



MARY LINDEMANN

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## AHA Presidential Address

### Slow History

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WE ALL RECOGNIZE JUST HOW much COVID-19 has interfered with our scholarship and teaching. Everything has slowed down, from preparing for classes, to doing research, to completing the simplest tasks of everyday life. Yet in the upheaval we are currently experiencing—as we struggle to remain productive, and as we quite justifiably bemoan projects delayed and teaching made more difficult—perhaps we should also seize the opportunity to reflect on the doing of history and especially to consider what benefits going slow offers to research, writing, and instruction.

Indeed, slowing down has suddenly become fashionable as much as inevitable. Annette R. Federico, a scholar of Victorian literature, wrote a recent article in the *Times Literary Supplement* about her experiences teaching a course called “Slow Dickens.” By “de-accelerating,” by reading Dickens slowly, “there would be no reason to skim, skip, or skimp. . . . We’d allow ourselves time to scrupulously enjoy Dickens.” But the anticipated payoff was greater: slow reading, as Federico put it, “activates our own facilities.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, as much as going slow promises to enhance our appreciation of literature, it also can make us better scholars and teachers.

Certainly, it wasn’t always so and we as a society have not always appreciated the virtues of slowness; instead, these virtues often were denigrated and dismissed as not up to date or the unwanted remnants of a stagnant world and a calcified mindset. Speed, after all, is the legacy of the nineteenth century, a function of faster transportation (the railroad, the bicycle, and later the automobile), faster communication (telegraph, then telephone), and the fast living of the Bohemian avant-garde. Electric lighting magically transformed night into day and made hours “hasty.” Ever more, time became money and the speed-up and specialization of Taylorism the watchwords of efficiency and modernity.<sup>2</sup> Stephen Kern, in his history of *The Culture of Time and Space*, devoted an entire chapter to speed, charting the ways in which technology had transformed nineteenth- and early twentieth-century life.<sup>3</sup> Speed not only altered communication and transportation; equally important, and perhaps even more so, was how speed itself be-

I would like to thank Michael B. Miller and Guido Ruggiero for reading an earlier draft of this address and for their helpful suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> Annette R. Federico, “Blessed Little Room: Re-reading *David Copperfield*,” *Times Literary Supplement*, June 26, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Kanigel, *The One Best Way: Frederick Winslow Taylor and the Enigma of Efficiency* (Cambridge, MA, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), 108–30.

came a positive characteristic of culture and morality. The Futurists proclaimed “a new aesthetic of speed,” and sloth, always one of the cardinal sins, was equated with sluggish and insufficient productivity, as well as being destructive of civic values. It is interesting to note that *Roget’s Thesaurus*, first published in 1852, lists mostly negative synonyms for slow: indolent, languid, late, reluctant, stupid, uninteresting.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, the virtues of speed did not sweep everyone along. As Kern also pointed out, “there [always] ran countercurrents” and tensions existed between a “speeding reality” and “a slower past,” the latter often expressed in “sentimental elegies about the good old days.”<sup>5</sup> Be that as it may, speed was here to stay and could be valorized in new theories about time and space: Einstein’s famous equation on relativity— $E = mc^2$ —but also in doggerel verse.

There was a young lady named Bright  
Whose speed was faster than light;  
She set out one day  
In a relative way,  
And returned home the previous night.<sup>6</sup>

Since the middle of the twentieth century, and with accelerating velocity over the last twenty years, computer technologies and the proliferation of devices that collapse time and space even further and often reduce speech to sound bites, Instagrams, and tweets dominate our lives. For so many of us the most frequent form of human contact and communication over the last several months has been the eponymously named Zoom. We now “zoom” around everywhere in a universe where the speed of electrons through the ether has obliterated distance.

Yet, and despite the undeniable impact of these enhanced, if slightly disturbing and disorienting, forms of human interaction, or perhaps because of them, a new emphasis on slowness has set in as a direct response to the perceived negativity of speed. Some of it comes from Zoom-fatigue and the strains of distanced learning; some of it bears strong elements of nostalgia and a yearning for the return of older and putatively better ways of doing things. One root of this attitudinal shift lies in the “slow food movement,” born in Italy in 1986, and which has since spread worldwide.<sup>7</sup> Slow food strives to preserve traditional and regional cuisines and has been promoted as a healthful and ecologically responsible alternative to fast food. Although the slow food movement has drawn criticism as being antimodern and a gut reaction (no pun intended!) to globalization, it has influenced culture more generally while reshaping the eating habits and attitudes among millions. Slow food may seem to have little connection to my topic of slow history, but bear with me for a moment and think of the many culinary terms that pop up in academic writing: savor, taste, flavor, relish, tempt, tantalize, stir, simmer, stew.

<sup>4</sup> First published by Peter Mark Roget as *Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases Classified and Arranged so as to Facilitate the Expression of Ideas and Assist in Literary Composition* (1852). This list of synonyms is taken from the 4th edition, *Roget’s International Thesaurus*, rev. Robert L. Chapman (New York, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space*, 119, 130.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Henry Reginald Buller, “Relativity,” *Punch*, December 19, 1923.

<sup>7</sup> “Our History,” Slow Food (website), <https://www.slowfood.com/about-us/our-history/>.

Slow food might be seen, and has been seen, as something of a limited phenomenon and also elitist. Yet it is also part and parcel of a much broader slow movement that has gained speed in the late twentieth century, that is more academic in focus, and that touches more immediately on scholarly practices. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, many scientists, worried about the implications of speed in scientific research, promulgated a series of deliberatively provocative manifestos now collectively understood as the “Slow Science Movement,” of which the most widely known is the one published in 2010 by the Slow Science Academy in Germany.<sup>8</sup> In a pointed attack on scientific superficiality and faddish celebrity- and media-mongering, they trumpeted: “We are scientists. We don’t blog. We don’t twitter. **We take our time.**” Of course, they fully intended to shock and to provoke debate; in this, the authors were successful. Contributors to major journals, including *Nature*, the *Scientist*, *Scientific American*, and the *Atlantic*, soon joined the fray.<sup>9</sup> The manifesto directed much of its criticism at universities and research scholars who chase after grant money without “spending nearly enough time mulling over the big scientific questions that remain to be solved,” and its authors excoriated grant agencies that throw big money at fashionable, high-prestige, and headline-grabbing projects while neglecting the needs of basic science.<sup>10</sup> Of course, not everyone was thrilled with the idea that science should slow down, and the proponents of slow science were characterized as Aesopian foxes who, unable to participate in the rewards of “fast science” (read: the science practiced in universities and at scientific institutes) cried sour grapes. Moreover, many critics found the arguments of those advocating slow, or at least *slower*, science muddled, vague, impractical, and unrealistic.

