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INTRODUCTION

History Is for Everyone

Historical research has been for me an arena of joy and intellectual passion. I always feel a shiver of anticipation when I enter an archive or a rare book collection: what am I going to find?

—NATALIE ZEMON DAVIS, *A PASSION FOR HISTORY*

IN 2004, Afua Cooper walked the streets of Old Montreal, seeking the ghost of Marie-Joseph Angélique. Two hundred and seventy years earlier, Angélique—an enslaved woman—had been tortured and executed for setting a fire that burned much of the city. By telling Angélique's story, Cooper believed, she could tell a story about Atlantic slavery, about Canada's place in the Atlantic world, about "an experience of woe and sorrow." "Since much of the Black past has been deliberately buried, covered over, and demolished," Cooper writes, "it is our task to unearth, uncover, and piece it together again. This we are called to do because the dead speak to us."[1] Not all history has been so deliberately buried, covered over, and demolished. Not all historical figures are silent ghosts. But, like Cooper, all historians believe they are called to unearth, uncover, and piece together a lost past. We remember what must not be forgotten. We tell the stories that must be told.

These stories matter. Ten years before Cooper's walk, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen directed a telephone survey that

1. Afua Cooper, *The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montréal* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 9, 11.

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asked fifteen hundred Americans how they engaged with the past. While a distressingly high proportion of respondents complained that their history classes in school had been boring, and that they rarely read history books, a majority reported some kind of enthusiastic exploration of history, through visits to museums, participation in hobbies, or, most of all, through the sharing of stories with family members. "Using the past is as natural a part of life as eating or breathing," Thelen concluded. "What we have in common as human beings is that we employ the past to make sense of the present and to influence the future."[2] "History-making," insists Gerda Lerner, "is not a dispensable intellectual luxury; history-making is a social necessity."[3]

At National History Day competitions, students as young as sixth grade pose questions and share their findings. As they weave sources into stories, they engage in the same basic project as my colleagues in a university history department. Moreover, many of the contestants are perfectly capable of reading, understanding, and imitating some of the same works that I would assign to graduate students. Likewise, adults who do not think of themselves as historians take part in the great task. Over the years, I have worked with lawyers, architects, planners, engineers, ethicists, military officers, and other professionals, whether in the classroom, at conferences, or in oral history interviews. None has had any trouble understanding the goals of the historian or the importance of the work, and many have made significant contributions to the study of the past. Conversely, when I have worked with journalists, curators, public officials, and advocates to share some of my own findings in the form of newspaper stories, television documentaries, museum exhibits, or recommendations for public policy, I feel I have done pretty well at grasping their needs and making myself useful.

I hope, then, that this book will reach historians from middle school through doctoral study and beyond, as well as those who identify not as historians—anthropologists, economists, geographers,

2. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 190.

3. Gerda Lerner, "The Necessity of History and the Professional Historian," *Journal of American History* 69 (1982): 10.

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political scientists, policy makers, sociologists, journalists, and nonfiction writers—but who want to answer questions about the past.

One peril of any guide to research is that it will suggest that the process is more linear than it really is. Ski jumpers must perform their tasks in a set order: in-run, take-off, flight, and landing. If they deviate from this order, they have violated not only the rules of the sport but the laws of physics as well. Figure skaters, by contrast, get to choose the order in which they will perform the various spins and jumps on which they will be judged. Writing history is more like figure skating in this regard; so long as you eventually perform all the tasks, the order is relatively unimportant. (In point of fact, figure skaters get bonuses for moves performed later in their program. Please ignore this complication for the purpose of simile.)

