics – with reading lists filled with German scholars – and was largely cloistered in Western institutions.[10] Although this is partly due to the Anglocentric nature of academic publications and the legacy of the Westernisation of academia, much of global history was consequently dominated by Eurocentric language even when topics are presented as unrelated to Europe.[11] Global historian Dipesh Chakrabarty noted:

> European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations, and provincializing Europe becomes the task of exploring how this thought – which is now everybody's heritage and which affect us all – maybe renewed from and for the margins.[12]

This tendency towards Eurocentric language was also noted by Anne-Charlotte Martineau in her review of the *Oxford Handbook of International Law*:

> [The editors' overall ambition was to allow for 'a multipolar perspective' [that] […] not only […] flattens differences and reduces political projects to commodities, but also […] makes its own politics invisible. No attention is given to the historical prevalence of Western narratives or to issues regarding the production of knowledge.[13]

This skewed positionality of Eurocentric ways of doing global history should not be overlooked, especially in those endeavours specifically taken to focus on non-European or non-White narratives.[14] Across more general fields, research topics can often be correlated to positionality, either because many of these academics study their own histories or are invested in theorisations that directly connect to their world view.[15] Certain histories are acknowledged to be most insightful when written by commentators who are closely aligned with the topic; however, this assertion that certain histories can and should only be written by certain peoples is confining, both towards a 'global history' approach and to individuals who do not seek to study topics positionally connected to themselves.

Ideally, a range of academic positionality is to the benefit of historical discussions. As Michael Erdman argued, awareness and variety of positionality within historiography deepens the richness of historical narratives. History can be examined through several lenses, providing accounts of pertinent events either first-hand or through a variety of dialogues and records through which much historical analysis is based:

> [The historiographical nexus between history and power] explains to citizens how the state has shaped their views of themselves through historical narratives. To foreigners, it charts the path that identity and belonging have taken over the course of the state's existence. It helps to combat the vilification and essentialization of groups of people by both demonstrating the fluidity and

malleability of the historical Self over time, and highlighting the dialogue that exists between writers and readers of history.[16]

Positionality is a vital aspect of both historical analysis and historiography, as those who produce and present historical research become the narrators and authorities of both the past and its influences upon present and future. Deconstructing bias is only part of this process as understanding the benefits and shortcomings of approaches allows for a greater understanding of the role of historians as actors within history. However, whilst bias can be deconstructed, it cannot be fully removed.[17] Therefore, an awareness of positionality permeates the tone of a research project from its conception, and an understanding of the strengths and shortcomings of the historian's situation is necessary. The main weakness of positional distance is the difficulty of grasping the subliminal details that may be more readily understood if immersed in the culture, place, or events. There is a nuance to history-writing that 'armchair' research may not adequately provide, where an understanding of culture, atmosphere, identity, and intangible practices become some of the most impactful concepts upon both the individual and the historical narrative. 'Armchair' research refers to the contextual disconnect that can occur between the academic and their chosen topic, wherein they do not interact directly with the location, peoples, or events that they are studying; often, 'armchair theorising' does not rely on primary sources at all and instead discusses the subject through secondary and abstract perspectives.[18]

Variations of positionality have complicated the field of global history; should those as 'close' as possible be deemed authorities over more 'distant' academics? This dilemma presents the shortcomings of 'closeness', as the bias that permeates these avenues of historical research can be both consciously and subconsciously rooted in personal experience or vendettas.[19] In these incidences, the intimacy of positionality can compromise the project as surely as an 'armchair' approach shapes the scope and insight of a 'distant' topic.[20] This entanglement is, arguably, poor history-writing, as theory is based upon opinion instead of evidence, but the case can be made that all historical discussion is rooted in exploration of theory more than evidenced towards fact. It is clear, then, that the historian must be fully aware of their positionality and its impact upon the scope, direction and conclusion of their research. Positionality, therefore, becomes a framework in itself.