Although the slow science movement has not yet gone mainstream, it has fueled a larger debate on “the changing nature of academic work, which is driven by intensification and instrumental rationality.” The proponents of this broader slow movement argue that an acceleration in the pace of academic work, a speeded-up, almost Stakhanovite approach to scholarship, “thwarts the truly productive slow zones for reading, writing, collegial reflections and well-informed critical dialogue.” Even more expansively, “the principles and practices of slow science . . . are meaningful and relevant to human togetherness and living in general.”<sup>11</sup>

The very process of thinking has been famously parsed into slow and fast categories by philosophers, psychologists, and economists—and especially by scholars who work

<sup>8</sup> “The Slow Science Manifesto,” Slow Science Academy (website), published 2010, <http://slow-science.org>. More recently, the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies (NIAS) held a public opening to its 2019–20 research year, dedicated to celebrating slow science; see “Celebrating Slow Science: Opening Academic Year 2019–2020,” NIAS (website), September 4, 2019, <https://nias.knaw.nl/events/opening-academic-year-2019/>. This was followed on February 18, 2020 with a public lecture presented by the sociologist Dick Pels; see Pels, “Why Do We Need Slow Science?,” NIAS (website), February 18, 2020, <https://nias.knaw.nl/insights/why-do-we-need-slow-science/>.

<sup>9</sup> Lisa Alleva, letter to the editor, “Taking Time to Savour the Rewards of Slow Science,” *Nature* 443, no. 271 (2006); Eugene Garfield, “Fast Science vs. Slow Science, or Slow and Steady Wins the Race,” *Scientist* 18 (1990); Petri Salo and Hannu L. T. Heikkinen, “Slow Science: Research and Teaching for Sustainable Praxis,” *Confero: Essays on Education, Philosophy and Politics* 6, no. 1 (2018): 87–111; John Horgan, “The ‘Slow Science’ Movement Must Be Crushed,” *Scientific American*, July 29, 2011; and Rebecca J. Rosen, “The Slow-Science Manifesto: ‘We Don’t Twitter,’” *Atlantic*, July 29, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel McCabe, “The Slow Science Movement,” *University Affairs/Affaires universitaires*, December 5, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Heikkinen and Salo, “Slow Science,” 87–88, 104–5; Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (Toronto, 2016).

at the intersection of these fields, such as Daniel Kahneman, who employs what he terms the “metaphors” of fast and slow thinking to distinguish between fast (intuitive) and slow (rational) thought.<sup>12</sup> These manifestos and studies propose a novel definition of slow that has little or nothing to do with sloth, procrastination, or stupidity. Moreover, it resembles neither the plodding of the dull-witted tortoise nor the whizzing of the superficial hare, but rather something akin both to Kahneman’s slow thinking and to slow science. These insights suggest that historians as well might profit from more rigorously probing the meanings and the virtues of slow for our profession and to consider the epistemological and heuristic value of slowing down.

The historian’s slowness derives from the very doing of history, in research, writing, and teaching. Without a doubt, the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 has greatly retarded our research. The situation became especially fraught for those poised to embark on major research projects, a disruption perhaps most cruelly felt by ABDs and early career scholars seeking to produce that first all-so-important monograph, or for others whose outreach and educative projects have been so abruptly delayed or even derailed. Historians who work in the academic environment have witnessed how the increasing emphasis on STEM initiatives has exacerbated the situation for those in the social sciences and the humanities. University administrators have been very hard to convince, for instance, that it really *does* take more than five years to attain a PhD.

Is there then any sense in thinking about *slow* history or even postulating its existence? Or is history always slower than in fields where the real payoff—in terms of prestige, jobs, and money—comes more immediately? Perhaps. Yet as I thought about historical research, teaching, public engagement, and writing, it seemed to me that there was much to say—and that a good deal has already been said—about the many ways in which history is slow and wondered why the subject is not quite so *brisant* among historians as in other fields; to my knowledge, no “slow history” manifesto exists, with perhaps a single exception I will discuss later. Perhaps, one might argue, such reflection is otiose because history is always slow.

Yet, *very slow history has often been the target of satire and parody*. We are all acquainted with the perfectionist scholars who tremble forever on the cusp of finally finishing their great books. In his brilliant social satire *Point Counter Point*, Aldous Huxley used a historian as the model for the procrastinate, idle rich.

Ever since the publication of that first book Mr. Quarles had been writing, or at least had been supposed to be writing, another, much larger and more important one, about democracy. The largeness and importance justified an almost indefinite delay in its completion. He had already been at work on it for more than seven years and as yet . . . he had not even finished collecting the materials.<sup>13</sup>

Seven years to work on a book does not suggest to me a particularly languid pace; I would judge that many of you reading this article have taken much longer to produce good, thoroughly researched books and lengthy articles, edit collections, or curate his-

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York, 2011), esp. 10–13, 415. Kahneman’s work, and that of his longtime colleague Amos Tversky, revolved around biases in decision-making. His own position lies not at one pole or the other. Rather he provides a description of “the workings of the mind as an uneasy interaction between two fictitious characters,” and, indeed, most of his book is spent discussing fast thinking and intuition.

<sup>13</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Point Counter Point* (1928; repr. New York, 1965), 257–59.

torical exhibitions. Here the problem is not being slow, but rather indolent and indeed rather silly, unable to separate important study from frivolous pursuits. Quarles will never get it done, not even with the help of his card indexes, steel filing cabinets, “very professional roll-top desk,” three typewriters (one electric) and an “ingenious” American invention (“a calculating machine”), and a large selection of “alternative types.” When stymied or upset with life in general, he “bought another loose-leaf notebook, or a fountain pen, he explained, that could . . . write six thousand words without requiring to be refilled”—words, of course, that remained unwritten.<sup>14</sup>

For Huxley, the creative demolition of the pompous, self-satisfied, and superficial Sidney Quarles proved easy pickings. While everyone can point to a similar example—and no one doubts that real-life Sidneys will never finish—it is not the seven years of work that prove problematic. Great books, even good ones, require time, enormous amounts of labor, stubborn stick-to-itiveness, and regular periods spent suspending disbelief. While Sidney Quarles took seven years to produce absolutely nothing, the very prolific Robert A. Caro is still, at age eighty-five, hard at work on the *fifth* and final volume of his monumental and multiple award-winning biography of Lyndon Johnson. Volume 4 of *The Years of Lyndon Johnson, The Passage of Power*, appeared nine years ago in 2012. Six years later, in an interview with the *New York Review of Books*, Caro estimated that it would be anywhere from two to ten years before the last installment would be done.<sup>15</sup> That’s a lot of time spent “working on” an admittedly huge subject.

Caro has recently reflected at some length on his career as a journalist, historian, and biographer. Significantly, he chose the prosaic and humble title *Working* followed by an equally prosaic subtitle: *Researching, Interviewing, Writing*. I bought the book for my husband, an admirer of Caro’s earlier volume on Robert Moses, and then selfishly read it before passing it on to him, complete with a cracked book spine and slightly torn dust cover. Before I committed the mortal sin of fouling the book with my own underlinings, I purchased a copy for myself. Taking the advice of an early mentor to “turn every goddamn page,” Caro became a relentless, even obsessive researcher and something like an archive junkie.<sup>16</sup> While Caro was still a student, a wise professor advised him that he would never be as good as he could be until he stopped “thinking with his fingers,” that is, unless he realized that just because writing came to him so easily, that it was easy. And what did he do to break that bad habit?

