

# An Interview with Kevin Gannon about “A History of Your Day”

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For the Fall 2025 issue of *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, I’m delighted to include this recorded interview with Dr. Kevin Gannon describing an assignment he regularly uses when teaching undergraduate history courses. He calls it “A History of Your Day” and it is an in-class activity he facilitates during the very first in-person class meeting. I first heard Dr. Gannon describe this activity at the 2024 American Historical Association annual meeting as part of a panel titled “One Small Change You Can Make Tomorrow in Your Introductory History Course.” I know that readers of *THAJM* will find it as inspiring as I did!

Kevin Gannon is Director of the Center for the Advancement of Faculty Excellence and Professor of History at Queens University of Charlotte, in North Carolina. He is the author of *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto* (West Virginia University Press, 2020), and his writing has also appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Vox*, *CNN*, and *The Washington Post*. In 2016, he appeared in the Oscar-nominated documentary *13th*, directed by Ava DuVernay. He is co-editor of the new collection *The Campus Crisis Toolkit: Strategies and Solidarity for the Rest of Us* (SUNY University Press, forthcoming).

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** Welcome, Kevin Gannon. Thank you so much for talking to *Teaching History, a Journal of Methods* today. Can you please describe the activity “A History of Your Day” that you use on the first day of your introductory history classes?

**Kevin Gannon:** Sure, and I do this in any introductory history class that I teach. Basically, it’s a light lift exercise. In the first day of class, I ask my students to think about and free-write a little bit about what they think history is. Based on, you know, their previous experience in history classes, interest in it, whatever. And then, after giving them a couple minutes to sort of prime like that, then I ask them to write a history of their day. And I’m purposefully vague. They get really frustrated, because they’re like, do I write it as a list? And I tell them, however you want to write it, however you want to present this. It’s your history, right? I say, “I’m not going to give you any more guidance than that, because you’re writing *your* history, you’re the expert on that.” I do say, “Start from when you first gained consciousness today until you walked in our classroom.”

**Jessamyn A Neuhaus:** Right.

**Kevin Gannon:** And what usually happens is they will write [something] very cursory and they mostly end up as lists. Some of them [are] bullet-pointed [though] there are a few who write it as a narrative. But it’s very simple, you know: “I got up, I brushed my teeth, I did this, I did that.” And it all tends to focus on the very quotidian, small pieces of things.

So, what comes out of the discussion after?

I have several of them share out. And then I ask them, “What are you hearing that’s similar? What are you hearing that’s contrasting? Are these history?” And that’s the question that kind of gets them, you know, because what will surface, to no one’s surprise, right, is some students will say, “Does it count?” And I’ll say, “Well, we don’t

read anything about Julius Caesar brushing his teeth, but let's assume that he practiced oral hygiene, right?" Just because it doesn't feel important, does that mean it's not history?

And so that's where the discussion really [goes] and I have them think, I have them, sort of reflect a little bit, on why did you write it the way that you did? If you wrote a list of bullet points, why did you organize things that way? They all write it chronologically, and so I asked them to think about, you know, why would the expectation be for a history that everything is exactly along the linear timeline? Just sort of, you know, pushing against what our assumptions about what history is.

And then I have them think about choices, because I'll say, you know, you didn't include *everything* that happened today, right? Like, how did you decide what to put in and what to leave out? I use the example if you drive, if you commute to campus. Like, you make the same drive every day, and if I were to ask you [to] tell me all the things that happened on that drive, you probably wouldn't be able to tell me anything, because you were on autopilot.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** Right! Yeah.

**Kevin Gannon:** And so, does that count as history if it's something that's so routine, did you talk about that in the history of your day? And someone will say, occasionally, like, "Well, I almost got rear-ended, so I wrote about that," and okay, so now something has risen to the level of significance. What are the criteria?

Basically, it's to get them thinking largely about "what is history?" You know, the old E.H. Carr question. What counts as history depends [on] who you ask. What's important depends [on] who you ask. And then I have them compare and contrast what they've produced with the history that they've read. Or been assigned in previous courses. And mostly it's contrasting, right? I ask them, "What are the main differences?" And [they answer with] some variation of, "Well, those were important people."

