

# Sources

AN INTRODUCTION

HISTORIANS DESCRIBE scenes they have not witnessed, converse with people they have never met, and remember events that predated their birth. They perform these wonders through encounters with evidence. “Sources from the past, primary or secondary, are not a prison,” explains Natalie Zemon Davis. “They are a magic thread that links me to people long since dead and with situations that have crumbled to dust.”<sup>1</sup>

The magic has its limits. “Most human affairs happen without leaving vestiges or records of any kind behind them,” writes Louis Gottschalk.

The past, having happened, has perished with only occasional traces. To begin with, although the absolute number of historical writings is staggering, only a small part of what happened in the past was ever observed. . . . Only a part of what was observed in the past was remembered by those who observed it; only a part of what was remembered was recorded; only a part of what was recorded has survived; only a part of what has survived has come to the historians’ attention; only a part of what has come to their attention is credible; only a part of what is credible has been grasped; and only a part of what has been grasped

1. Natalie Zemon Davis, *A Passion for History: Conversations with Denis Crouzet*, *Early Modern Studies* 4 (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2010), 22.

can be expounded or narrated by the historian. . . . Most of history-as-record is only the surviving part of the recorded part of the remembered part of the observed part of that whole.<sup>2</sup>

In Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical, *Hamilton*, Eliza Hamilton burns her letters right there onstage. "I'm erasing myself from the narrative," she sings to her absent, unfaithful husband. "Let future historians wonder / How Eliza reacted when you broke her heart." If historians are in the audience, it is their hearts that break.

Even when you can find sources, you must understand their limits. "So great was the tragedy," writes J. H. Powell of Philadelphia's 1793 yellow fever epidemic, "so astounding the scenes of suffering, that one after another of those who lived through the plague wrote down what they saw. They are responsible for all the facts recorded here; and if they sometimes saw things that could not happen, told stories beyond belief, that is because they were men, not cameras. The historian can never construct a record of events. All he can do is construct a record of records."<sup>3</sup> Humbling as such pronouncements are, they should not deter the historian, for a record of records of small parts of the human experience is still vastly better than no record at all. The historian pieces together clues until they form a coherent story of what happened.

### *Tips*

- Accept the fact that the available sources represent only a tiny fragment of the human experience.
- Identify *sets* of sources: collections of material that will form the heart of your research.
- Understand that more powerful people created and preserved more records, but that skillful historians can often find the voices of the less powerful.

2. Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History: A Primer of Historical Method* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950), 46.

3. J. H. Powell, "Preface to the 1949 Edition," in *Bring Out Your Dead: The Great Plague of Yellow Fever in Philadelphia in 1793* (1949; repr., Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), xvii.

### *Primary versus Secondary Sources*

The distinction between “primary” and “secondary” sources for historical research dates back to the early twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> As Louis Gottschalk helpfully explains, “A *primary* source is the testimony of an eyewitness . . . of one who or that which was present at the events of which he or it tells. . . . A secondary source is the testimony of anyone who is not an eyewitness—that is, of one who was not present at the events of which he tells. A primary source must thus have been produced by a contemporary of the events it narrates.” Significantly, a source can be fantastically old and still be a secondary source. As Gottschalk notes, Livy’s history of Rome, now more than two thousand years old, covers events that took place centuries before Livy’s birth. For those events, Livy is a secondary source. It may be an “original source”: the earliest extant source for those events. But it will never be primary.<sup>5</sup>

Differentiating between primary and secondary sources helps distinguish types of historical scholarship. The chief purpose of a work based on primary sources, especially those never before consulted by a historian, may be to lay out the basic facts of a story. And part of the interpretive power of the argument is likely to be rooted in newly discovered facts. By contrast, the value of works based mostly on secondary sources lies in their presenting known facts in new configurations, to reveal new insights. W.E.B. Du Bois’s 1935 book *Black Reconstruction in America*, for instance, remains one of the most influential texts in the historiography of the United States. “If I had had time and money and opportunity to go back to the original sources in all cases,” Du Bois writes, “there can be no doubt that the weight of this work would have been vastly strengthened, and as I firmly believe, the case of the Negro more convincingly set forth.” Yet even scholarship whose conclusions he rejected had facts he could rely on to support his claims.<sup>6</sup>