The idea of 'digging where you stand' has become a question of who has the authority to declare themselves the commentator of particular events or people.[21] This can be seen in recent historiographical movements to redefine and re-establish interest in local histories that exist beyond the colonial narrative, such as the rising prominence of African Studies.[22] The value of this focus should not be discarded, as undoing the narratives of imperial history is a long and necessarily arduous process. The positionality and closeness of the historian become a pivotal part of this endeavour, both as local actors participating in decolonising institutionalised history-writing and in circulating alternative perspectives to those of both colonisers and external voices. Consequently, positionality can be a necessity when doing history, as the involvement of the historian's self is acted upon to strengthen,

instead of tarnishing, the argument or narrative. However, this question of 'authority' and the positionality of the historian can become problematic for those global historians studying histories that are removed from themselves. As historian Christoph Kalter argued, distance from research is both a strength and a weakness.[23] Whilst Kalter expressed a belief that his 'non-connectedness' was beneficial – "as an outsider, nothing seemed self-evident" – he did not deny the pitfalls of navigating a society with which he had little knowledge of before his project; there were language issues, despite his previous confidence in fluency, and a "lack of intimate knowledge […] extended to the entire web of intellectual, social, and political references that constitute a national culture."[24] There was also backlash as Kalter was accused of lacking nuance: "I, as an armchair historian, (comparatively) youngster, and foreigner could not possibly understand what had been at stake".[25] Furthermore, his "privilege", as a foreign academic with funding that was unavailable to local researchers wanting to study their shared topic, "[flew] into everybody's face, including my own."[26] Kalter concluded his self-critique by remarking that his work was subsequently published in English – "the lingua franca of Anglocentric academia" –despite Portugal being both the topic and locality of his work, and Portuguese being the language his counterparts published in.[27]

The linguistic divisions of accessibility, in all history-writing but especially in international or global history, is something that may never be reconciled.[28] It is impossible for a global historian to learn enough languages to a high degree of fluency and cultural understanding to navigate any region they are studying. There is a need for collaboration, either with other historians or with translators, which begets a 'local' perspective. The necessity of a local representative, either through the historian themselves or by collaboration, extends beyond signposting resources; understanding how these localities function, what questions should be asked, and how to build relationships that beget trust and truths instead of suspicion that impedes exchange. Lynn Hunt commented that "[h]istory writing in the global era can only be a collaborative form of inquiry, whether between types of approaches or between scholars from different parts of the globe."[29] A defence of Kalter's publishers printing his work solely in English does not withstand scrutiny, financial limitations or outreach aside, as works should be accessible to the subject. History-writing should be both a portrait and a mirror, to us in the broader sense but also to the subjects as the usefulness of the outsider perspective on history-writing is diminished when its accessibility is so skewed. As a global historian, Kalter felt pressured by his fellows to promote the 'transnational' elements of his research instead of the national. The reality that many historians who identify as 'global' are Anglo-speaking further problematises specific trajectories of doing history. Whilst global history is often perceived as 'transcending' the nation state, the impact of regionalism and identity should not in turn be neglected upon the basis of a skewed lens.

In relation to this, the practical and logistical impacts of positionality, especially methods of resource gathering, have become increasingly divisive regarding which historians can study what histories. Whilst the digitalisation of archives and expanding

