

FORUM: HISTORY AND THE PRESENT

Practices Make Pertinent: Prospecting and Histories of the Present

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(Received 1 April 2022; accepted 6 April 2022)

Most historians let collective memories guide their work, with what needs to be studied already understood to matter. This is particularly true for histories of the recent past, in which primary-source research serves, to quote Michel Foucault, “to refresh memory.” Memorial histories are of different types—including nationalist histories, militant histories, and family or group histories—and useful. There are other approaches to studying the past, however, that can help even those committed to memorial practices. This article draws from work by Bonnie G. Smith, Laura Doan, and Foucault to home in on two key historical practices: “primary-source work” and “historiography.” A sharper awareness of what these practices are, their possibilities, and, of pressing importance, their limits—what they cannot or tend not to reveal, what they in fact render more difficult to see—could help make debates about presentism more convincing. The article proposes “prospecting” as a way to identify research topics that might stimulate present-day discussions and also engage other scholars.

Historians like to think that big ideas largely explain our choices, how we grapple with our research as well as why we write the histories that we do. Current discussions of how and why to deploy historical research in public debate offer a case study of this blinkered view. In multiple forums, historians assess the role of presentism, with some warning of the risks to rigor and to the promise of historical distance, while others unpack how the fetishization of such conservative ideas impedes important claims and evidence gaining wider purchase. All participate in a broader conversation about how, whether, or to what extent present-day political positions and analyses ought to shape historical research and/or frame historical interpretations. I share the view of many that extra-academic debates require the insight that trained historians can bring to the table, both to clarify existing stakes and to inform others of how we got here. Yet debates among historians about how to bring historical insights into current popular and political discussions would gain much from taking questions of practices—how do we produce writing that, because it signals specific types of work, convinces other historians that it’s “good” history?—as seriously as theoretical debates about why certain *topoi*, claims, or forms of argument are required. Specific historical

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practices, after all, are what distinguish historians from other commentators. A sharper awareness of what these practices are, their possibilities, and, of pressing importance, their limits—what they cannot or tend not to reveal, what they in fact render more difficult to see—would make debates about presentism more convincing. They might also make them more interesting for other scholars.

My own scholarship focuses on the 1960s and 1970s, with a particular attention to what I term Algerian histories of France. My first book argued that “the Algerian War [1954–1962] posed fundamental questions about who was French and how the country must be governed ... In most ways, what resulted in France resembles a counterrevolution.” To explain what I meant by counterrevolution, I insisted that “understandings premised in newly clear racial and ethnic differences proved the most secure harbor for French universalism in its stormy exit from the reassuring certainties that overseas empire had seemed to offer,” and that this new form of racialization had dramatic institutional effects, allowing “Charles de Gaulle and his associates to reshape, radically so, republican legitimacy, civil liberties, and the state.” A French trade press quickly bought the rights and translated it into French. I am frequently invited to comment in the French press as well as academic discussions and to participate in efforts by intellectuals to shape public debate. The book has also had a certain echo in Algeria. The same trade press published my second monograph, with a translation that appeared before the original came out in the US. The book sought to unpack “how much the Algerian revolution shaped France’s sexual revolution and, more broadly, its history.” In short, when the *New York Times* subtitled a February 2021 article with “politicians and prominent intellectuals say social theories from the United States on race, gender and post-colonialism are a threat to French identity and the French republic,” I recognize the discussions of which they speak.¹

What I think matters in my work, which I also believe has allowed some of it to matter to certain activists as well as others in France and Algeria, is the ways in which theoretical and methodological engagements have shaped my research. It’s certainly not that, as an “outsider,” I am more “objective” than French or Algerian commentators on their countries’ intersecting pasts. When I began doctoral work, I had little interest in or awareness of French history, in general, or of Algeria’s forced connections to France since 1830, more specifically. My commitments were to queer, post-colonial, and gender theory, which I believed offered useful ways to think through certain dead ends and disappointed hopes that “identity politics” in the US, and the aftermath of anticolonial and New Left movements across the world, confronted. What led me to train as a historian was my encounter with primary-source research guided by questions and frames from secondary sources. I admire the ways in which research in primary-source material is constantly reinvigorated by the need to turn to

