Modern American History (2019), **2**, 77–82
doi:10.1017/mah.2018.41

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Q&A

The WRITER'S STUDIO with Heather Ann Thompson

The poet and pediatrician William Carlos Williams jotted down phrases on his prescription pad. Lorraine Hansberry spent hours at her desk smoking cigarettes and sharpening pencils. Truman Capote claimed not to be able to think without lying down. Historians, too, have special ways of working that are worthy sharing. In September 2018, Thomas Andrews and Brooke L. Blower asked the Pulitzer Prize winning author Heather Ann Thompson to talk about outlines, archives, and the power of careful description.

Heather Ann Thompson has taught at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Temple University, and the University of Michigan. She is the author of several award-winning articles as well as the books *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (2001; Cornell University Press, 2017) and *Blood in the Water: The Attica Uprising of 1971 and Its Legacy* (Pantheon Books, 2016).

Tell us about how you usually write. Do you have any special techniques for getting words onto the page?

I have to devote specific time to writing. I can't do a little here, and a little there, in a day filled with other things like teaching or meetings or child responsibilities. I have to devote the day to it. I used to write best at night, especially when my kids were all small. But now I like to work in the day, with repeated cups of hot coffee (more for the comfort than the caffeine), and then just start until something substantial is finished—a full draft of an op-ed or essay, a solid first section of a scholarly article, or a big chunk of a book chapter.

I can never begin any major writing project without having already done an outline of the overall arc of the piece. And I never stop a day's writing before I have listed some bullet points capturing the gist of where I am headed—what needs to be said in the next section when I come back to it. As I always tell my graduate students, when you have a solid outline of the overall project and then each section or chapter of it, that is the hardest part done. With that you know what to write and won't get lost in the weeds and head off on tangents. Of course outlines themselves need to be updated as they evolve. But they are the blueprint, the map, regarding what words, what evidence, needs to make it on the page.

How do you manage to find time to write given all of the other demands on your time?

Ha! Well, ironically, the busier I am, the more I write. On a plane, in a hotel room, and in the midst of ten other responsibilities. It isn't so much that I need chaos to write; it's that when I am productive, ideas come to me, and a passion to get them on paper comes as well. Plus, of course, when one is on a plane, or in a hotel room, one can't do the laundry, or clean, or grocery shop, or make sure the dishes are done. Those times on a plane or in a hotel are actually my most quiet, and thus also my most productive.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2018.41 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Did you grow up with lots of books? When did you start writing?

My childhood house was full of books. My parents never had much money, but we always had books and any time I picture my father in my mind, he is in his chair reading, or we are in a book store together, slowly meandering between the shelves, and he is periodically pausing to read the backs of volumes high above my head. I still remember the wall of the tiny apartment we lived in when my sister was born. It was filled floor to ceiling with unfinished wood bracket shelves my dad had built, each of them groaning under the weight of more books than I could count. We always had the *Oxford English Dictionary* out on a table, easily accessible, to look up the meaning and origins of words. I also remember my mother always researching and writing. She went to law school when my sister was small, and few women did that. And she always wrote the most beautiful letters to me, when I was at my grandparents' house for summer visits. She could describe things in ways that made me feel as if I was right there with her.

Still, it took me decades to find my own voice as a writer. I read voraciously, but the magic I found on the page intimidated me. Other writers were so good—not just the novelists on our shelves, but my professor father and my lawyer mother who could each capture experiences and render details on the page with a cleverness that awed me. My own writing always seemed, in comparison, so plodding, and my vocabulary and descriptions so trite. It wasn't until well into my adult life that I understood that being a good writer was not just about technique. It was also about passion. I could not be a good writer until I had something that I felt deeply moved about and wanted to convey to others. It wasn't until I became a historian, and felt the imperative of bringing the past to life most powerfully in the present, that I really learned how to write.

Which historians do you most admire as writers and stylists, and why? Which writers of any sort have influenced your work?

It is so hard to come up with a short list of writers whom I most admire or who have most influenced me because so many have for very different reasons. From novelists like Toni Morrison, Isabel Allende, and Arundhati Roy I have learned so much about language. Specifically I learned that neither cold nor flowery descriptions full of purple adjectives bring something to life on the page. Instead one must use evocative and powerful imagery and metaphor—literally immersing the reader in a given landscape, assaulting or seducing them with a certain smell, enveloping them in a mood.