I decided . . . to slow myself down, to not write until I had thought things through. That was why I resolved to write my first drafts in longhand, slowest of the various means of committing thoughts to paper, before I started doing later drafts on the typewriter; that is why I still do my first few drafts in longhand today; that is why, even now . . . I still stick to my Smith-Corona Electra.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Huxley, *Point Counter Point*, 263.

<sup>15</sup> Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, vol. 4: *The Passage of Power* (New York, 2012); interview in “Robert Caro Reflects on His Career in Upcoming Book,” *New York Review of Books*, December 12, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Robert A. Caro, *Working: Researching, Interviewing, Writing* (New York, 2019), quote on 11; “A Peek at Robert Caro’s Yellowed Files,” *New York Times*, January 10, 2021. The phrase “archive junkie” is actually Guido Ruggiero’s. I made it my own in “Confessions of an Archive Junkie,” in *Theory, Method, and Practice in Social and Cultural History*, ed. Peter Karsten and John Modell (New York, 1992), 152–80.

<sup>17</sup> Caro, xi–xii.

Here again we encounter the word “slow,” this time as a verb not an adjective, and in a manner critically important for the process of writing history. Ever more frequently, as I read the papers of graduate students and churn my way through drafts of their dissertation chapters, I have become convinced that many of the failings that plague them—and not only them—come from writing too fast, from heedlessly flinging words on a page (or into the word processor, and that only exacerbates the problem), before thinking about where one needs to go; it is the intellectual equivalent of painting yourself into a corner. Learning to write concise, well-structured, and rigorously argued paragraphs, to link one paragraph to the next, and each sentence in a paragraph to those that proceed and follow it, requires a great deal of slow, hard work but, in its absence, prose meanders and interpretations die. I often insist that my ABDs write the introduction of their dissertations *first*. This strategy always elicits howls of protest from students and much headshaking from my colleagues, but it tends to force students to identify the major arguments and interpretations that belong in a dissertation or in any piece of scholarly work. Even a detailed outline doesn’t quite do the trick because it lacks an adhesive narrative. And, yes, of course they will rewrite it, perhaps several times. Likewise, for students who have trouble marshaling their thoughts into tight formations, it often helps to have them push back from the computer keyboard and reach for the pencil. The resulting improvement in argument and in prose is striking. Much research into cognitive processes has found that handwriting fosters organized thinking as well as creativity.<sup>18</sup>

Many accomplished historians have mused at some length on the interlinked processes of research and writing in ways that underscore the benefits of going slow. I recently read John Elliott’s coming-of-age story that forms the first chapter of his *History in the Making*. It is a deeply personal account of how and why he became interested in Spain and Spanish history. Much seemed serendipitous: a youthful expedition during a summer vacation, inspiration from teachers, and, of course, the intellectual currents of the 1950s. This confluence of circumstances appears familiar to many of us. Note, however, what a slow evolution it was. Elliott first settled on a topic analyzing the reform program that the Count-Duke of Olivares set into motion in the mid-seventeenth century. Elliott’s initial immersion in the Simancas archives proved exhilarating, but exhilaration soon turned to frustration. Calling up “bundle after bundle of state papers,” he soon discovered that “none of them contained the kind of material that I had confidently expected to find.” It was a greenhorn’s mistake for a person who eventually became one of the premier scholars in the latter half of the twentieth century. The road got even rockier when he discovered that the most substantial part of the Olivares archive “was destroyed in two fires in the ducal palace of Buenavista in Madrid” in the eighteenth century. I can just imagine how the young Elliott felt at this point. In retrospect, however, it was perhaps the best thing that ever happened to him professionally and taught him, and teaches us, an especially pertinent lesson about research: things never go as planned, and often what first appears a disaster or a dreadful mistake proves to be a windfall, as Elliott realized later. Admittedly, he was probably far less calm at the mo-

<sup>18</sup> Bryan Saner, “Handwriting Is Physical Visual Thinking,” *Visual Arts Research* 40, no. 1 (2014): 118–20; more information on the cognitive effects of handwriting can be found on the website of the Indiana University Cognition and Action Neuroimaging Laboratory, <https://canlab.sitehost.iu.edu/handwriting.html>.

ment as he watched his dissertation and perhaps his career go off the rails. Reflecting on what at the time seemed a tragedy, Elliott observed that

this is the kind of problem, even if it does not always assume quite such a dramatic form, that is all too liable to confront even the best prepared of researchers. After an apparently ideal subject has finally been identified, it subsequently turns out, for one reason or another, to be simply not feasible.<sup>19</sup>

The middle of this story was his dissertation—“Castile and Catalonia, 1621–1640.” We all know its end: Elliott’s marvelous *The Revolt of the Catalans: A Study in the Decline of Spain, 1598–1640*. It wasn’t a study of power at the center of the Spanish state, and it wasn’t about the reform program of Olivares he originally intended to write; it was something much greater in offering an interpretation of Spain’s decline and a deeply revisionist treatment of Catalonia. Even today, I am struck by how much attention Elliott paid to issues of culture in an academic age dominated among British historians by political and economic perspectives.

Not only did Elliott have to rethink his subject, he also had to learn Catalan. He was fortunate to have the funding and the time to reorient his project and carry out the subsequent months, and even years, of research and writing. The other lesson to be learned here is one by no means unique to Sir John Elliott, but forms the essence of how really good history takes shape: it is always “in the making” and, like Penelope waiting for the return of Odysseus, often what we weave during the day, we pick apart in sleepless nights. Like Robert Caro’s relentless search for the roots of power and the sense of place that explained men like Robert Moses and Lyndon Johnson, Elliott’s quest for a historical understanding of Spain’s decline, or Natalie Z. Davis’s decades-long pursuit of people on the margins, were ever-evolving. Moreover, the archival experience—the slow struggle with the documents—actively molded their interpretations and the histories they created.

Archival work is necessarily slow and painstaking, but its slowness has little to do with being mechanical or dull. Sources are not dead, even ones hundreds of years old and often preserved in a dreadfully mutilated condition. There is nothing transparent about an archive or a document; the archive masks as much as it reveals. We wrestle with documents that, despite imprisoning words on a page, remain lively or even slippery, constantly assuming new, and often surprising, shapes. Even those that seem the least ambiguous are filled with nuances, complexities, contradictions, and, at the risk of anthropomorphizing, exhibit their own little devilries. In her conversation with Denis Crozet, Natalie Z. Davis caught the dilemma. She related how “having documents and manuscripts in my hands” immediately produced a feeling of connection. But she also perceived the dangers. “Whenever,” she warns, “I have the impression that I have met, touched, seized the past, [I say] Watch out, Natalie. You are being taken over by a romantic fantasy.”<sup>20</sup>

As all these historians have experienced, archives are generative as well as *seductive*. Many of us, once we find our way past the dragons that often guard the doors, are addicted for life. Moreover, archival work, in and of itself, slows us down as we taste,

<sup>19</sup> John H. Elliott, *History in the Making* (New Haven, CT, 2012), 15–17.