communication opportunities have facilitated distanced networks to flourish, the increased gentrification of access has barred many researchers from the available resources even though they have been made accessible online.[30] Furthermore, as highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, travelling between localities is a substantial barrier for research purposes. [31] ot only could academics no longer visit archives and facilities, but political and economic logistics problematised international border-crossing, as noted by global historian Elizabeth Leake in her article "(In)accessible Stories and the Contingency of History Writing."[32] Leake's project constantly evolved due to the resources she had available as, when travelling through war zones within Afghanistan, she was forced to accept that certain exploration would be impossible due to the very real danger to life or because records and communities had been destroyed.[33] To most researchers, issues of travel and access are defining influences upon the realities of carrying out their projects as it requires funding, and it takes time, in addition to the networking and language skills necessary. When researchers can neither access their resources remotely or travel to their locations, their resources are significantly diminished and their progress impeded. The impact of the climate crisis on the future of these ventures is also of serious concern, as not only must long-distance travel be sensitive to pollution and be cost-efficient, but many locations, peoples, and resources will be lost to the devastation of natural disaster and neglect in favour of life-preserving ventures. Positionality therefore becomes less about what historians feel they want to be studying and more about what they feel is available to them. Many global historians, as demonstrated by Kalter, who are White, European, and well-funded can therefore travel to these locations of interest even when local historians cannot be funded to study a subject of comparative proximity. The logistics of positionality are called into question; do we study the histories we are a part of because we feel our input is valuable or because it is the history we had access to?

The strength of researching histories removed from our own experiences and bias is evident.[34] Most global historians are interested in the themes, connections, and 'bigger pictures' of history. Whilst their own cultures, identities, and experience might involve themselves with the research content, this is rarely at the centre of the project. Furthermore, in studying our own histories closely, we may not realise things which to ourselves as locals are common or expected but would be vastly different to someone with an outside perspective. The assumed baseline of communal knowledge remains and could impede the clarity of publications. Thematically, detachment is also a significant aspect of doing global history. It can arguably be a strength as Kalter claimed, as it allows for a disassociation of perception, where everything becomes 'new' and open for analysis. A disconnect from personal experience would therefore prove beneficial, even if only brought about by the commentary of international peers. As both Chakrabarty and Martineau noted regarding Eurocentric dialogue within the field, positionality can work to conceal shortcomings if research lacks external evaluation.[35] The multiplicity of global and world history approaches may prove beneficial to identifying these weaknesses within intellectual communities. Although these variations of approach have existed in various incarnations for decades, they often remain divided by these conflicts in focus and differences in language.

Consequently, positionality is transformed from a strength or a weakness into something to be negotiated.[36] Acknowledging the positionality and bias of the historian to the research is a methodological process that, whilst all academics must partake in it, is particularly evocative when related to the global historian's propensity to study further 'afield' from themselves. These wider questions of ability in positionality call for a readjustment of how global history is perceived.

According to historian Haneda Masashi, the Japanese model of 'world history' is the overarching collaboration of the main histories of larger regions – i.e. continental histories – and differs greatly to 'European' world history, which focuses on trends of humanity itself.[37] Masashi reasoned that, in America, "world history is macrohistory […] transregional, transnational, and transcultural."[38] Global history is defined as a separate endeavour from world history; Masashi argued that Japanese *guroobaru hisutorii* specifically was dependent upon taking "a bird's eye view".[39] Therefore, positionality regarding the historian's own field of research becomes a moot point as, regardless of spatial proximity, the historian should strive to detach themselves. Masashi then asserted that "it is important that historians themselves develop multiple identities as a citizen of a given nation state and as a resident of the Earth", acknowledging that identifying with nation-states and regions is natural and to be expected but should not confine the historian to specific themes or localities.[40] Masashi's discussion of positionality in world/global history concluded with the assertion that the field existed in natural multiplicities, formed around the various perceptions of what it is and how it should be done, and that a collaboration of these approaches was a necessary and core aspect of doing global history.[41] Global history, as an independent field, has continued to grow and evolve; exchanges between varieties of these 'regional' methods as well as between geographical regions, institutions, individuals, and languages will continue to bolster these exchanges of perspective. Collaborative use of internal and external perspectives should be utilised to further understand the impacts of tethering and positionality within the roles of historians as commentators and historians as actors.