¹See Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, 2006), 2; Shepard, 1962: *Comment l’indépendance algérienne a transformé la France*, trans. Claude Servan-Schreiber (Paris, 2008); Shepard, *Mâle décolonisation: L’“homme arabe” et la France, de l’indépendance algérienne à la révolution iranienne*, trans. Clément Baude (Paris, 2017); Shepard, *Sex, France, and Arab Men, 1962–1979* (Chicago, 2017); Norimitsu Onishi, “Will American Ideas Tear France Apart? Some of Its Leaders Think So. Politicians and Prominent Intellectuals Say Social Theories from the United States on Race, Gender and Post-colonialism are a Threat to French Identity and the French Republic,” *New York Times*, 10 Feb. 2021, A9.

new scholarly discussions to make sense of what one encounters. French history proved a generative choice, even though the questions that led me to explore “whether the Algerian Revolution was a French revolution” were wholly American in origin. The *va-et-vient* between primary-source evidence and scholarship has proven a powerful lever to make arguments that can intervene historiographically, even as they also can have traction in public debates.

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An emphasis on historical practice, as I see it, offers another way to allow “theory”-derived insights to change the ways historians do work. I want to suggest that an “archaeological” approach to historical research—let’s call it prospecting, for reasons I explain below—might add much to the important contributions that explicitly “genealogical” approaches bring to “the history of the present.” My use of these three terms draws explicitly from Michel Foucault’s deployment of them: this is a call to focus on practice that rejects any pretense that, for historians, practice can be disassociated from theory. My introduction to prospecting reads a couple very brief suggestions from Foucault through the pathbreaking work of feminist historian Bonnie G. Smith on what she calls “the gender of history” and British historian of sexuality Laura Doan’s compelling summons for a queer critical history. Both share the certainty that historians need to maintain a sharp critique of all forms of positivism, notably the belief that certain categories of analysis or “identities” always matter, or have any coherent (or even solid) foundation. These are insights they draw from post-structuralist, postcolonial, gender, and queer theory, which the writings of historians such as Joan W. Scott, Hayden White, and Dominick LaCapra, among others, have done so much to interpret for other historians. Unlike a summons such as the 2018 “Theses on Theory and History,” or #TheoryRevolt, however, Smith and Doan more clearly open perspectives for how to do historical work that centers thinkers, discussions, and intellectual debates that are not already known to matter, that have disappeared from view. In part because of this, prospecting offers much to intellectual historians committed to expanding the range of thinkers and knowledge producers who should be taken seriously. Prospecting, however, directly challenges historians intrigued by new approaches that embrace identities as stable, and affirm the portability, across time and space, of their supposedly radical and critical analytic matrix, such as decolonial theory or settler colonial studies. Rather than another contribution to (important) debates on the role of “theory” or how we conceptualize “the past,” “the present,” or “the future,” my attention to historical practice aims to invigorate ways in which we conceive and pursue research projects in primary-source materials, including archives.²

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²See, e.g., Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1986); Dominick LaCapra, *History and Criticism* (Ithaca, 1985); Joan Wallach Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 91/5 (1986), 1053–75; Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17/4 (1991), 773–97; Ethan Kleinberg, Joan Wallach Scott, and Gary Wilder, “Theses on Theory and History,” *History of the Present* 10/1 (2020), 157–65.