4. James Harvey Robinson, “The Newer Ways of Historians,” *American Historical Review* 35 (1930): 245.

5. Gottschalk, *Understanding History*, 53–55.

6. W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (1935; repr., New York: Touchstone, 1992), 724.

When historians understood history to be the record of statecraft and war, a primary source usually meant an official document preserved in a state archive. As history matured as a discipline, imaginative historians began to see the potential in other types of records. Edward Potts Cheyney, wrote an admirer, made use of literary and artistic sources “while most of us were limiting our attention to the State Papers, just as though there were not more of Tudor England in Shakespeare than in all the documents combined.”<sup>7</sup> Newspapers—now routinely consulted by researchers from middle school students to the most senior scholars—were uncommon as historical sources until John Bach McMaster demonstrated their value.<sup>8</sup>

The line between primary and secondary sources can get blurry as we widen the definition of an event. Few of the characters in Martha Hodes’s book *Mourning Lincoln* witnessed the April 14, 1865, shooting of Lincoln or his death the following morning, so their letters are not primary sources for the assassination. But a great many recorded their own reactions to news of that death, or the public displays of grief that followed. Their diaries and letters are primary sources for those reactions.<sup>9</sup>

Or consider one of the events that inspired Hodes: the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The members and staff of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (better known as the 9/11 Commission) had not witnessed those events directly, so their 2004 report should be read as a secondary source for events of September 2001 and before. Indeed, the executive director of the commission staff, Philip Zelikow, had taught history at the University of Virginia, and the report is a work of history. Yet if we consider the event “9/11” to include not only the attacks and their antecedents but also the *effects* of those attacks, we must ask how the commission report came to be, and how it shaped both public policy and public perception. Indeed, the report was

7. Conyers Read, “Edward Potts Cheyney as a Writer,” in *Edward Potts Cheyney: Portrait of an Historian*, ed. William E. Lingelbach (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1935), 22.

8. Richard H. Shryock, “Medical Sources and the Social Historian,” *American Historical Review* 41 (1936): 458.

9. Martha Hodes, *Mourning Lincoln* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).

so significant to that perception that a *New York Times* reporter, Philip Shenon, devoted a book to the commission's work: a history of a history. For Shenon, Zelikow and his team were most certainly eyewitnesses to the creation of the report, so their report (as well as their interviews with Shenon) served as a primary source.<sup>10</sup> We are all witnesses to history, and every record we make is potentially a primary source to someone.

Similarly, a great many primary sources are secondary sources as well. In 1965, Saul Benison argued that "the autobiography gathered by oral history methods is not merely an addition or a supplement to other extant documents; actually it stands as an attempt at a first interpretation of a series of given events. It is also the first reduction and ordering of a mass of primary and secondary material germane to a particular man's life."<sup>11</sup> The same is true of written autobiographies, which frequently mix the writer's recollection of past events and their current understanding of those events' meaning.<sup>12</sup> We cannot tell our own stories without some interpretation.

Legal historian Hendrik Hartog once claimed that "what makes a legal historian a legal historian might be nothing more than the difference between assuming that law is a window and assuming that you have to understand the window as an artifact and as having a shaping effect on what you see through it. Legal historians are curious about the windows."<sup>13</sup> I like the metaphor but reject the implication that legal historians are unique in this regard. Every historian, regardless of specialty, must regard sources as windows, remembering to look *at* the window as well as *through* the window. No window is wholly transparent, and without understanding the way a source frames the view and distorts the light, we cannot trust our eyes.

10. United States Government Printing Office, *9/11 Commission Report: The Official Report of the 9/11 Commission and Related Publications* (Washington, DC: USGPO, 2004); Philip Shenon, *The Commission: The Uncensored History of the 9/11 Investigation* (New York: Grand Central, 2008).