To Masashi, positionality is an unavoidable part of intellectual exchange, rooted in an individual's and a region's origins of ideas; considering Kalter, Erdman, and Leake, positionality as a methodology is also rooted in cultural, linguistic, and practical relations between the historian and the content of the project itself, not just the approach taken. The insights provided by, or disconnect stemming from, this positionality of the historian as both commentator and actor shapes the ways in which we 'do' history. Acknowledging our positions as actors and historians in our research, the process of formulating these works, and the conclusions reached, contextualises both our theories and the role of these publications. In global history, this tethering of the self to historical narrative is therefore inevitable, both methodologically and within the content itself, and should not be conflated as strengths and weaknesses that can always be overcome. Instead, the relationship between global historians and tethering becomes an exploration of how we perceive the authorial voice within both theory and narrative.

Notes

[1] This paper does not aim to present a finite conclusion on this topic but, rather, to provoke an internal examination within the reader to explore their own positionality and their own ways of history-writing.

[2] This is often regarded as the difference between history as a humanities discipline or as a scientific endeavour.

[3] The various national institutes of academia that formalised the study and practice of history configured their own means of determining how we go about 'doing history'.

[4] Global history could also be presented as an approach within another field rather than a discipline depending on how we categorise it. For more information on the discussion surrounding the role of global history within history, see Pamela Crossley, "Why Do Expectations Persist That Global History Should Be History?" *Cromohs (Cyber Review of Modern Historiography)* (2021).

[5] The use of the phrase 'doing' global history throughout this paper reflects the idea that global history is simultaneously a field as well as a framework with which to explore projects and resources. This turn of phrase, however seemingly inane, is outlined in Roland Wenzlhuemer, *Doing Global History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

[6] This process, a configuration of positionality, is visible in other historical fields as well, upon the basis of language, region, class, race, gender, sexuality, or ideology. It is an inevitability of humans relating to each other. See L.P. Hartley, The Go-Between (London: Penguin Books, 1953).

[7] Including the meetings, exchanges, and collisions of said ideas, objects, or peoples.

[8] Barry K. Gills, and William R. Thompson, *Globalizations, global histories and historical globalities* (London: Routledge, 2006).

[9] The article also questions the European, post-Brexit 'naval gazing' of how national and international relations skew the various perspectives of globalisation and global history. See Jeremy Adelman, "What is global history now?," aeon Jeremy Adelman, *aeon* (2017), https://aeon.co/essays/is-global-history-still-possible-or-has-it-had-its-moment.

[10] Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016). The reasons for the dominance of German historiography are expanded upon in David Lindenfeld, "Review: 'Global Perspectives on Global History: Theories and Approaches in a Connected World' by Dominic Sachsenmaier" *H-Soz-Kult* (January 2014): 1.

[11] John V. Pickstone, *Ways of Knowing: A New History of Science, Technology and Medicine* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

[12] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 16.

[13] Anne-Charlotte Martineau, "Overcoming Eurocentrism? Global History and the Oxford Handbook of the History of International Law," *European Journal of International Law* 25, no. 1 (February 2014): 330.

[14] For more information, see Olivette Otele, *African Europeans: The Untold History* (London: Hurst, 2020).

[15] Reclaiming histories, either from colonial narratives or classist hierarchies that suppresses other voices, has been a long endeavour that has dominated much of African and Asian history-writing,

amongst many others. In global history, this is particularly prevalent, as much of these discussions revolve around themes of travel and exchange. See Toyin Falola, *Decolonizing African Studies: Knowledge Production, Agency, and Voice* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2022). See also Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil T. Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, *Critical Race Theory: The Key writings that Formed the Movement* (New York: The New Press, 1995).

[16] Michael Erdman, "Historiographic Positionality and the Role of the Social Scientist: An Application of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Phenomenology to the Study of History Writing in Turkey," *ESR Journal* 1, no. 1 (2016): 13.

[17] Even a 'scientific' examination of data provokes a response, in some manner. If history demanded a total removal of human insight, then it would, inevitably, become less human, as history is recorded not only through the content of the words but the hand that is writing them.