<sup>20</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, *A Passion for History: Conversations with Denis Crozet* (Kirksville, MO, 2010), 4–5.

savor, and finally digest what we encounter. Actually, it also sometimes gives us indigestion, but that's a chance we take. Archives teach us valuable lessons in slowness that we probably never lose. Robert Caro's life turned around when he was left alone with the records of the Federal Aviation Administration. "I will never forget that night," he reminisced, "it was the first time I had ever gone through files. . . . Somehow, in a strange way, sitting there going through them, I felt at home."<sup>21</sup> Caro's experience is hardly unique, and it would not take me long to find many others to match it. Such a transcendental experience, romantic as it may sound, forms an essential part of the intellectual wonderment that leads us into the archive and draws us back again and again.<sup>22</sup>

Few people, however, have composed a more elegant homage to archival joys than Arlette Farge. *The Allure of the Archives* is a sustained love story for the dirty, dusty, promising yet often maddeningly complex and obstinate materials found in the manuscript collections of the Arsenal, the Bibliothèque nationale, the Archives nationales, and other rich documentary repositories and libraries in France and, particularly, in Paris.<sup>23</sup> Despite uncomfortable seats, smelly co-users, bad lighting, cold rooms, and the often bizarre rituals that regulate archival life, she loves it and expresses that love in language that is positively sensual, that conveys the smell of the paper, the crinkliness of it between your fingers, the very dust that arises (hopefully not filled with mold spores!), and the almost sexual thrill of a great find. Working in the archives inevitably slows you down—and not only because of the crabbed hands and shaky orthography of the long dead. Far more important is the link between archival word and thought process. Farge again: "Combing through the archive . . . requires a host of tasks. . . . They are both familiar and simple, and they purify one's thoughts." More apposite are the next two sentences: "One cannot overstate how slow work in the archives is, and how this slowness of hands and thought can be the source of creativity. But more than inspirational, it is inescapable."<sup>24</sup> Farge never denies that the many tasks archival work requires are sometimes boring and banal; nonetheless, they are as intellectually formative as they are unavoidable, for

a new object is created, a new form of knowledge takes shape, and a new "archive" emerges. As you work, you are taking preexisting forms and readjusting them in different ways to make possible a different narration of reality. This is not a question of repetition, but of beginning anew, of dealing the cards over again.<sup>25</sup>

Farge communicates no sense that documents are transparent or obvious, nor does she even hint that they can convey by themselves what Leopold von Ranke's "wie es eigentlich gewesen" has often been taken to mean: "how it actually was." The history produced by such creative archival experiences can also not be sneeringly dismissed as crass empiricism. Rather, a thoughtful, prolonged, and, above all, active archival encounter produces a richly documented and rigorously analytical history, not a mere re-

<sup>21</sup> Caro, *Working*, 9.

<sup>22</sup> Davis, *A Passion for History*, 1–29. "Wonder" is an oftentimes unappreciated component of intellectual life, as historians of early modern science have argued. See, for example, Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives* (New Haven, CT, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, 55–56.

<sup>25</sup> Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, 62–63.

production of facts. Robert Darnton referred to it once as “marinating in the sources,” picking up this apt culinary metaphor from that consummate stylist (and gourmand) Gustav Flaubert. Darnton emphasized the importance of reading “slowly through the documents, summarizing their contents, copying out key passages, and writing an interpretive note to yourself about their importance, you absorb a great deal,” as you soak in and soak up archival juices.<sup>26</sup>

Archival work, as Farge, Caro, Elliott, and others understand it, by no means proceeds in a mechanical fashion; the archive is also not a supermarket where researchers rush along the aisles pulling off the meats, vegetables, sauces, and spices that they believe will eventually result in a harmonious blend of flavors. All too often, that strategy results in a meal lacking taste, substance, and the essential ingredients that have been missed in the hurry to get something on the table—that is, in scholarly terms, to produce a published work. Just as appropriate, however, is the wonderful image Marcel Proust conjured up in *Swann's Way*, not the one of *petite madeleine* crumbs soaked in tea, but rather that of “little pieces of paper” dipped in water, “which until then are without character or form, but, the moment they become wet, stretch and twist and take on colour and distinctive shape”; so, too, does researchers’ slow marination in documents allow historical analyses and interpretations to unfold in their minds.<sup>27</sup>

As a method, or scholarly strategy, this may all seem unacceptably iffy or rather like some mysterious process that prestidigitates history into existence, or a gratuitous gift like second-sight that is precious but neither learned nor to be taught, too touchy-feely to be intellectually rigorous and respectable. It is not. Rather it is anchored in Caro’s sense of work: a humble, sweaty, hard, and, yes, imperfect endeavor. Likewise, serendipity plays a strange part in this development. Stories of great finds in the archives, or finding great archival *fonds*, such as Darnton’s discovery of the records of the Société typographique in Neuchâtel, are familiar to all of us. The holdings of the Société were indeed marvelously fecund, but the documents alone did not make the history; the historian did. Similarly, one is not hard pressed to identify instances where the existence of materials was long known, but that were discounted as unimportant or unworkable. One thinks immediately of Martha Ballard’s diary. Donated to the Maine State Library in Augusta in 1930, for decades it was regarded by scholars as too repetitive and too mundane to be useful except as a source of anecdotes to enliven histories of frontier life in the early republic—until Laurel Thatcher Ulrich wrote *A Midwife’s Tale*. Other examples abound. In the 1970s, while Richard J. Evans was researching labor organizations in nineteenth-century Hamburg, an archivist responding to his question about police records dismissed them with a single word: “worthless.” Those worthless records that had “survived merely by chance,” Evans explored for two years and, from them, “there emerged a useful corrective to earlier historical interpretations.” Michael MacDonald found gold in another quite well-known source that most believed was almost impenetrable: the astrological notebooks of the Anglican clergyman and healer Richard Napier. MacDonald spun it into an original interpretation of Napier’s

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Andrews Bond and Robert Darnton, “ASECS at 50: Interview with Robert Darnton,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 53, no. 1 (2019): 21–29, here 27. In a letter to Guy de Maupassant, Flaubert spoke of marinating on his green leather sofa. Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondence*, ed. Jean Bruneau, 5 vols. (Paris, 1973), 1:293.