11. Saul Benison, "Reflections on Oral History," *American Archivist* 28 (1965): 74.

12. Jennifer Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 111.

13. Gautham Rao, "Friends in All the Right Places: The Newest Legal History," *Uncommon Sense—The Blog*, October 8, 2019, <https://blog.oieahc.wm.edu/friends-in-all-the-right-places/>.

### *Balancing Your Use of Secondary Sources*

Some important histories rely entirely on secondary sources. Practitioners of what William McNeill called “macrohistory”—stories that span multiple continents and centuries—must get most of their information from other scholars. No single set of primary sources could capture movements and events too big to be perceived even by the people who took part in them, and no mortal historian could hope to learn all the languages and subjects needed to tell these stories from scratch.<sup>14</sup> Writers of reference formats are even more dependent. The writer of an encyclopedia entry or a textbook is generally expected to sum up current knowledge on a topic, not to break new ground, even if they occasionally interpret a primary source themselves along the way.

Historians working on smaller scales, however, must balance secondary and primary sources. You could start a project by hitting the library and securing every book and article related to your topic written since the event itself, then write a first draft based only on those sources before determining what there is left to say. I suspect, however, that this would be psychologically quite difficult, doing all that work without knowing what you would contribute that is new. On the other hand, writing a draft based only on primary sources could be equally terrifying. What if you have done all this work, only to find that someone else has marked that path before?

Fortunately, there are other possibilities in between. It is certainly a good idea to familiarize yourself with the existing literature, including its source bases. For instance, as I worked on the Philadelphia riots of 1844, I hoped to gain insights beyond those achieved by Michael Feldberg in his 1975 book on the topic.<sup>15</sup> Seeing how heavily he relied on one newspaper, the *Public Ledger*, I could feel more comfortable knowing that I was breaking new ground when I read other newspapers, without having to check back each paragraph to see what Feldberg said. You can also write a draft based

14. William H. McNeill, *Mythistory and Other Essays* (ACLS Humanities E-Book, 2008), 86–90.

15. Michael Feldberg, *The Philadelphia Riots of 1844: A Study of Ethnic Conflict* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975).

on primary sources, then compare it to previous accounts to see if there is anything you missed or misunderstood. With luck, these will be few enough that you can happily cite the secondary source for the gaps and still feel you have done something original. Secondary sources can be particularly useful for information that is adjacent to your topic. If I am writing about Pennsylvania, I want most of my information about Pennsylvania to come from primary sources. But I may need a sense of what was going on in New York, Canada, and the United Kingdom, and I am happy to rely on secondary sources for that.

You will need to evaluate the merit of each secondary source on which you rely. Finding works published by a reputable press or journal is a good start, but some valuable works appear elsewhere, while some of the best publishers occasionally publish junk. Finding reviews and citations to works can give you a sense if other researchers trust them.

### *Sets of Sources*

Any important event may leave traces in records scattered across the globe. Consider again Hodes's history of reactions to the assassination of Abraham Lincoln in 1865. Along with the accounts left by those who witnessed the shooting and Lincoln's death, we have accounts of the hunt for the assassin, his coconspirators, and their trials and execution. And even beyond that, we have the reactions of untold numbers of contemporaries in the United States and in other countries, just a sample of which Hodes tapped.<sup>16</sup> To try to gather every possible source would take more than a lifetime.

To make their job manageable, most historians focus their efforts by identifying *sets* of sources that can be found and read relatively quickly (and even this can mean years). A set might be an archival collection, a run of a periodical, published government documents, or any other group of sources that can all be found in the same place. For seminar papers or even journal articles, a single set of sources may be enough. Collections of letters sent to a mayor or a prominent prisoner, though addressed to the same recipient,

16. Hodes, *Mourning Lincoln*.

may express a range of views.<sup>17</sup> A set of children's books—written and illustrated by various authors and illustrated but published around the same time and sharing similar themes—can help us understand the “definition of masculine courage, chivalry, and self-sacrifice” that shaped the American boys who became soldiers in World War I.<sup>18</sup>

A truly rich set of sources may fuel a whole book. Theodore Rosengarten won the National Book Award for *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw*, based on his remarkable interviews with a remarkable man.<sup>19</sup> He followed up with *Tombee: Portrait of a Cotton Planter*, the core of which was the plantation journal kept by Thomas B. Chaplin between 1845 and 1858. For the latter book, Rosengarten and his research assistant, Susan Walker, “stalked Chaplin in public and private archives, reconstructing the world he took for granted, filling in the gaps in his story.”<sup>20</sup> Still, the journal is central to the story, and Rosengarten includes it as the second part of his book.