In its idealistic framing, today's debate about the possibilities and risks of bringing historical research into wider public debates closely resembles influential interpretations of the struggle among historians in the 1980s and 1990s over the so-called objectivity question. In 1988, historian Peter Novick subsumed ongoing debates for and against "theory" and "positivism" into what he named "the objectivity question," which the historian proposed was foundational, rather than recent, for the US history profession, and also cyclical in nature. Changing contexts as well as debates internal to practitioners largely explained, in Novick's interpretation, the shifts in preferences over time among historians about whether a commitment to "objectivity" or "subjectivity" was more conducive to compelling research. As in current discussions about "presentism" and politics, Novick and many other commentators on the "objectivity question" prefer to ignore the role of practice. Shared methodological premises, notably, heavily determine whether historians find work compelling. The presumption that ideas—about what kind of history we should pursue, what kind of arguments we should make, about objectivity or presentism—should be the only topic of debate or theorization further obfuscates the importance of practice.³

The importance of practices is one foundation of Bonnie G. Smith's illuminating 1995 article "Gender and the Practices of Scientific History," which offers an archival history of the emergence of what became the modern academic discipline of history. Smith highlights historians' preference for idealistic self-understandings—for example, explanations based on which position one holds about "objectivity" or "presentism"—to remind readers that this has only ever been part of the story. It is a shared attachment to usually unspoken premises, what Smith shorthands as the "actual work performed in the pursuit of truth," that binds historians together in a community of knowledge. She quotes historian Michel de Certeau's argument that every "historical fact" results from a praxis ... It results from procedures which have allowed a mode of comprehension to be articulated as a discourse of facts." This argument, Smith notes, "mirrors the findings of historians of science that intense and detailed activity necessarily precedes the production of scientific facts." Smith identifies two foundational practices, which the emergent history profession embraced as field-defining, and that, still today, allow those trained as historians to recognize the work of other historians: the twinned practices of "archival research" and "seminar training." Smith affirms, were "as foundational to and influential in the profession as the ideals of truth and objectivity." In Smith's analysis, which she develops in *The Gender of History*, we see how these can aptly be translated into today's commitment among historians to the seemingly more ecumenical practices of "primary sources" and "historiographical expertise," yet the ways in which each practice in its original form shaped the emergence of the historical profession merits some attention. They modeled how the discipline of history came to function, in ways that resemble the development of other professions, especially in terms of boundary policing and attempts to assert a monopoly over relevant knowledge.⁴

³Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988).

⁴Bonnie G. Smith, "Gender and the Practices of Scientific History: The Seminar and Archival Research in the Nineteenth Century," *American Historical Review* 100/4 (1995), 1150–76, at 1150; and Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Cambridge, MA, 1998).

Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, first in Germany, then across the Atlantic world and beyond, so-called seminar training proved crucial as historians took over the teaching of history in universities and, more broadly, organized to insist that only those trained in such a way could be trusted to make claims about the past in any serious discussion. Smith incisively explores how closed doors and specially designed seminar rooms helped create a glorified vision of the modern confraternity of historians, which conceived of itself as “disdainful of aristocratic displays of inborn flair and brilliance,” and believed, Smith demonstrates, that “seminars produced scholars prepared for hard work, provided with technical competence, and skilled in critical thinking.” In the name of “truth and objectivity” only some could be admitted into the seminar room, unlike in other forums where historical claims might be exposed and judged, such as public lectures. Only an intense commitment to the importance of history and the certainty that hard work would allow good history to emerge were acceptable. Only those deemed worthy of admission to the seminar, or who had trained in this system, could truly judge the budding practitioner. The man who introduced the seminar method to the United States, Herbert Baxter Adams of the new Johns Hopkins University, celebrated historical seminars as “laboratories where books are treated like mineralogical specimens, passed about from hand to hand, examined, and tested.” The sightlines through to how both graduate programs continue to train historians and members of the profession continue to judge each other and themselves as “good” historians are clear, in terms of mastery of the extant historiography of the field(s), one’s ability to respond to challenges and suggestions from other historians, and the category of evidence on which such responses must be anchored.⁵