And so that's a great opportunity. What makes historical significance? Like, I think all of you are pretty significant and important, but because you don't think so, does that mean you don't have history? Right? And I actually introduce them, I give a couple quotes from Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People Without History*.<sup>1</sup> As kind of a couple thought points, like, who gets to have history in the way that we approach history with a capital H. So, it's kind of a free-range discussion, because a lot of it does sort of springboard off of what the class has written, and then who shares. But we usually, in fact, in my experience, we've always ended up at a place where students get to an understanding that everything has a history, to quote the AHA. And that what we tend to think of in terms of important or significant, or the ways that we've accessed history, particularly U.S. history, has been heavily filtered. And so, then I invite them to think, well, what do we do about that, right? You know, what are the implications of that? You know, for you, not just as a student or as a learner, but as a person? Like, how does this make you feel? Do people who look like you count?

So, it's really interesting, and I do this right off the bat. Like, we do some brief introductions, and then we jump right in, because my goal is to immediately problematize

the assumptions they bring in about what history is and how you study history. And very quickly, it helps us get [that] out. I think some of the chief work that it does short-term is it conveys very clearly that this is not going to be a "names and dates" class.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** [laughs] Yes.

**Kevin Gannon:** I'm very clear that this is not a class where you will have to memorize names and dates. The palpable relief! I mean, seriously. I was absolutely surprised, the first [time]. I was like, Jesus, who hurt you? [laughter] And, you know, there's a variety of reasons for it, right? Like, standardized testing, AP mania, I think, is a big one.

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<sup>1</sup> Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** Yeah.

**Kevin Gannon:** And so, to get to a place where we could immediately address that, and say this is not how we're gonna do it. This is not really, you know, how history is. The broad and rich set of habits of mind and practices that it is. And so, letting that pressure off is actually some of the most important work this exercise does right away.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** Yeah, great. So, you described how students respond that day during discussion. Does it ever arise later, or do students comment on it a bit later in the semester, or in conjunction with other reading and assignments?

**Kevin Gannon:** It bubbles up from time to time, but I think one of the things I would like to do better at is intentionally coming back [to it]. I refer back to it at several points throughout the semester. But I'd like to be more intentional about that, and kind of build that into the course [more] systematically and have students kind of draw some of those connections. I think there's room and opportunity space to do that in the primary source work that we do. For example, I do a lot of social annotation. You know, like, with Hypothesis,<sup>2</sup> for example, or we'll, you know, kind of do some close reading in class, either in groups or as a whole group, and I think there's space there where I can be a little more intentional about having them connect to that particular activity, and then seeing where that resonates with the sources that we're looking at in the context of those sources.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** You could even collect them, and then hand them back late in the semester, and ask them to revisit it, and would they do anything differently this time?

**Kevin Gannon:** Yeah! The next time I teach a history course, because teaching is not part of my regular duties, and when I do teach, I teach in our new student seminar program. But I will have an opportunity to teach some history at some point soon, I think. And what I'm gonna do is I'm actually gonna rerun the activity again at the end of the semester. Yes. And have them think [about] what are the different choices that you made now? How does your history now reflect what's happened this semester? So again, I'm thinking about it cognitively, but also a very intentional way of showing [that] you have a much more sophisticated and complex [answer to] this question now than you did 14 weeks ago.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** Right, yeah!

**Kevin Gannon:** Pretty cool stuff, right? You know, because a lot of times we sort of assume that students see, oh, I've learned things. Yeah, but can they name those things explicitly? Can we help them name it? And I feel like this is an opportunity to do that.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely, and they will recall the activity very specifically, so it's not a vague something we did that's been lost in the shuffle.

**Kevin Gannon:** I will share one thing, too. When they talk about all the, you know, the quotidian things, I mentioned the brushing the teeth thing, because almost everyone includes that. And so, I'll make it, like, all of you who've shared, "How many of you included brushing your teeth in the history of your day?" And almost everyone will raise their hands. And I'll say, "Okay, great, right? Like, I'm happy you did that, and so are the people sitting next to you. But why?" For a lot of students, it's, "Well, that's the first thing I did that I could remember after getting out of bed." And, you know, and that's a legitimate reason, and an interesting reason. But then it's also like, you know, did you put that down there because you were worried that if you did it, how people

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<sup>2</sup> Hypothesis Online Annotation Tool, <https://web.hypothes.is/>.

might look at you? So, we talk about motivations and choices about what to include, but the brushing the teeth thing becomes kind of a running gag in some of the classes, right? And so that's kind of fun, to have that as a little thread that weaves its way through.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** And historical specificities, there are times in human history where that would not have been the thing people did.