More commonly, historians seek multiple source sets to view events from more than one perspective. “I have assumed that each document might reflect a particular agenda and have taken certain precautions as a result,” writes Kathleen Belew. “When possible. I use multiple sources to corroborate information. If, say, a fact appears in a redacted FBI file, an undercover reporter's interview with a white power activist, and a mainstream press report, it probably can be relied upon.”<sup>21</sup>

It can be helpful to juxtapose sources reflecting the views of one set of actors against those reflecting the views of their antagonists.

17. Michael Willrich, “‘Close That Place of Hell’: Poor Women and the Cultural Politics of Prohibition,” *Journal of Urban History* 29 (2003): 555–74; Jon Shelton, “Letters to the Essex County Penitentiary: David Selden and the Fracturing of America,” *Journal of Social History* 48 (2014): 135–55.

18. Vanessa Meikle Schulman, “‘The Books We All Read’: The Golden Age of Children's Book Illustration and American Soldiers in the Great War,” *Lion and the Unicorn* 41 (2017): 206.

19. Nate Shaw and Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York: Knopf, 1974).

20. Theodore Rosengarten, Thomas Benjamin Chaplin, and Susan W. Walker, *Tombee: Portrait of a Cotton Planter* (New York: Morrow, 1986), 11.

21. Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 14.

For instance, in *The Dead Will Arise*, Jeffrey Peires uses correspondence between two British officers to understand the point of view of the colonizers, while he uses articles by a Xhosa historian of the nineteenth century and journals of a British clergyman to understand events from the perspective of the colonized.<sup>22</sup> Alternatively, a historian might use one set of sources to document an actor's public statements while others reveal more private thoughts. Rachel Shelden, for example, contrasts the theatrical speeches that congressmen bellowed in order to please constituents back home with personal correspondence suggesting that fellow representatives discounted the bombast.<sup>23</sup>

Where records are scarce, a historian may need to move from one type of source to another, like a traveler who rides an electric scooter to the nearest bus stop, takes a bus to the subway to the airport, gets on a plane, and takes a cab to their final destination. Scott Heerman's *Alchemy of Slavery* covers nearly two centuries, and no one set of observers recorded that entire sweep. For the earliest period, Heerman relied on European diplomatic records, then moved on to local legal records, and, toward the end of his story, to local newspapers as they were founded. "Each set of sources offers its own window on the contours of slavery and freedom in Illinois," Heerman explains, "and each has its own set of limitations." But taken together, the sets get him from start to finish.<sup>24</sup> For her history of disability, spanning a century, Sarah Rose needed to tap a new set of sources for almost every chapter.<sup>25</sup> Despite discouraging advice from other labor historians, Seth Rockman was able to use multiple sets of sources to tell the story of unskilled workers of the early nineteenth century. "The archive *is* there," he concludes,

22. Jeffrey B. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), x-xi.

23. Rachel A. Shelden, *Washington Brotherhood: Politics, Social Life, and the Coming of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 39-40.

24. M. Scott Heerman, *The Alchemy of Slavery: Human Bondage and Emancipation in the Illinois Country, 1730-1865* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 15.

25. Sarah F. Rose, *No Right to Be Idle: The Invention of Disability, 1840s-1930s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), Appendix A: Note on Sources.