<sup>27</sup> Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way* (New York, 2003), 64; originally published as *Du côté de chez Swann* as the first volume of *À la recherche du temps perdu* in 1913.

practice, which contributed to a major reshaping of how the medical history of mental illness was henceforth to be written.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, supposedly accidental discoveries in the archive—the diary of a Spanish tailor, the account of an urban magistrate in the Thirty Years’ War, the many “other voices” of early modern women, of minorities, and of Indigenous peoples, and, of course, the obscure and often fragmentary narratives preserved in ego-documents—were not merely chance archival encounters. Such famous finds usually resulted from weeks and months of slowly and laboriously turning pages and then following up on what may be hunches, but hunches informed by deep reading in the sources.

Archives are, of course, as Alexandra Walsham wrote in 2016, “the factories and laboratories of the historian,” and to exploit them skillfully requires knowing how they were created, by whom, and for what purposes. “Too often,” Walsham observed, “we mine the documentary sources they house without scrutinizing the decisions about selection, arrangement, presentation and retention taken by those responsible for the care of their contents.” She went on to warn how “we still fall into the trap of approaching them as if they provide a transparent window through which we can view societies remote from us in time.” Decisions about what is, or is not, important, as well as professional cataloguing and systematizing, can mislead as much as guide. Archivists always select what to keep and what to throw away, or where and how to classify materials. As scholarly tastes evolve, the task of identifying sources requires some delicate detective work into the organization of archives to persuade them to yield up their secrets. But as valid as this observation is—and it is extremely important to avoid falling into the treacherous “objectivity trap”—it also signals the necessity for another, equally pertinent form of slowness: the time taken to learn the archives “not merely as the object but also the subject of enquiry.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, over the past decade such a study of the archives *qua* archives has become the focus of renewed interest and has fostered new histories enjoining scholars to “rewrite archival history.”<sup>30</sup>

But lest I be considered more old-fashioned and conservative than I believe I am, let me say that I do not believe that traditional archives, those located in imposing edi-

<sup>28</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* (New York, 1990); Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York, 1999), 64–66; Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1981).

<sup>29</sup> Alexandra Walsham, “The Social History of the Archive: Record-Keeping in Early Modern Europe,” *Past and Present*, suppl. 11 (2016): 9–48, here 10–11. On the perils of objectivity, Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (New York, 1988).

<sup>30</sup> Richard J. Cox, “Revisiting Archival History,” *Information and Culture* 54, no. 1 (2019): 4–11; C. Randolph Head, ed., “Archival Knowledge Cultures in Europe, 1400–1900,” special issue, *Archival Science* 10, no. 3 (2010); Head, *Making Archives in Early Modern Europe: Proof, Information, and Political Recordkeeping, 1400–1700* (Cambridge, 2019); Terry Cook, “The Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country: Historians, Archivists, and the Changing Archival Landscape,” *American Archivist* 74, no. 2 (2011): 600–632; Cook, “What Is Past Is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift,” *Archivaria* 43 (February 1, 1997): 17–62; Filippo de Vivo, “Ordering the Archive in Early Modern Venice (1400–1650),” *Archival Science* 10, no. 3 (2010): 231–48; de Vivo, “Coeur de l’Etat, lieu de tension: Le tournant archivistique vu de Venise (XV<sup>e</sup>–XVII<sup>e</sup> 30 siècle),” *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 68, no. 3 (2013): 699–728; de Vivo, Andrea Giudi, and Alessandro Silvestri, eds., “Archival Transformations in Early Modern Europe,” special issue, *European History Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2016). See also the report by M. J. Maynes and Leslie Morris, on “interrogating the archive,” about the same-named international seminar that “explored questions about which events and perspectives on the past do and don’t get preserved in official archives”; Maynes and Morris, “Interrogating the Archive: Campus Controversy Becomes Part of International Graduate Seminar,” *Perspectives on History*, December 2019.

fices, or those professionally administered, necessarily offer the only, or best, avenue for historians to explore, or even hold the richest sources. There exists a real danger, of course, that one can fetishize the archive by treating the traditional archive, filled with books, papers, and iconographic materials, as somehow the sole source of historical knowledge and the only fertile ground where historians can set their spades. Indeed, over the last decades, scholars have substantially altered and expanded the idea of an archive; the classic form of the governmental archive—one containing written records, pictures, and artifacts—no longer adequately fills the definitional box. A partial list of new archives includes nongovernmental records, oral histories, material objects, memories, the city as archive, the body as archive, the plantation as archive, the archive as art and art as archive. Some have even asserted that it is perhaps silly to try to define “archive” or “archives” at all, as Eric Ketelaar, professor of archives and information studies at the University of Amsterdam, proposed: “Let anything be ‘an archive,’ and let everyone be an archivist. The important question is not ‘what is an archive,’ but how does this particular individual or group perceive and understand an archive.” While I find the implications of an archival multiverse somewhat disorienting, Ketelaar’s statement reflects recent thinking about where historical documentation exists. Moreover, his perception pays off in several fields, for example, the history of enslaved peoples, of people without a written record, and especially of those who communicate in pictorial or other nonverbal or nonscribal forms.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, several historians have broadened the idea of an archive to include literature, arguing that contemporary literature serves as a historical archive of past imagination. Literary texts are thus not mere “fictions.” Rather, they serve as repositories of the way people in the past understood themselves and the culture in which they lived; like all archives, this one, too, must be read deliberately, critically, slowly.<sup>32</sup>

This more recent understanding of what constitutes an archive developed in lock-step with the growth of multi- and interdisciplinary, intersectional, and global history. As scholars became cognizant of deficiencies in monodisciplinary history (I fear that’s a neologism), and as historians experimented with novel forms of writing and drew on other disciplines, we also were forced to learn about and exploit new sources as well as acquire expertise or at least gain familiarity with differing fields, disciplines, theories, and methodologies. That imperative, too, slows us down or certainly should as we cautiously enter these strange new lands. Bill Cronon, in his now-classic 1983 *Changes in the Land*, confronted the perils of working interdisciplinarily. Urging caution and humility, he quoted Marshall Sahlins: “[It is] the process by which the unknowns of one’s own subject are multiplied by the uncertainties of some other science.”<sup>33</sup> Virtually any historical subject can draw on a variety of archives and be examined from a multiplicity

<sup>31</sup> Eric Ketelaar, “Archival Turns and Returns,” in *Research in the Archival Multiverse*, ed. Anne J. Gilliland, Sue McKemmish, and Andrew J. Lau (Clayton, Victoria, 2017), 228–68, here 239; Ketelaar, “Archival Temples, Archival Prisons: Modes of Power and Protection,” *Archival Science* 2, no. 3–4 (2002): 221–38. I would like to thank Randolph Head for calling my attention to Ketelaar’s work and informing me about the whole field of new archival studies.

<sup>32</sup> I thank Guido Ruggiero for this insight. See, for example, his revisionist study of the Italian Renaissance, *The Renaissance in Italy: A Social and Cultural History of the Rinascimento* (Cambridge, 2014), and his book *Love and Sex in the Time of Plague: A Decameron Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA, forthcoming 2021).