From historians like E. P. Thompson, Robin D. G. Kelley, Natalie Zemon Davis, and Kelly Lytle Hernández I learned not to be intellectually lazy when it came to rescuing the past—always to keep an eye out for what Kelley calls the "hidden transcript" and to understand that we must create what Hernández terms a "rebel archive" if we have any hope of telling history as it really happened.[1]

And from theorists and activists—from Malcolm X to Frantz Fanon to Cedric Robinson to Angela Davis and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor—I have learned the imperative of speaking the truth on the page in such a way that not only shines an unapologetically sober gaze and glaringly bright light on the injustices of past and present, but also helps us to imagine power disrupted, and one day more equally shared.

[1]Robin D. G. Kelley, "We Are Not What We Seem": Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South," *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (Jun., 1993): 75–112; Kelly Lytle Hernandez, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771–1965* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2017).

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Blood in the Water reads quite differently from _Whose Detroit?_. What did you learn about writing in graduate school and while working on your first book that you felt you had to learn, re-learn, or un-learn to make _Blood in the Water_ the book that it became?

In graduate school we are trained to be meticulous researchers, to sort through and weigh the contributions of other historians, and to craft our own tight argument on the page. But it wasn't until trying to write *Blood in the Water* that I realized I had never really been trained to be a writer. By that I mean to be a good descriptive writer—really to know how to marshal the English language so that it could convey the past in a way that would make readers experience it most intimately. And so when writing this book, I felt like I had to go back to reading again. I had to read novels. I had to think about writing in a much more deliberate way.

And I had to be comfortable with my own historical expertise in a way that I must confess I never was trained to be. It is very difficult for historians to assert something without endless footnotes to support it. But in this book I learned that relying on a footnote to give power to what you want to say, in fact, can mute it.

A great example of this was brought to my attention by my agent, the brilliant Geri Thoma, after she asked me to offer a richer description of one of the key historical actors in my book proposal. I panicked and said to her, "But I don't know what he looked like or sounded like!" She calmly responded, "Have you seen a picture of him? Have you ever heard him speak on a recording?" And of course, I had. This wasn't a matter of me needing someone else's account of this man to footnote; it was a matter of me just having the intellectual confidence to write what I, myself, knew to be true.

Blood in the Water contains short, chronological chapters. Did you always plan to structure it this way? What was surprising about how the book turned out considering how you originally envisioned it?

When I first began this book, I didn't know how to write it in any other way than I had written other books and articles. I assumed that I needed a lengthy introduction where I would layout my arguments, and then I would tell the story in aid of proving those arguments just asserted in the introduction. But this story was so unwieldy, so rich, so powerful, so complicated, that I kept feeling like my tried-and-true historical method was weighing it down and stopping it from being experienced fully by readers. And so I scrapped my original drafts and started again. I realized that I needed short chapters because there was so much to digest, and the subject matter was often difficult to process. I felt like readers needed to be able to take a breath and to reflect on where they were in the story, what it meant, and also to steel themselves for what might come.

Also, I realized that these are the sort of chapters that I like to read. I actually have never liked chapters that are so long that I feel like I am plodding through them and secretly wishing that they will end just so that I can take a moment to think about what I just read.

All of this said, I still felt that there was a need to work out, and to assert, a more scholarly version of why Attica, and prisons in general, mattered to historians. This is why, in the midst of writing this book, I took a major pause to articulate those thoughts in what became my *Journal of American History* article, "Why Mass Incarceration Matters."[2] In some key

[2]Heather Ann Thompson, "Why Mass Incarceration Matters: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar America," *Journal of American History* 97, no. 3 (December 2010): 703–734.

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respect, I couldn't be free to write a narrative that I wanted until I had written the more self-consciously scholarly articulation of the material, just for historians.

We understand that you wrote *Blood in the Water* while collaborating with documentary filmmakers. How did that shape the book—not just the research, but also the narrative, characterization, pacing, tone, and style of the text itself?

I was well into the book before I talked to any documentary filmmakers, so in that sense it didn't really shape my book to work with them—other than to confirm my sense that this was a powerful story that needed telling. And yet, one amazing thing did happen when I connected with the filmmaker Christine Christopher who was in the process of directing the film *Criminal Injustice: Death and Politics at Attica* (2012). I not only came to work with her closely, but she also became such an important sounding board for me as I wrote. Indeed Chris and I shared sources and spent hours trying to get to the bottom of various puzzles about the Attica story—particularly the cover up—that vexed us. Her research insights, and some of the interviews that she did for her film, ended up being so helpful to me. My book was all the better for my collaboration with her toward the end of writing it. The collaboration worked because we trusted each other and saw our projects as mutually reinforcing.