“but it requires a willingness to see bigger stories in smaller evidentiary fragments.”<sup>26</sup>

The more you learn, the clearer an idea you will get of what you are looking for. Jean O’Brien, for example, wanted to find nineteenth-century New Englanders writing about Indians. She “started by creating a comprehensive bibliography of local histories of all the towns and cities of Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island published between 1820 and 1880,” and added additional items that she thought might mention Indians. But she did not let those early selection principles confine her research, nor did she force herself to read everything on her initial list. “Once I settled down to read the texts,” she explains, “I noticed some patterns and further modified my list. Fairly early on I concluded, for example, that church histories, manuals, and anniversaries rarely included Indians; sermons or historical discourses delivered at churches also likely did not. . . . And by no means did I look at every Forefathers’ oration delivered at Plymouth (although I did consult many of them).” Eventually she had a source base that gave her confidence that a few additional sources here or there “would not alter the story I saw emerging from the texts I already had consulted.”<sup>27</sup>

It is rare to find a finished work of history that relies solely on its main sets of sources, for historians must build some passages from varied scraps of information. To write a one-paragraph description of the appearance and contents of a typical dwelling around 1900 in the “Mexican Town” of Clifton, Arizona, Linda Gordon used photographs, interviews she conducted, interviews conducted by previous scholars, published scholarship, unpublished dissertations, an unpublished letter, and a historical society pamphlet.<sup>28</sup> Still, a glance through the notes for her book as a whole shows the importance of a few sets of sources that Gordon uses again and again, such as the New York Foundling Hospital Archives and such periodicals as the *Arizona Bulletin* and *Copper Era*.

26. Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 352.

27. Jean M. O’Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), ix.

28. Linda Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 361n11.

*Sources as Records of the Powerful*

When Martha Jones entered the Baltimore Bar Library to trace the efforts of antebellum African Americans to assert their legal rights, she found that she would need to do her research in a room dominated by a portrait of Chief Justice Roger Taney, author of the infamous Supreme Court opinion holding that African Americans “had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.” “The portrait of Taney haunted me,” Jones reflected. “I could not reconcile how, despite the gracious accommodation that was extended to me, I wasn’t sure I belonged. Or did I mean my research topic did not belong?”<sup>29</sup>

Jones’s discomfort at Taney’s portrait reminds us that no source, library, or archive is a neutral record of history. Literacy itself is a form of unequally distributed power, and it takes even more power to create, organize, and preserve records. In the United States we have vast buildings designed to store the papers of a few twentieth-century presidents, while ordinary folk may be lucky to find a stray reference to their great-grandmothers in a genealogical database. Long before it became a T-shirt slogan, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s observation that “well-behaved women seldom make history” expressed an insight about uneven historical sources: the keepers of records in seventeenth-century New England were more likely to write about a woman if she were charged with heresy or witchcraft than if she lived her life as the ministers wished.<sup>30</sup> And since most women, like most men, are well behaved, that makes it hard to study the lives of ordinary folk in any age.

Rather than give up, historians have developed tools to find the voices of less powerful people in the archives of the powerful. Often, this takes the form of unusual intrusions by the state—that great creator of records—into the lives of people whose words have otherwise vanished. As noted in chapter 6, whole subgenres of history are based on trial records or census data, which themselves record moments when the state cared enough about taxation, conscription,

29. Martha S. Jones, *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 159.

30. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “Vertuous Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature, 1668–1735,” *American Quarterly* 28 (1976): 20.

or social order to take notice of the poor. In writing her history of the cotton gin, Angela Lakwete found ample papers recording the career of wealthy manufacturers, such as Eli Whitney. To include the stories of less prominent craftsmen, she relied on patent extension files, which, she explains, “include biographies of the applicants, business histories, broadsides and trade catalogs, along with the petition, substantiating evidence and counterevidence.”<sup>31</sup>

Nongovernmental actors also record the lives of the less powerful, and the less literate. Middle-class reformers left us their observations of gamblers and prostitutes.<sup>32</sup> To hear voices of Indians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Nancy Shoemaker relied on the records of “travelers, traders, missionaries, or soldiers,” who wrote in European, not Native, languages. Yet she offers reasons to believe that those Europeans captured more than their own preconceptions. For one thing, different nations and even individuals appear distinct in the records. “If European record keepers had imagined their conversations with Indians,” Shoemaker argues, “then we should expect Indians to act and speak alike, and in these records they do not.” Moreover, she continues, “Indian complaints of greed, lies, and treachery appear openly in accounts written by the alleged perpetrators of the greed, lies, and treachery. If European functionaries wantonly doctored the records, surely they would have edited out these unflattering depictions of themselves.”<sup>33</sup>