**Kevin Gannon:** Nope. And so, when I teach my Ancient World class, for example, we talk about Greek habits of hygiene, you know, like, let's bathe in olive oil!" It seems ludicrous. But I'm like, it worked! Barely, you know? So, yeah, it's just, it's kind of fun to be in that space, and for them to enter it in kind of a playful way, which I also think is really important.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** Well, on a slightly less fun note, in what ways is "A History of Your Day"

**useful way to introduce students to studying history right at this particular moment [in] 2025? In other words, how does it potentially lay the groundwork for learning about reliable primary sources and historical facts in this era of truth decay and the rise of generative AI?**

**Kevin Gannon:** So, I have not done this exercise since large language models have really exploded onto the scene, but when I do, I'm gonna ask them to think about what would this have looked like if you'd have entered it as a prompt in ChatGPT. I don't integrate Gen AI into my own teaching for a lot of reasons. But I don't think it's a constructive strategy to pretend it doesn't exist, and I think that there's an opportunity for some rich conversation there. Because then it gets into, and I quote E.H. Carr, I still love *What Is History?* I think that book, it made such an impact when I read it as an undergrad.<sup>3</sup> But the idea of, you know, there are facts, and then there are *historical* facts, the distinction he makes. You know, lots of people cross the Rubicon, but we always talk about Caesar. Why?

So, I use that example to think about, well, lots of people brush their teeth, right? You know, or whatever. [Students] see themselves as a primary source. So, I ask if someone else were to write the history of your day, what would that look like? Because they wouldn't have been there for, like, the brushing your teeth part, right? Or maybe, if it's a communal bathroom. [laughs] But just getting them to think about, like, positionality, observation. Our primary sources, you know, sometimes [students] come to us with this idea that primary sources are the gold standard, and it's like, well, not the *only* source, and sometimes they're not all they're cracked up to be, and let's talk about why that is, And so that's a good way to get into that conversation a little bit as well.

But it also, I think, opens up, and this is to the point of the question, and the important work that [the assignment] does. It opens up the idea that it's not just history, it's histories.

And so perspective matters; positionality [matters]. I try to do in this [to help them] get them away from this sort of all-consuming fetish for objectivity. Right? Everybody's biased, right? The very act of choosing a topic is an act of saying this is more important than other things, right? So, objectivity with a capital O doesn't exist in history. That doesn't mean history and historical scholarship is invalid, but it means we have to approach it in different ways. The history of your day is a history with a capital H.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** Right.

**Kevin Gannon:** It is a research product, right?

**Jessamyn A Neuhaus:** Yes.

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Knopf, 1969).

**Kevin Gannon:** It is a synthesis of primary sources and content, but it looks different than the people at your table. It looks different from the history that's on sale at Barnes & Noble for Father's Day. So, what do we do with that understanding? And I think for this particular moment, it equips students to sort of critically analyze why is something produced, for what ends, and for what audience? As a genre, what's the audience? And it gives them the information fluency and metacognitive tools to approach not just sources we might be looking at in class, for example, but, like, something they see online, or something they [read] in another course. And ask those types of questions that we ask as scholars of history, and I think as historians we are not uniquely but close to uniquely [qualified] to really navigate this complex epistemological landscape. And so, I think the more of those habits of mine, my students are able to discover and practice and apply. Then we're doing some really important work.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** I love how it starts with, not just their perspective or their experience, but actually their agency as producers of knowledge. And I've never thought before about how that step can help them better understand other [kinds of] knowledge production.

**Kevin Gannon:** Right. It positions them as the expert right away, and I point this out right away, like, you're the expert on the history of your day. No one else has seen every moment of that history like you have. And so, you know, this sense of agency is [important] but also, like, what is expertise? Well, it's fluid. It's not something, you know, that I have that you don't, [that] you'll never have. So many of them come to us with most of their schooling in history, [not always] but certainly a lot of times, that it's been something taught *to* them, rather than done *by* them. And so getting that shift in place right away is, I think, crucial.