<sup>33</sup> William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, rev. ed. (1983; New York, 2003), xvii.

of perspectives and disciplines. Sebastian Conrad has recently urged all historians to work globally, by which he means “to understand the connectedness of the world” and to look for those connections in every research project, rather than only writing what is typically regarded as global or world history. Likewise, the connected or braided histories others have proposed force us to consider not only other places but also other mindsets, and, inevitably, not only to mine other archives and sources but also to deal with more traditional sources in novel ways.<sup>34</sup> To do so effectively, however, takes time: time to learn from our fellow researchers, time to evaluate the worth of perspectives and forms of analysis that may first seem alien to us, and time to incorporate those perspectives rigorously and not just as window dressing. Here, too, archival research and interdisciplinarity interweave to slow us down, but they enrich and deepen, if also complicate, our histories, while frequently altering our original topics into something wholly unexpected.

Certainly, over the past several decades, many interpretive “turns” have strongly influenced historical research and writing. While these often lead us to new insights and interpretations, they also slow our progress, albeit fruitfully. The linguistic turn urged us to question historical objectivity and argued that the past only exists in our textual representations of it.<sup>35</sup> In the 1990s, the spatial turn highlighted the shaping powers of space and landscape and affected, among other subjects, gender studies, social, labor, and political history, and the history of science.<sup>36</sup> Just recently, an Organization of American Historians virtual panel examined the “archival turn.” The proliferation of such turns is dizzying, and in addition to these, and to the now familiar, almost venerable cultural turn, we find ourselves spun around on a carousel of others: the pictorial or iconic, sensory, material, and, finally, the resource turn.<sup>37</sup> We may accept, re-

<sup>34</sup> Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton, NJ, 2016). Sanjay Subrahmanyam speaks of “connected histories” in his *Explorations in Connected History: From the Tagus to the Ganges* (New Delhi, 2004) and *Explorations in Connected History: Mughals and Franks* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014). Natalie Z. Davis coined the term “braided history” and has discussed it in articles and several presentations, particularly in connection with her work on Leo Africanus: *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim between Worlds* (New York, 2006). For other examples of braided histories from the field of pedagogy, for example, Susan D. Dion, *Braiding Histories: Learning from Aboriginal Peoples’ Experiences and Perspectives* (Vancouver, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> The literature on the linguistic turn is huge. The influence of Hayden White’s *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (New York, 1973) can hardly be overstated. A very incomplete list of some influential works includes: Jean-Christophe Agnew, *The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750* (Cambridge, 1986); Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives* (Ithaca, NY, 1982); and J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1985). Useful review articles include: John E. Toews, “Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience,” *American Historical Review* 96, no. 4 (1987): 879–907; and James Vernon, “Who’s Afraid of the Linguistic Turn? The Politics of Social History and Its Discontents,” *Social History* 19, no. 1 (1994): 81–97.

<sup>36</sup> Felix Driver and Raphael Samuel raised the idea already in the 1990s: “Rethinking the Idea of Place,” *History Workshop* 39 (1995): v–vii; Thomas Zeller, “The Spatial Turn in History,” *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 35 (2004): 123–24; Beat Kümin and Cornelia Usborne, “At Home and in the Workplace: A Historical Introduction to the ‘Spatial Turn,’” *History and Theory* 52, no. 3 (2013): 305–18; Angelo Torre, “Un ‘tournant spatial’ en histoire? Paysages, regards, ressources,” *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 63, no. 5 (2008): 1127–44.

<sup>37</sup> On the cultural turn, see Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, CA, 1989), which was obligatory reading for every graduate student in the 1990s and early 2000s. On the other turns, see W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago, 1994); Alberto Martinengo, “From the Linguistic Turn to the Pictorial Turn: Hermeneutics Facing the ‘Third Copernican Revolution,’” *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics* 5 (2013): 302–12; Mark M. Smith, *Sensory History* (London, 2008); Carolyn Birdsall, Jan-Friedrich Missfelder, Daniel Morat, and Corine

ject, or partially integrate such perspectives, but it is the process of thinking each one through in respect not only to our research but also to our teaching that makes us slower historians but probably also better ones.

Such repeated false starts and recoveries have characterized my own research, and it took me quite a long time to accept that what I originally considered a “problem” was instead “a good thing” and not the embarrassing revelation of ill-preparedness or naïve misconception. I have come around to regarding false starts, dead ends, and confusion not as mistakes that I should not have made (well, sometimes they were) but rather as opportunities. I can honestly say that no research project I have ever launched comes out in the end looking remotely like what I originally envisioned. My 2015 book, *The Merchant Republics: Amsterdam, Antwerp, and Hamburg, 1648–1790*, started out as a comparative history of crime in three urban environments. Practically the only thing that remained in the published version was the comparative dimension. Instead of analyzing the deeper relevance of certain crimes for each city, the book argued for a commonality among all three cities in being merchant republics, possessing similar, if by no means identical, political and economic structures and sensibilities. I remember quite distinctly the moment of epiphany that transformed the project. It occurred when I had already spent quite a bit of time identifying and reading crime cases, ranging from those on family annihilators to spectacular frauds to rape and child molestation. Suddenly, I realized that economic malfeasance, especially bankruptcy, was far more interesting. I then began to read extensively on economics, business practices, and business ethics; the last was not oxymoronic in the early modern world. At the outset, I knew little about early modern business. Because bankruptcy was a civic blemish as much as a crime, these cases allowed an in-depth exploration of the often hidden dynamics of social and political life in the cities Fernand Braudel once referred to as the “economic motors of civilization.”

Almost simultaneously with that “aha” moment occurred another, although it was more of a “what am I going to do with *this*” problem. My interest in crime had originally turned on what I loosely, very loosely, defined as spectacular crimes and centered on the multiple narratives woven around them. Such crimes usually throw up a vast documentation that could be narrated serially, of course, but I found that strategy analytically feeble. As I was working my way rather doggedly through the files on crimes, I grew ever more uneasy, not only about how to write the story but about its greater historical value. Late one gloomy northern German afternoon, one of the *Magaziner* plopped a monster file down on my desk titled “Documents concerning the killing of the so-called Count Visconti by the erstwhile Prussian Lieutenant Herr Baron von Kesslitz, and what thereby was discovered in regard to the Italian courtesan Romellini and the Royal Spanish Consul, Herr San Pelayo, 1775–77.” For days on end it kept me glued to my chair as I picked my way through multiple, often contradictory narratives in seeking to comprehend the significance of a story that seemed unending in its complications. Scandals connected to the case touched on an ever-growing cast of charac-