In this book I have tried to present the skills of the historian in what strikes me as a plausible order. In practice, you should expect to deploy these skills as needed, jumping back and forth, repeating some tasks and skipping others. As William McNeill once described his process, "I get curious about a problem and start reading up on it. What I read causes me to redefine the problem. Redefining the problem causes me to shift the direction of what I'm reading. That in turn further reshapes the problem, which further redirects the reading. I go back and forth like this until it feels right."[4]

Two researchers with similar goals may differ widely in the tools and methods that produce the best result. One may work for an hour each morning, write a first draft in longhand, and never pause to outline or count words until they have a substantial bit of work on paper. Another may set aside one day per week for intensive work, starting with an outline, typing every word, and obsessively tracking progress. Some historians do not begin to write until they have gathered all the sources they think they will need for a project, transcribed key passages, and composed a complete outline.[5] If that were the only way to write history, I would need to find another job.

4. Quoted in John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 48.

5. Hidetaka Hirota (@hidehirota), "How Are You Writing Your Dissertation? How Did You Write Yours? How Do You Write Your Books? This Is My Method (so Far). Note: I'm a Historian. #writing 1," Twitter, August 7, 2019, https://twitter.com/hidehirota/status/1159131324789116930.

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Even the individual historian must use multiple methods at different stages in a project. Sometimes you need to read a source closely, teasing out each nuance. At other times, you need to use outside information to put the source in context, or assemble hundreds or thousands of sources in order to discern a pattern. And just because one method works for one project, it may not work for the next. A work based mostly on primary sources has a different rhythm from one based mostly on secondary sources, and perhaps it demands different tools as well. Similarly, some projects—and some researchers—can take advantage of the very latest in computer technology and digital resources, while others will do just fine using methods similar to those employed by scholars hundreds of years ago.

If a method works for you, it is not my place to challenge it. Rather, I hope in this book to document some of the methods that historians have used to pose and answer questions, to craft stories and arguments. Instead of telling you what to do, I hope to show you some options. Similarly, you should feel free to read the following chapters in whatever order makes the most sense to you. For example, reading the chapters on outlining and writing early may help you understand some of the chapters that precede them in the book. By learning the components of a finished work, you may have an easier time framing questions, identifying sources, and taking notes.

This book mixes recommendations (I hesitate to call them instructions) with model passages from historians, showing various techniques in practice. As both a learner and a teacher, I have found such combinations effective, and I hope my readers will as well. If nothing else, I hope the examples show that most of the guidance in this book is not a set of arbitrary rules that I have devised but rather a compilation of practices used by a wide range of historians across many genres and specialties. When judging the usefulness of my advice, do not take my word for it. Check the evidence I provide for its effectiveness.

In selecting examples, I have tried to suggest some of the range of topics studied by historians, but I have not done so systematically. Instead, I have started with works I know I like, most of them about the history of the United States. Of course, each field of history presents its own challenge, and a general-purpose guide like this is no substitute for mastering the existing scholarship on a

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particular topic and the tools that other scholars have developed to work with specific sources. But as I read the histories of other places and eras, I find most of the historian's tools to be familiar. I am therefore hopeful that the examples in this guide will prove useful far beyond the specific topics they address. I also hope that they will suggest some of the excitement of recent scholarship and inspire readers to track down the works from which they are drawn.

Most of the examples are drawn from single-authored books, which have not only been a standard form of historical scholarship for centuries but also give historians greater space to discuss research methods and sources than one is likely to find in articles, textbooks, museum exhibits, or other equally valuable forms of presenting historical knowledge. As argued in later chapters, the lessons of book writing apply to these other forms. A ten-page student paper or a five-hundred-page book manuscript both need questions, sources, characters, plots, and arguments, and this guide aims to help creators find them. Moreover, as discussed in greater detail below, books are composed of chapters, which themselves are often built from sections about the length of a ten- or fifteen-page research paper. Thus, if you want a sense of the scale of a topic that can be addressed in the length of a term paper, look for books with chapters explicitly divided into sections with their own headings. Then consider the questions and sources the historian used to write each section. Analyzing how successful historians built their stories will make you both a better writer and a better reader.

Researching history is like collecting stamps, sewing a quilt, solving a jigsaw puzzle, and reading a murder mystery at the same time. Like any human endeavor, it is at times difficult, boring, and frustrating. But when the research all comes together, it is deeply, deeply satisfying. Have fun.

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