**Jessamyn A Neuhaus:** Yeah, thank you. So, you have touched on it, but was there anything else you wanted to say about what you most enjoy about facilitating this activity?

**Kevin Gannon:** This is gonna sound bad, but I'll explain. It's easy, right? I literally came up with the idea on the way to the first meeting of a class one semester, realizing that the stuff I was doing on the first day wasn't doing the work that I wanted it. And so I was, you know, I mean, walking [and] it's a small campus, so I didn't have much time to think, right? And I'm just like, what the hell am I gonna do? It kind of popped into my head, because I was thinking about, how do I get them out of this place where, again, where history, where teaching has, or learning has been something done *to* them rather than *by* them? So, I was like, well, shit, we'll start with something by them and see what happens. And I also knew it couldn't be anything too involved, because I [only] had what I was carrying! So, it was absolutely, you know, necessity, the mother of invention and all that.

But it worked so well when it happened. I mean, it was a chaotic discussion there that I've sort of refined and changed [over] years as I've done it, but that first time, I was like, this is the energy! And also you could see [students getting the idea that] everything has a history. Everyone has a history. We don't always hear about it. Why not, right? Like, those connections were happening. Which is what we want to do in a history course, but right off the bat, it was already starting. From that point forward, I was a convert, and I love... and I share it with colleagues, because I say, you know, it doesn't have to be something that you have to, you know, redesign your course over. Like, Jim Lang's small teaching stuff, right?<sup>4</sup> Like, that's... that's exactly what this is.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** Yeah! And such a prime example of taking care of your pedagogical well-being. It's great for students, it's a really productive learning activity, but it doesn't take a huge, huge lift for you, and in fact, is energizing and inspiring, because it touches on all these things that drew us to the study of history in the first place, and gets us energized for the semester. Good for students, and good for us.

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<sup>4</sup> James M. Lang, *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*. Second edition. (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, a Wiley imprint, 2021).

**Kevin Gannon:** Yeah, and, I mean, I could have assigned them Carr. But that wouldn't have nearly the [same impact].

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** That's right.

**Kevin Gannon:** So, trying to get at that thing and demystified. That's the other thing, you know, agency, and that's kind of the lodestar in my teaching, right? This isn't some walled-off province for us PhDs, right? You are *doing* history in this course. You are a historian. I can give you a, you know, a certificate if you want, right? [But] we are doing this thing and so let's think hard about what that means. And what that means for you.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** It's the opposite of gatekeeping.

**Kevin Gannon:** Exactly, exactly. Well, what's the old, was it Carl Becker, "Every Man a Historian?"<sup>5</sup> I had to read that in, like, every historiography class I ever took in grad school. But I say that and joking because it was a very boring article, but it was also in the early twentieth century what he's doing [as a] progressive historian. But it's also a reassuring reminder that this isn't new. I'm certainly not doing anything revolutionary. I've just sort of found a way that works to get at these larger things that I think most of us in the classroom are trying to get after.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** Yeah, absolutely. Do you have any specific advice for other history instructors who would like to use this in their class?

**Kevin Gannon:** Yeah, I think the crucial step [is] not to give them too much guidance. And tell them, I'm doing that deliberately. I'm interested in what you show me.

**Jessamyn Neuhaus:** Transparency.

**Kevin Gannon:** And then allow sufficient time for the sharing and discussion part to sort of emerge organically, which is easier in some class situations than others. But there have been some semesters, I think, where I've done this. And people were reticent to participate for whatever reason, and I don't think I gave enough space for the discussion to really launch.

And so, it became more didactic than discussion, and it wasn't as satisfying. So especially for someone who might be trying something like this for the first time, don't be afraid of the silences, right? The first day of class, it's weird, you know? People aren't sure if they want to participate. Allowing extra time to do that is really, really important if this activity or a similar one, is going to do the type of work that you want it to do.

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5 Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *The American Historical Review* 37, no. 2 (1932): 221–36.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/1838208>.