Archival research was the other pole of historical practice: in tangent with seminar training, this practice came to seem the very grounds from which historians could speak. Over the course of the late nineteenth- and the twentieth centuries, as the seminar increasingly discredited other ways of gaining expertise among historians, an intense focus on archived materials displaced other types of research into what mattered in the past. In the descriptions professional historians proposed, Smith summarizes, “study in the archives was an arduous, joblike quest undertaken by expert citizens.” The *nec plus ultra*, across various national contexts, was state archives, which either extended or took control of and subsumed royal, ecclesiastical, or aristocratic archives, and increasingly focused on taking in the collection, winnowing, and organization of documentation that state agencies, bureaucrats, and officers had produced and relied on to function. Archivists’ efforts to control who could have access to their holdings, to what extent, and when often offered particular privileges to historians.⁶

Still today, it is the dialogue between twinned practices, primary sources and historiographical expertise, that allows historians to recognize the work of other historians; a commitment to these practices “carved out a space where ... history as knowledge and as secular truth,” as Smith puts it, “could be written, judged, and promoted.” Training in historiography, as well as continued efforts to remain

⁵Smith, “Gender and the Practices of Scientific History,” 1158, 1154.

⁶*Ibid.*, 1166.

conversant in what other historians write (or otherwise reveal about their research), allows historians to recognize one as a member of the profession. Facility in this language makes it possible to have other historians take seriously one's questions or doubts about a historical work's lacunae, biases, or misinterpretations. To make a convincing argument, however, requires primary-source evidence. As historian of sexuality Laura Doan puts it, "academic history is professionalized in particular ways, tethered to historical evidence as a means to best understand change over time." Too often, though, historians leave unspoken the certainty that historical work requires a commitment to a constant back-and-forth between primary sources and historiographical engagement. This makes it easy to leave this commitment unexamined and difficult to critique the blind spots such a commitment entails.⁷

Historical method has troubling limits. This is what Smith's critical history of the discipline's emergence makes particularly clear. *The Gender of History* offers a critique of how substantively gendered thinking framed what historians imagine matters, both topically and in terms of evidence: while certain women had played a key role in earlier forums where historical expertise could be recognized—whether as *salonnières* in the Republic of Letters or, like Germaine de Staël, as writers and public lecturers recognized as imaginative "geniuses"—the new seminar system a priori excluded women altogether (although, unlike with the concomitant emergence of strict limits on women voting, a few exceptions made it in). The summons to do archival research fixed the gaze of historians on politics and the state, to the detriment of types of evidence and domains of human existence where the place and creativity of women were central, or at least present, and where qualities deemed "feminine" might be prized. "Aiming to find a consensual truth," Smith argues, "professionals in the seminar and archives relied heavily on gender—a concept riddled with hierarchy and dichotomy at the time and one that eliminated many people from consensus-making." Yet Smith does this critical work as an archival historian, one who stresses "the productivity of historical science's contradictions." Smith contributes to the work historians of gender do: to reveal the endless crises and contradictions that, via distinctions that shift quite dramatically over time and between societies, make possible the hierarchical division of people, values, and things into male and female, masculine and feminine. Yet Smith offers a key caveat to Joan W. Scott's influential summons to use gender as a category of analysis. Scott argues that historians must always historicize: first, to always prove and never presume that, in the context in question, categories such as "men" and "women" or qualifiers such as "feminine" and "masculine" mattered (even if, in diverse contexts and widely varied eras, they almost always have and do); second, that who and what the binaries males/females and masculine/feminine refer to and include differs over time and space, often quite substantively. Smith reminds us that the types of historical research that modern historians rely on, which took shape in nineteenth-century Western universities, can never get outside the specific and intense processes of gendering that profoundly shaped their foundational presumptions and their practices. Historians' basic understandings of

⁷Smith, *ibid.*, 1175; Laura Doan, *Disturbing Practices: History, Sexuality, and Women's Experience of Modern War* (Chicago, 2013), 35

historicization, that is, are gendered. This is why, even as she masterfully stages the dialogue between her archival materials and the relevant historiographies, Smith also looks beyond historiography, notably through the place she gives to work and arguments by feminist, philosophical, and psychoanalytic theorists.⁸

