

Lesson Plan to Supplement *American Treasures Exhibition: Of Climates and Empire*

For Advanced Students of U.S. History, Western Civilization or Humanities

Possible areas of study this lesson may supplement:

- Colonization/American and European Imperialism
- 19th c. U.S. or European History
- History of American Education

Skills:

Analysis of primary source documents
Close reading
Analytical/Critical thinking and writing

Themes/Topics of the Lesson:

The ways in which the study of geography reflects and shapes contemporary attitudes
The use of maps to explore and discover cultural biases
The use of education to support particular agendas and belief systems

Objectives:

- To develop analysis and critical thinking skills
- To develop close reading of primary source documents
- To demonstrate the ways in which primary texts are products of particular historical attitudes
- To encourage students to develop an understanding of race as a social construct
- To encourage students to consider the ways that the dominant beliefs of society shape the individual's perception of the world and relationship with other people

Key Terms:

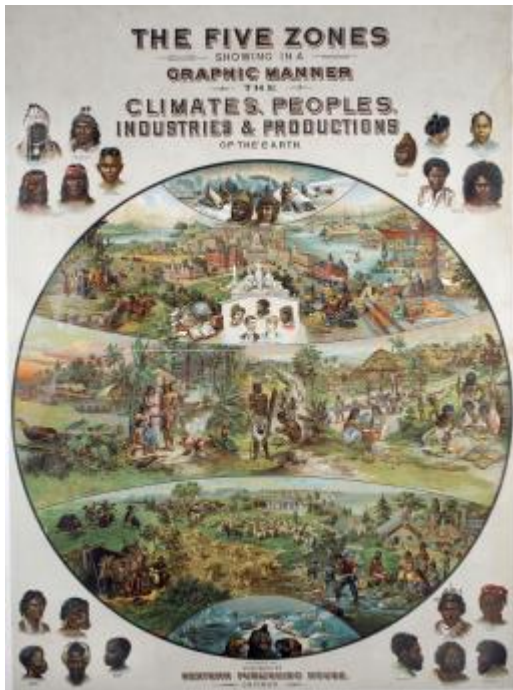
- Primary source documents
- Close reading
- Colonization
- Imperialism
- Race

Getting Started:

1. First, have students view and read the exhibition "Of Climates and Empires" under the heading *American Treasures*.
2. To review, ask students: What are the five climactic "zones"? Describe the features of each zone. According to the document, which people are suited to live in each zone? What kinds of value judgments are implicit in this organization of the world?
3. Hand out the document: "Maps as Primary Source Documents." Use these questions to investigate the maps in this exhibition.

Activity: Close Reading and Contextualizing a Primary Source

Use the map entitled “A Grand Statement of the World's Proper Organization” for this exercise. First, as a class or individually, ask students to take a close look at this map. Then complete the steps below.



1. Ask students to generate general questions about the map and its meaning and origins. This will probably be more fun as a class, with one person recording the questions on the board. Examples of general questions: who created this map? When was the map created? Does the author have an agenda? What was going on in the world at the time this map was created?
2. Research the answers to those questions, either as a homework assignment or by bringing the class to the library.
3. Put the map in historical context: How do the images in the map correspond to the context in which the map was created? Even though we see these maps as backward, in what ways were they groundbreaking at the time they were created? How does context help us to understand this map and its purpose?

Discussion: Race and “The Other”:

1. Read and examine the maps and texts entitled: “Zones and Degrees of Civilization” and “Distributions of Flora, Fauna and People Explained.”
2. Ask students to recall: what are the races or categories of people mentioned in these texts? Also recall: what was the purpose of these atlases? When were they created? Put these maps into a general historical context.
3. Who is the intended audience for these texts? What do you think the lives of those people were like?
4. How do you think schoolchildren who read these texts felt about people of other races and about other parts of the world? How would these texts shape their worldview?
5. Explain the idea of race as a social construct. What is the purpose of creating racial differences, both generally and in this specific example? Whom does this construction help and whom does it hurt?
6. Now bring the discussion into the modern era. *This will have to be done with sensitivity, especially in a diverse classroom. The following questions could also be answered individually on paper if that seems preferable.
 - a. Begin by asking students about stereotypes. What is a stereotype? Why do we stereotype people? Can stereotypes be helpful, or are they always destructive?
 - b. Ask students to list some common stereotypes. Although the exhibition deals primarily with racial stereotypes, students might list stereotypes based on age, gender, class, clique, region, etc. Ask students to be respectful in their speech – some students may find these stereotypes offensive.
 - c. Then ask students how the world around them -- the media, their families, the school, government, architecture, etc. -- supports or resists the stereotypes listed on the board.
 - d. Ask the students to conclude this discussion with a writing exercise. Ask them to answer the following question: Does our society shape our beliefs about other people? If yes, then in what ways?
 - e. Extension Essay: In a short essay, apply the above writing exercise (d) to the exhibition. In other words, in what ways might the lessons contained in these geography texts shape the worldviews of students in the 1870’s? How, then, could you predict that their worldviews shaped their behavior?