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Schlieff, “Forum: The Senses,” *German History* 32, no. 2 (2014): 256–73; Tony Bennett and Patrick Joyce, *Material Powers: Cultural Studies, History and the Material Turn* (Basingstoke, UK, 2013); Harvey Green, “Cultural History and the Material(s) Turn,” *Cultural History* 1, no. 1 (2012): 61–82; Anke K. Scholz, Martin Bartelheim, Roland Hardenberg, and Jörn Staeker, eds., *ResourceCultures: Sociocultural Dynamics and the Use of Resources—Theories, Methods, Perspectives* (Tübingen, 2017).

ters ranging from the respectable to the scabrous and reaching out from Hamburg's city hall to its more crepuscular corners. Of course, my first thought was that this is one of those cases that could easily become a book. By the second decade of the twenty-first century, many wonderful examples of microhistories existed that had done just that.<sup>38</sup>

But did I really want to follow that well-trodden, perhaps too well-trodden, path? So, I went back and read the file again. Slowly, an entirely different picture came into focus. I realized that these documents offered the jumping-off point for another kind of history, one that would allow me to meld diplomatic, legal, social, and cultural histories in unusual ways. It later became *Liaisons dangereuses: Sex, Law, and Diplomacy in the Age of Frederick the Great* and has since contributed to my very modest reputation, of all things, as a diplomatic historian. No one could have been more surprised than I. But the point is that I certainly didn't start out to write diplomatic history. At the time it seemed perhaps a foolhardy venture because I knew *nothing* really about eighteenth-century diplomacy and spent months filling in the secondary literature, while simultaneously locating and exploring the other sources necessary to complete the story; this included dipping into documents in the Geheimes Staatsarchiv in Berlin, perusing the memoirs of Casanova, and reading the wonderfully gossipy reports that residents, agents, and consuls from France, Prussia, the Netherlands, Denmark, and England dispatched home.

And so it has gone. A few years ago, I embarked on a new project, now well advanced, that began as a study of how Brandenburg was rebuilt after the Thirty Years' War in what I characterize as an age of "unending conflict," a concept I actually borrowed from the work of modern Europeanists who have studied the aftermath of the two twentieth-century world wars.<sup>39</sup> At first, I was woefully ignorant about the relevant archives. I had never worked on Brandenburg or Prussia before. Others had already told the story in one key as the "rise of Prussia," a well-worn interpretation that focused on government initiatives taken to recover from the ravages of war. Even at the very outset, I had little interest in repeating or merely tweaking a popular metanarrative that granted the lion's share of credit to the hyperactive electors, and later kings, of Brandenburg-Prussia who had, it was agreed, fought long, hard battles against persistent opposition from the estates, the nobility, and a recalcitrant, conservative subject population, to lift

<sup>38</sup> Natalie Z. Davis's *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA, 1983) is by far the most famous example. Yet there are many others even if we only consider those for early modern Western Europe, for instance: Donna T. Andrew and Randall McGowan, *The Perreaus and Mrs. Rudd: Forgery and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century London* (Berkeley, CA, 2001); Pierre Birnbaum, *A Trial of Ritual Murder in the Age of Louis XIV: The Trial of Raphaël Lévy, 1669*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Stanford, CA, 2012); John Brewer, *A Sentimental Murder: Love and Madness in the Eighteenth-Century* (New York, 2004); Alexandra Parma Cook and Noble David Cook, *Good Faith and Truthful Ignorance: A Case of Transatlantic Bigamy* (Durham, NC, 1991); James R. Farr, *A Tale of Two Murders: Passion and Power in Seventeenth-Century France* (Durham, NC, 2000); Jeffrey Freedman, *A Poisoned Chalice* (Princeton, NJ, 2002); Jeffrey Ravel, *The Would-Be Commoner: A Tale of Deception, Murder, and Justice in Seventeenth-Century France* (New York, 2008). Robert Darnton reviewed a number of such works that he characterized as "incident analysis" in "It Happened One Night," *New York Review of Books*, June 24, 2004.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Donald Bloxham and Robert Gerwarth, eds., *Political Violence in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, 2011); Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, eds., *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War* (Oxford, 2012); Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End* (New York, 2016); and Mary Lindemann, "How Great Wars End: Legacies and Lessons," 2018 German Studies Association Presidential Address, *German Studies Review* 42, no. 2 (2019), 338–52.

their territory out of the wartime wreck. I was pretty sure that interpretation was incomplete and perhaps even wrong-headed.

My first sustained encounter with the vast documentation on the turbulent sequelae to 1648 led me to think very differently about what had transformed Brandenburg between then and the middle of the eighteenth century. I began to appreciate the centrality of the landscape and to value the efforts of the vast numbers of those involved in what is too simply called “the rebuilding process.” I soon also realized that my research needed to be finer-grained, more focused on local events, and more cognizant of the people historians had previously ignored but whose activities, when aggregated, made the Brandenburg of the eighteenth century a very different place than it was in the early seventeenth century. Even the essentially administrative and political documents I originally consulted had contained wisps of information that soon beckoned me in very different directions and suggested to me an analysis not only about the interaction of government initiatives and traditional forces, or on the tensions between central dirigism and local intransigence, but that considered seriously the many smaller initiatives undertaken during three decades of war and its long aftermath. That realization led me, very quickly actually, to other rich documentary holdings with which I had previously only a passing acquaintance: those recording the flow of quotidian rural and small-town life. Contact with these documents—often fragmented, poorly written, innocent of the rules of spelling and syntax, lacking provenances and dates, and sometimes reduced to lacy fragments by the working of time, mold, and voracious insects—produced another “aha” moment: what mattered greatly to these people was the access to, and the manipulation of, resources and the land that they inhabited, managed, altered, and reshaped, and from where they drew their identities. I suddenly was becoming a historian of landscape and of the built environment in a broad sense that extended well beyond structures such as churches, houses, and other buildings to include the constant reshaping of fields, waters, borders, and forests—a reshaping vastly accelerated and even transformed in its objectives and contours by the experience of war. Had I become an environmental historian, or at least a historian of landscape? Well, perhaps, but not intentionally. The documents made me do it.

Of course, I am hardly unique or even unusual in starting out with one project to be led into another one entirely. As a neophyte researcher, I often suffered the very disorienting and disturbing feeling that I was “wasting too much time” reading irrelevant stuff. Yet, for me, every new project still begins this way, with a feeling of intimidation when confronted with a thicket of documents that seems impenetrable. But time is never truly wasted, and confusion is, after all, the first step to understanding. Rejecting one topic can open up many others, and suddenly you have more projects at hand than you can manage. Moreover, there always looms the possibility that you will later return to a subject you initially discovered while hacking through archival tangles. I think that someday I will return to the materials I have on spectacular crime, for example. Far more important, you thereby lay down a rich layer of knowledge, or what once seemed sure to be left on the cutting room floor suddenly assumes a new relevance and suggests the possibility of new interpretations and analyses—but it is a slow process. I am *almost* concluding here that there is nothing wasted about “wasted time” in archives, unless you spend your days drinking coffee with friends, and even then, we all have had our ideas fructified, verified, modified, or rejected in just such informal venues.