Feminist, gender, and critical theories offer necessary tools to take into account some of the limits that historical practices rely on to function. Psychoanalytic insights, for example, make visible how unconscious factors fashion historians' understandings of "their" archives, sources, and topics; Smith's study incisively brings in Freudian analyses of fetishism to assess her actors' description of archival work. Smith's own practice makes visible what the potent dialectic between historiographical and primary-source research can do, even as her analysis insists that what historians do qua historians is neither all that there is to see when we study the past, nor all that one should try to understand. Many intellectual and other historians continue to embrace the call to expand "the seminar" to include non-historians, to expand our definition of historiography to engage critical works by theorists and other scholars. To define our research topics, however, we might also pay attention to how we analyze the encounter with primary-source evidence, to take full advantage of "the productivity of historical science's contradictions."

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A brief aside in the Introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) emerges in a new light for historians when we focus on practices. Over some three paragraphs, Foucault distinguishes between two different approaches that historians use to define a research project; that is, two different ways to treat primary-source evidence ("the documents"), historiography, and the relationship between them. Foucault defines the work of most historians in terms of "memory," which he counterposes with a novel method that he claims "aspires to the condition of archaeology," which he defines as "the intrinsic description of the monument." The distinction between the two approaches lies in how historians define their objects of study, which is what Foucault here refers to as "monuments." Primary-source materials, "the documents," are necessary for both approaches, but whereas memorial histories use this evidence to alter, fill in, reject, or confirm what the historian's contemporaries already understand about the object of study (or monument), he highlights a different approach, which rediscovers forgotten monuments through wide-ranging work in "the documents." What Foucault names "archaeology," although of much interest for the identification of discourses and other philosophical projects, is not my focus here. Rather, I highlight how his book's first use of the term allows historians to focus on questions of practice.⁹

⁸Smith, "Gender and the Practices of Scientific History," 1176.

⁹Quotes from the English-language translation: Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York, 1972), 7. Let us note an aspect of his claim that make it additionally compelling. Foucault's categorization of most work by historians as "memory" foregrounds how the disdainful analysis of "memory" that, starting in the 1980s, French historian Pierre Nora advanced so emphatically encourages historians to avoid self-reflexivity. This ideological work is particularly clear in the ways in which François Hartog leverages Nora's analysis of memory to critique what Hartog sees

Most historians let memory guide their work. Since historians began to rely on documents to make their claims, Foucault would have it, those claims have focused on what he refers to here as collective memories of what mattered in the past, with the role of historians being to make “use of material documents to refresh [this] memory.” The documentary evidence itself, in the philosopher’s understanding of this approach, allows historians to try “to reconstitute what men have done or said, the events of which only the trace remains.” The “events,” what needs to be reconstituted, are already understood to matter. This definition of historical work as guided by memory, in my reading, lumps together historiographical approaches that define themselves quite differently, and often in stark opposition: nationalist histories; militant histories, which draw from the subterranean networks of oppositional or marginalized movements; family or group histories, which begin from stories or documents passed down through generations. Each offers multiple starting points for a research project. In this broad definition, we find works inspired by the radical insights of Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Saidiya Hartman, or Walter Mignolo, perhaps even Ranajit Guha, alongside those taught in schools or at home, or celebrated by states or a given political movement.¹⁰ The historian uses research to explore a topic that matters in order “to define relations (of simple causality, of circular determination, of antagonism, of expression) between facts or dated events,” is how Foucault puts it, although he also evokes “the restitution of a historical discourse.” The analyses, to be clear, can also be much more expansive, as well as incisive. Most work inspired by the Foucauldian genealogical approach, too, fits easily into the memorial approach to history. Literary critic Barbara Johnson’s pithy summary of critique insists that “critique reads backwards from what seems natural, obvious, self-evident, or universal, in order to show that these things have their history, their reasons for being the way they are.”¹¹ Foucauldian “history-of-the-present” approaches offer compelling examples of why such work is so important. Still, they rhyme with other “memorial” histories, in Foucault’s framing, in that the historian already knew that the topic was there and had reason to believe it of historical importance: “The series being known, it was simply a question of defining the position of each element in relation to the other elements in the series.” The philosopher affirmed that this approach was *passé* among historians. He was wrong, which is perhaps why I find this definition of what I call memorial history such a pertinent provocation for current discussions. Memorial histories have much to offer. An awareness that there are other