[18] Christoph Kalter refers to himself as an 'armchair' historian, in reference to his positional disconnect from the local historians in Portugal throughout his research there. See Christoph Kalter, "The history of others, or: the historian as a privileged outsider," *Fifteen-Eighty-Four: Academic Perspectives from Cambridge University Press*, June 2, 2022, https://www.cambridgeblog.org/2022/06/the-history-of-others-or-the-historian-as-a-privileged-outsider/.

[19] Whilst positional closeness can be a strength – the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, on the intersection of race and gender springs to mind – there are also evident shortcomings as the authorial voice can 'intrude' on the subject. See Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99; C. Behan McCullagh, "Bias in Historical Description, Interpretation, and Explanation," *History and Theory* 39, no. 1 (2000): 39–66.

[20] Emotional investment in a topic, just as 'armchair theorizing', should not necessarily be deemed a 'wrong way' of doing history, provided the historian acknowledges their bias and situation.

[21] This phrase originated to counter bourgeois narratives of economic history with 'on the ground' perspective from workers. However, the idea has since grown to generally allude to a more 'history from below' or subaltern historical approach. See Sven Lindqvist, "Dig Where You Stand," *Oral History* 7, no. 2 (1979): 24–30, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40178565. For more information on subaltern studies, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Ranajit Guha, ed., *Selected Subaltern Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[22] Falola, *Decolonizing African Studies*.

[23] Kalter, "The history of others, or: the historian as a privileged outsider".

[24] Kalter, "The history of others, or: the historian as a privileged outsider".

[25] Kalter, "The history of others, or: the historian as a privileged outsider".

[26] FKalter, "The history of others, or: the historian as a privileged outsider".

[27] Kalter, "The history of others, or: the historian as a privileged outsider".

[28] And consequently, of positionality.

[29] Lynn Hunt, *Writing History in the Global Era* (London: W. W. Norton, 2015), 151.

[30] Nicholas Loubere and Ivan Franceschini, "Beyond the Great Paywall: A Lesson from the Cambridge University Press China Incident," *Made In China: Chinese Labour In A Global Perspective* (July-September, 2017): 64–66, https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.032397069454328; Lara Putnam, "The Transnational and the Text-Searchable: Digitized Sources and the Shadows They

Cast,"*The American Historical Review* 121, no. 2 (April 2016): 377–402, https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/121.2.377.

[31] This is in reference to the global COVID-19 pandemic, which saw national lockdowns sweep the globe. Businesses, schools, and institutions were closed for many months and travelling between regions, as well as internationally, was prohibited or made extremely difficult.

[32] Elizabeth Leake, "(In)accessible Stories and the Contingency of History Writing," *Histories of the Present*, May 27, 2022, https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/inaccessible-stories-and-the-contingency-of-history-writing/.

[33] Leake, "(In)accessible Stories and the Contingency of History Writing".

[34] This is, in itself, a questionable venture, as bias is not only shaped by our past but our perception of present and future. Therefore, we can form a biased view of any period of human history, and bias should be examined not as absolutes, but as variations of intimate compromise.

[35] Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; Anne-Charlotte Martineau, "Overcoming Eurocentrism?".

[36] The importance of positionality in deconstructing Eurocentrism is that many participating historians are in fact European themselves and therefore their own positionality lends an acknowledgement of improvement and broadening that global history, and wider academia, needs to advance.

[37] Haneda Masashi, "World/Global History and the Positionality of Historians," *Voyages, Migration, and the Maritime World: On China's Global Historical Role*, ed. Clara Wing-Chung Ho, Ricardo K. S. Mak, and Yue-him Tam (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 23-36.

[38] Masashi, "World/Global History and the Positionality of Historians," 26.

[39] Masashi, "World/Global History and the Positionality of Historians," 32.

[40] Masashi, "World/Global History and the Positionality of Historians," 34.

[41] Masashi, "World/Global History and the Positionality of Historians," 34.