Some records of the powerless survive through the oddest of chances, and emerge from the greatest of ingenuity. Thomas Cope was a wealthy Philadelphia merchant whose five ships connected Liverpool and Philadelphia at the height of the Irish Famine. A century and a half later, Matthew Gallman picked through Cope’s papers and found notes that Irish immigrants in Philadelphia had written on the backs of the tickets they were sending to friends and relatives who were preparing to cross the Atlantic. Since the

31. Angela Lakwete, *Inventing the Cotton Gin: Machine and Myth in Antebellum America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 220.

32. Mara Laura Keire, *For Business and Pleasure: Red-Light Districts and the Regulation of Vice in the United States, 1890–1933* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

33. Nancy Shoemaker, *A Strange Likeness: Becoming Red and White in Eighteenth-Century North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 10.

tickets were torn in half when used, Gallman often found only half a message. Still, he was able to glean details of the lives of desperately poor people, who needed to avoid con men and thieves, but were advised not to purchase clothing, which would be cheaper in America.<sup>34</sup>

It can be frustrating to see the lives of the powerless only through the eyes of the powerful. “Police, bureaucrats, folklorists, priests, teachers, agronomists, and men of letters looked on, even probed,” Eugen Weber explains, “but whether critical or sympathetic they cannot tell us what went on as true participants” in the lives of the more humble villagers Weber wishes to study.<sup>35</sup> Paul Thompson notes the irony that classic works on bottom-up history depend on “reports by paid government informers,” so that “socialist historians are reduced to writing history from the records of government spies.”<sup>36</sup>

Worse still is the utter lack of records about many people whose stories we would like to tell. “I went to Barbados searching for something I would never find,” writes Marisa Fuentes of her search for the voice of enslaved women of the eighteenth century.

There were none of the voices I sought to document, no whole figures emerged that I could trace beyond a momentary mention. The women I did find were battered, beaten, executed, and overtly sexualized. They were listed on estate inventories only as Phoebe, Mimba, or “Broken Back Betty,” and sometimes only as “negroe”—stripped bare of all that was meaningful in their lives. Bequeathed in wills and deeds, or counted and dying on slave ships, they could not tell me about these conditions or what they thought, how they loved, or from where they came. The permanent loss of this knowledge was harrowing.<sup>37</sup>

34. James Matthew Gallman, *Receiving Erin's Children: Philadelphia, Liverpool, and the Irish Famine Migration, 1845-1855* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 2-3; 229n1.

35. Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976), xi.

36. Paul Thompson and Joanna Bornat, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 5.

37. Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 145.

Fuentes does what she can with the sources she has. For instance, when she finds white men's descriptions of other white men's beating enslaved women, Fuentes keeps the details but retells the episodes from the women's point of view. Yet while she does all she can to tell these women's stories, Fuentes remains frustrated by "the historical impossibilities of representing and historicizing their pain."<sup>38</sup>

### *No Source Speaks for Itself*

No source speaks for itself; the historian must ask questions, which will in turn determine the answers. Consider, for instance, the interviews of formerly enslaved Americans, conducted in the 1930s by Works Progress Administration (WPA) workers. Some scholars have been wary of the interviews. How well could elderly African Americans describe a world they had known only as children, seventy or more years before? Moreover, as John Blassingame points out, in most states, the WPA hired only white interviewers, whom the narrators likely did not trust enough to offer candid accounts of their lives under slavery, and who appear to have left doctored transcripts of what they did hear.<sup>39</sup> Other scholars acknowledge these shortcomings but note that every historical source is problematic. "If they were in some respects tainted," note the editors of one volume of excerpts, "so too were other sources of slavery—including the records produced by slaveholders and their white supporters. The historian's task was, as always, to employ them in ways that maximized their utility. The best scholars of slavery have used them critically and cautiously, carefully evaluating the quality of each narrative, verifying the ex-slave's memory against other sources, and sometimes even sifting through multiple versions of the same interview."<sup>40</sup>

38. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 128. See also Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12 (July 17, 2008): 1–14.