as a contemporary (post-1970s) reliance on “presentism” to understand the past. See, e.g., Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les lieux de mémoire,” *Representations* 26 (1989), 7–24; François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, trans. Saskia Brown (New York, 2015).

¹⁰Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. E.g. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, 1995); Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York, 2019); Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, 2000); Ranajit Guha, “The Prose of Counter-insurgency,” in Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner, eds., *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory* (Princeton, 1994), 336–71.

¹¹Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Barbara Johnson, “Translator’s Introduction,” in Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago, 1981), vii–xxxv, at xv.

approaches to studying the past, however, can help even those committed to memorial practices.¹²

When it comes to historical work that either focuses on the quite recent past or is designed to be useful for current discussions, some of the least interesting tendencies of memorial history tend to come to the fore. As the cliché about journalism as “the first draft of history” signals, it is particularly difficult for historians—especially those who work on the recent past—to propose analyses that break with narratives established at the time of the event(s)—most often, at the perceived moment of resolution of the conflict, debate, or development. It is hard to map out research topics that escape from proving or disproving such extant narratives. Arlette Farge, the innovative historian of eighteenth-century France, emphasizes “the imperceptible, yet very real, way in which a historian is only drawn to things that will reinforce the working hypotheses she has settled on.” The risk, she notes, is that this “stunts the imagination, inhibits the mind and stifles curiosity by confining reflection to narrow and suffocating paths.”¹³ Our fairly recent ability to use digitalization and other amazing tools to search databases, online document collections, or publications for the words and terms we want to find make it easy to avoid wading through (seemingly unrelated) surrounding materials, whether the other articles of a daily newspaper or the baffling stuff someone placed in a carton. Such efficiency makes it less likely we will be distracted from predetermined foci, drawn toward the unexpected. This further encourages historians to stick with memorial or contemporary certainties about what mattered in the past. We hear much, in current US debates, about “being on the right side of history”; of what “historians will recall”; of impeachment, for example, as vital “for the historical record.” Thankfully, some future historians of this era will also demonstrate that vitally important developments, events, and causes existed that are not, in the current moment, what such comments presume to know will matter. Still, there are ways besides the passage of time in which we, too, can create salutary distance between our objects of study and the force fields that the power of collective memories exercise. For historians, this is one of the many contributions that an explicit engagement with critical methods offers, notably with those that forthrightly challenge positivism, such as post-structuralist approaches: to critique the a priori importance of extant categories that frame extant narratives. A more explicit attention to practices, notably how we encounter primary sources, might be another way to get out from under the weight of received interpretations, to potentially take fuller advantage of the historian’s encounter with primary sources.

How the historian enters into a rich source base need not predetermine how she responds to what she finds there. I’ve learned much from rich discussions, on the one hand, about “the archive” that seminal work such as *Archaeology of Knowledge* and Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever* helped spark and, on the other, historians’ ongoing efforts successfully to bring types of evidence that challenge or, with

¹²Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 7. My use of “memorial history” is starkly different from that of Francesco Benigno and other scholars who rely on Pierre Nora’s distinction between “history” (good and serious work done by scholars) and “memory” (bad and politicized claims made by activists). Francesco Benigno, *Words in Time: A Plea for Historical Re-thinking*, trans. David Fairservice (New York, 2017).