As these examples also suggest, the more we work globally, interdisciplinarily, multidisciplinarily, and intersectionally, the slower we are bound to become. That retardation extends to writing and editorial processes. I admit that I have not found many explicit statements on “slow history,” but one that I did locate was a blog by an early Americanist and historian of Native American and Indigenous peoples, Christine DeLucia. Scholars who study the history of Native Americans, for example, often collaborate closely with their subjects and not only at the stage of research but also in the editorial process, which is DeLucia’s point. “I have come to insist,” she wrote, “upon the importance of creating time and space *within* scholarly processes for the types of responsiveness that ought to be integral to any work that pertains to Indigenous communities.” What happened not only reoriented her “ethical compasses,” but also, perhaps more important in this context, produced “a sharpening of critical intellects,” through collaboration, editorial feedback, and the writing process itself. If a published piece results, she noted, it “reflects some exceedingly slow ways of ‘doing history.’”<sup>40</sup>

DeLucia casts her web of relationships widely, but most historians construct similar ties with those friends we never meet: the colleagues whose books we read. I have often been struck by how expansively and intricately woven are the meshworks we knit from wide reading, reading so often done not for research but for teaching. Here, too, one should point out how teaching itself greatly contributes to slowing history. I am not speaking here of the obvious: the need to put our research aside to get on with our day jobs. The supposed dichotomy between research and teaching—expressed in the hackneyed phrase “Those who can, do; those who can’t, teach”—is, in any case, fallacious as well as pernicious; teaching and research form equal parts of the whole business of doing history. Admittedly, not all our scholarship dovetails neatly with our teaching. But the slowness teaching imposes on us exhibits a very different quality. It is time we take, or should take, to consider what we teach, how we teach it, to prepare in detail for our courses, and to take the trouble to assimilate new ideas and technologies. Thinking about how we teach schools us in how to present our ideas in print; it constantly reminds us that while detail is important, well-conceived and well-articulated interpretations are what stick.

Bill Cronon’s 2012 AHA Presidential Address, simply titled “Storytelling,” raised the question “How can we make the past come alive?” His answer: “By telling stories about it.” He named a series of well-known historians, familiar to all of us as consummate storytellers, albeit not *just* as tellers of tales. For me, the centerpiece of his address (as I believe he intended it) was the personal story he told about an instructor at Wisconsin who taught him as an undergraduate. Dick Ringler, emeritus professor of English and Scandinavian studies, Cronon admitted, “changed my life forever, and may well be the reason I am delivering a presidential address to the American Historical Association.” What made Ringler so unusual and so wonderful was the brilliance produced by being “slow.” Bill Cronon didn’t phrase it that way, of course. Rather, in recounting how Ringler rehearsed his lectures word for word before each class, Cronon pinpointed the core of Ringler’s pedagogic genius: Ringler was in fact “actually deliv-

<sup>40</sup> Christine DeLucia, “On ‘Slow History’: Decolonizing Methodologies and the Importance of Responsive Editorial Processes,” *Uncommon Sense—The Blog*, Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, March 22, 2018.

ering the lecture we were about to hear.” Such brilliance is scripted, and scripting takes labor (Robert Caro’s “work”), repetition, and, of course, time.<sup>41</sup>

A lecture is one thing, but precisely the same work goes into crafting effective historical narratives and convincing historical analyses. Careful reworking, rethinking, and recasting over time does the trick. It is slow, it is methodological, it is meticulous, and it is incredibly successful. This observation brings me to my final point, my final argument for the virtues of slowing down, and it also circles me back to Robert Caro: the process of writing. Is there anything more destructive of confidence than writing? Does it ever “go well”? A recent and somewhat frivolous discussion online involved a number of scholars in the question of how much one wrote in a day (perhaps the better question might have been, how much *should* one write in a day?). Few of us are like James A. Michener, who could reel out thousands of words at a sitting; few of us probably wish to imitate his style, although his income was another matter. Most of us, I believe, are far more like Caro, who admitted that “I am not sure I ever think the writing is going well. . . . It is a real mistake to get too confident about what I’ve written. I do so much writing and rewriting . . . I’d rewrite the finished book if I could.” Nonetheless, he produced on average what he described as his quota: “at least three pages a day.”<sup>42</sup> Most of us would be tickled pink at regularly reaching that goal. But there is little value in simply writing at warp speed. Yet the more we write—and, for that matter, the more we teach—the more we gain an ever-greater facility with language, which gradually makes us more adroit in converting thoughts into words. Good prose takes an awful lot of time; we write, we rewrite, we organize, we reorganize, and then we do it all again. Words are fantastic, protean creatures, often elusive and certainly frequently dangerous. Even Gustave Flaubert mulled over the *le seul mot juste* as he reclined on his green leather sofa. Writing to Guy de Maupassant (among others), he expressed his relentless search for words: “there is but one name for a thing, one verb to set it in motion, and one adjective to describe it.”<sup>43</sup> Most of us are not quite so finicky, but wisdom lies in the idea that how you say something is as important as what you say (Flaubert again: “*Bien écrire est tout!*”). Coaxing substance and style to march in unison proves a tricky task, and it is often agonizingly slow work. The sensitivity to selecting words and shaping sentences that effectively convey our thoughts is not inborn but something painstakingly acquired. Yet it remains imperfect, always becoming, never quite *there*. But we should take heart. Historians are, after all, long-distance runners not sprinters.

In the end, being slow in so many ways make us successful storytellers, historians, writers, and teachers. I produced the first draft of this talk rather quickly, during the month of April as social distancing confined me to the square footage of my house. In approximately three and a half weeks of pecking away at my computer and devoting about half time to the task, by early May, I had a rough draft of the article-length version. That was my goal. And I was more or less satisfied with the piece and in a self-congratulatory moment even thought, *Well, that’s almost done*. But it wasn’t, of course. Days were spent in tinkering, adding new materials, and discarding what seemed extra-

<sup>41</sup> William Cronon, “Storytelling,” 2012 AHA Presidential Address, *American Historical Review* 118, no. 1 (2013): 1–19, here 7, 12–15.

<sup>42</sup> Caro, *Working*, 200–201.

<sup>43</sup> Roland Barthes, “Flaubert and the Sentence” [1957] in *The Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York, 1982), 296–304; Flaubert repeated this phrase or a similar one many times in letters, for example, as “Si je mets bleues après pierres, c’est que bleues est le mot juste, croyez-moi,” *Correspondence*, 5:67.

neous or off point. Almost every day asked myself: *Does this really say what I want it to?* Over the awful summer and early fall of 2020, I repeatedly returned to the draft and was never, and am not now, totally happy with what I have wrought. But perhaps that's as it should be, and like confusion, dissatisfaction is a fertile soil in which history roots and grows.

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**Mary Lindemann** is Professor of History at the University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida. She is the author of several works on the history of early modern Europe and medicine. She is currently working on a history of Brandenburg in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.