39. John W. Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems," *Journal of Southern History* 41 (1975): 473–92.

40. Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller, eds., *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk about Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation* (New York: New Press, 2011), xxii.

While many historians have read the narratives for clues about how African Americans experienced slavery, others have mined them for information about the behavior of white people who claimed African Americans as property. “Serving as metaphorical flies on the walls of southern households, formerly enslaved people talked about some of the most violent, traumatic, and intimate dimensions of life for those who were bound and those who were free,” notes Stephanie Jones-Rogers. “They heard and saw things that typically remained obscured from view, details that white slave-owning couples often left out of personal correspondence or public communications—that is, when they were able to write at all.”<sup>41</sup> While many historians’ instinct has been to read the narratives for information about the 1850s, Stephanie Shaw notes that interviews conducted in the 1930s can also yield information about the 1930s. It seems obvious once it is put that way, but it requires a shift in perspective.<sup>42</sup>

### *Languages and Specialized Reading*

As part of the imagining process, you may need to ask what languages you are willing to learn in order to complete the research. “If you don’t know Russian, you don’t really know what you’re missing,” notes Timothy Snyder, whose reading knowledge of ten European languages enables his scholarship. “Imagine that you’re in a huge country house and you have keys, but your keys only open some of the rooms. You only know the part of the house that you can wander in. And you can persuade yourself that that’s the whole house, but it’s not. We can only see as much, and we can only go as far as our languages take us.”<sup>43</sup> For the most part, historians need only reading, not conversational, knowledge in order to conduct research. On the other hand, they may need specialized training (called paleography) to read centuries-old handwriting. And while linguistic ability is obviously important for multinational studies,

41. Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), xviii.

42. Stephanie J. Shaw, “Using the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives to Study the Impact of the Great Depression,” *Journal of Southern History* 69 (2003): 623–58.

43. “The Q&A: Timothy Snyder, Historian,” *Economist*, June 3, 2011.

all countries have linguistic minorities, not to mention visitors who recorded their observations in other languages.

Technical knowledge is also a kind of language. While some historians may need to read German or Korean, others may need to know how to read a legal brief, a garden journal, a medical chart, a military service record, a diplomatic cable, or a patent application—and perhaps how to read some of these documents in German or Korean. Business historian Caitlin Rosenthal’s years of reading spreadsheets as a management consultant, for example, prepared her to ask questions of and extract answers from ledgers kept by men seeking to extract the most labor from the workers they enslaved.<sup>44</sup> Would you recognize a telex if you saw one, and, if so, could you understand why someone in your story chose that mode over a letter or telegram?

Each language you learn, or other specialized knowledge you acquire, is an investment in future research. If you are planning a career in legal history or Korean history, then spending years on a law degree or Korean-language study is a reasonable investment. If all you need is a few pages of a language you do not read, it may make more sense to consult an online computer translation (I suggest using multiple services and comparing the results), then—once you have identified the passages you care about—running them past a friend or colleague who reads the relevant language. If you quote a passage that someone else translated, be sure to credit the translator in your notes.

### *Choose Sources That You Love*

Sources are a matter of taste. Some scholars find joy in close reading of a small number of sources, while others prefer to find patterns in vast collections. Some take pride in deciphering handwriting while others avoid the study of eras before the invention of the typewriter.

Just as it is a good idea to model the structure of your project on works of history that you enjoy reading, so should you consider the

44. Caitlin Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), xi.

source bases of your favorite works by other historians. If you love reading books based on personal letters, look for a cache of personal letters to write about. If you are more persuaded by quantitative analyses, look instead for a dataset. And if you admire cutting-edge historians who construct narratives out of sources that previous scholars had considered worthless, seek a comparable challenge.