¹³Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, trans. Thomas Scott-Railton (New Haven, 1989), 69.

oral sources, move beyond usual definitions of primary sources.¹⁴ Still, like “the seminar model,” the archive that obsessed the first generations of professional historians—and many historians since—what Foucault named “the institutions, which, in a given society, make it possible to record and preserve those discourses that one wishes to remember and keep in circulation,” still has much to contribute, following Smith, to “the productivity of historical science’s contradictions.” Historians’ encounters with a dense series of sources that someone or some collective body, for whatever reason, grouped together and preserved remains one key mode of defining a research topic. Such research also opens the possibility of seeing “monuments” that have made no mark on the memories that the historian has access to; one stumbles upon discourses, events, individuals or collective efforts that are absent from existing histories or oral traditions. Foucault celebrates the “New History” (this, of course, is what the *Annales* school, to which he was referring, was often termed at the time), to argue that “history is that which transforms documents into monuments.”¹⁵ What his words allow us to recognize is that our encounter with primary sources makes possible the discovery of forgotten monuments. This is the work of prospecting.

Among the endless number of such forgotten monuments, some merit excavation, description, and analysis, precisely because they speak to the present. Here “critique” is crucial: the recognition that the “monument” mattered in the past does not suffice to merit prospecting. The historian of the present uncovers, describes, and analyzes lost monuments because this work allows us to challenge current certainties. Right before I finished writing my first book, I discovered something in French archives that surprised me: starting in 1958, in the last years of the Algerian War, French authorities had aggressively advanced a quota-based policy of hiring for public-service jobs. Officials had established a new legal definition of a group they named “Muslim French citizens from Algeria,” which they insisted was defined by “shared origins” and not by religion. The explicit reason authorities gave for the quota policy—they named it “exceptional social promotion”—was to redress the effects of racist discrimination suffered by Algerians at the hands of their fellow French citizens. This policy is the focus of a book I’m working to finish now. The discovery surprises everyone I explain it to who knows anything about contemporary France. This is because, since the 1990s, the idea that the French Republic rejects anything that resembles affirmative action—any type of “color-conscious” approach to fighting racism—has become a key pillar in French political debate, and the basis of an academic cottage industry. A substantial body of anglophone work on France, for example, is framed as directly critical of the failures of France’s “color-blind” model of universalism. What is compelling about doing the history of exceptional social promotion, then, is not that it had effects at the time and has been forgotten. This is true of many, many things in late 1950s and early 1960s France. It is of interest because this history allows me to bring evidence and arguments that seem profoundly counterintuitive (because they challenge current certainties) into academic and, potentially, public discussion.

¹⁴Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago, 1998).

¹⁵Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 7. See, e.g., Peter R. Campbell, “The New History: The *Annales* School of History and Modern Historiography,” in William Lamont, ed., *Historical Controversies and Historians* (London, 1998), 189–99.

In thinking about how to do such work, I draw inspiration from the way in which I choose to read the brief passage in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* against the grain—I don't think this is what Foucault meant—which allows me to distinguish between “memorial” histories and what I call prospecting (prospecting, to be clear, is quite distinct from the method that Foucault describes as archaeology). This requires concerted attention to the interplay of historical practices inspired by “the seminar method” and “the archives,” as well as to the blind spots they impose. A recent book by Laura Doan, a historian of modern British lesbianism and sexuality, however, offers a far more rigorous exploration of what it means to do what I term “prospecting.”

The title of Doan's book, *Disturbing Practices: History, Sexuality, and Women's Experience of Modern War* (2013) at once references the upset that rumor or knowledge of nonnormative sexual acts can stir up and the author's goal of drawing attention to how historians do history, our practices, in order to suggest changes. She summons scholars to “envisage the potential of practices that acknowledge the ‘vast domain of historical unknowability.’” Doan uses her own work on early twentieth-century lesbian histories to speak to historians of sexuality, especially those engaged with queer theory. She argues that the dominant modes of historical work in these related fields can be aptly thought of in terms of “identity history,” insofar as present-day discussions of lesbian, gay, and other identities, which have clear purchase on current lives and debates, have fashioned the field. Existing work largely falls into two modes. What is usually referred to as “lesbian and gay history” might be described as “pursuing narratives of origin,” while so-called queer history is “informed by a Foucauldian genealogy renowned for problematizing narratives of origins.” This easy binarization, Doan points out, doesn't really hold, which she emphasizes by naming the first “ancestral genealogy” and the second “queer genealogy.” Despite the queer critique of origins, practitioners of the second, even as their work emphatically historicizes sexual identities and understandings, still analyze the past with questions that begin and remain shaped by current “identity” questions. Doan proposes a new approach for historians of queer, lesbian, gay, or homosexual pasts, which she names “queer critical history.” For her, the starting point is to use “sexual categories to ‘pose questions rather than provide answers.’” Queer critical history offers a superb model for what I term “prospecting.”¹⁶

The ability to turn to unexpected analytic categories, to engage unpredicted historiographies: this is a baseline which all historians can embrace, yet that too often goes unthought or untaught. Doan details why she went to the archives, to explore rich holdings around “the intense public humiliation” that the Hon. Violet Douglas-Pennant suffered in the final months of World War I. This was Doan's entry point for research into “historical evidence to better substantiate claims that women serving in military organizations were thought ‘abnormal’ or ‘peculiar’ or that war ‘heightened visibility of lesbianism.’” She did not find the evidence she hoped for, so Doan developed a practice that emerged from “peculiarities and conceptual roadblocks” that she encountered in the archives. The book uses case

¹⁶Doan, *Disturbing Practices*, 4, 2, 90. The certainty that surprising research discoveries offer springboards for innovative historical work is shared by many historians. See, e.g., Philippe Ariès, *Les temps de l'histoire* (Paris, 1954), esp. 298.

studies of her research into topics that have mattered in British lesbian historiography to explore how to leverage “the unknowability and indeterminacy of the sexual past” to home in on what I would term “lost monuments.” Doan insists on the importance of “alertness to other structures of knowing, including residual knowledges now vanished.” One way to do this, she argues, is to put aside the questions and categories that brought the historian to the sources. These can—for identity historians, they always do—have “political purpose and meaning,” but sticking with the questions and categories that opened up this source base to examination, Doan suggests, too often “yields few surprises.” Rather than frustration with the silences, sharp attention to “the gradations and shadings of nuances and innuendos, the shreds of information and misinformation in tandem with polarities familiar and less familiar and relationships that resist polarization,” allow her to identify other discussions, deeply unfamiliar to us now, that thus might offer novel purpose and meaning to current debates, historiographical and political. Only a historian could bring such unfamiliar discussions to the table.¹⁷

Like many histories of the quite recent past, most of the scholarly insights that historians in general now try to insert in current popular debates strike me as unsurprising, tied to interpretations that both seized hold of opinions—of “insiders” and/or larger publics—at the time of the development or events in question and have continued to hold currency ever since. This is fine and, undeniably, a necessary and good thing. As with histories of the recent past, however, it’s possible for historians to do more, to offer counterintuitive analyses, which require a certain respectful distance from the heavy weight of existing interpretations, especially those that matter a lot to certain communities, whether national, ideological, familial, or “identity”-based. A sharper focus on practices, guided by an intense attention to theoretical work that challenges existing certainties, might bring more counterintuitive claims into view.

Acknowledgments. I want to thank Daniel Steinmetz-Jackson, whose invitation allowed me to write this article. I also want to thank Camille Robcis, Faisal Abualhassan, Joao Galli Gabriel, Alexander Baert Young, Mihae Olteanu, and Arthur Lee for their helpful comments and suggestions.

¹⁷Doan, *Disturbing Practices*, vii, 5, 61, 132, 198.