***Blood in the Water* is billed as "the real story" of Attica. How do you square such claims with the complexities, uncertainties, and silences in the documents you were able to find on the uprising and retaking of the prison, as well as the political and legal responses that ensued? In other words, some see narrative history as a kind of straightforward reconstruction exercise, while others see narrative history as far more analytical and interpretive. What's your take on this?**

Well, to be sure the press uses such grand descriptors to entice the public to read one's book, but I do feel strongly that this was, at least, the first comprehensive history of Attica, and also, that it did reveal vital elements of the Attica story that literally nobody new––namely the depths of the conspiracy to cover it up, and also, of course, the identity of those members of law enforcement who had committed so much trauma during and after the retaking. And yet of course, as I made clear in the prologue, the state of New York still sits on so many documents, and, what is more, there is no question in my mind that the federal government was involved in what happened at this state prison to a degree we still don't appreciate. For those reasons, I've always been clear that this story will continue to unfold.

As to whether this narrative merely told a story, or whether it now shapes our historiography and adds to our broader scholarly understanding of the past, I don't see those as mutually exclusive. In fact, intrinsic to my narrative are powerful arguments about the origins of mass incarceration, about the fate of social movements in the 1960s, about blind spots in our labor history, about criminalizing and policing blackness, and I could go on. To be sure I do not hit the reader over the head with those arguments, but I am confident that when a historian reads this book, those arguments, and interventions, regarding how we understand the postwar period are inescapable.

You have written about the perils of writing about the recent past, including the difficulties of conducting oral history and the lack of access to documents that are often closely guarded for personal or political reasons. Do these challenges distinguish writing about modern American history from writing about earlier periods?

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Minus the difficulties posed by oral history specifically, the sort of challenges that I faced writing *Blood in the Water* are not confined to writing about the recent past. The truth is that whether we are writing about the nineteenth century or the twentieth, if we only look at archives that have been curated for historians' eyes, and only look at sources deemed open to the public, our understanding of what really happened in the past will be severely limited. What is not collected, what is never recorded, and what has been burned and destroyed are as important to rescuing the past—however far back it might go—as what has been saved in archives.

And so, while it was obvious and glaring what had been withheld from the public with regard to the story of Attica, and thus I had to come at that history creatively and from multiple different directions, there is no question in my mind that the experience of marginalized people in earlier centuries, and the abuses committed by those in power long ago, are also too often unavailable to researchers. This is why, no matter what moment in the past historians are trying to rescue and understand, the challenge for them is always to go beyond the official archive, and always to look for Hernández's "rebel archive" and Kelley's "hidden transcript."

When you begin a project, how do you tackle the research? When do you know when you've done enough?

I would say that my research has several phases. The first stage I would characterize as the "indiscriminate grab," meaning that I comb every possible archival collection, website, and secondary source that I can find for information on my topic. Then I spend some substantial time outlining what I imagine the parameters of my own inquiry to be, and even make chapter outlines knowing that they will change dramatically over time. This helps me fine-tune the research inquiry and make it more useful.

I am not sure that I was ever satisfied that I did enough research while writing *Blood in the Water*, because every new angle I came up with to get to the story netted important information. I lived in constant fear that if I stopped looking there might be something I'd miss. Eventually, however, it became clear to me that I had found what was possible to find, at least at this point, and that it was time to buckle down and pull it together in book form.

Of course the story was so complicated that each chapter, and even sections of chapters, required me to outline and re-outline, and even to diagram things on a whiteboard. And then I would see areas where I needed more information! In that sense, perhaps, the research never ended fully until the book was actually printed.

How do you keep track of all that research? Do you have a system for organizing your notes and files?

Because *Blood in the Water* took me thirteen years to write, my research notes are in many different forms. Some were in a program called One Note, some were in Word files, and I collected so many documents that, ultimately, I worked directly off hard copies too. I also had files of photographs, myriad recordings from television coverage, and radio interviews, and my own conversations with various historical actors. There is so much material now in my possession that I will soon donate it to an archive for the next person who tackles the story.

Since writing that book, technology has improved and now, as I am knee-deep in my book on the MOVE bombing, I have a system that I love and wish I would've had before. In short there is a program called Evernote, and a scanning app called Scannable, and they have been

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life-changing. I now can scan materials (without the tedium of cropping and centering, etc.) straight into the chapters where they belong, plus they are OCR searchable, and I can also move notes from chapter to chapter in such a way that I think will make the writing of this next book easier. I will still face the same challenges of making sense of deeply contradictory and complicated stories for the reader, but at least my own research materials are now easily searchable and easily moved as the chapter structure changes over time.

Do you do a lot of rewriting? Do you share your drafts with anyone? What do you do when you get stuck?

I do a lot of rewriting. I actually can't count how many drafts of a given piece I do. And I'm always loath to share anything I write with anyone else until I feel like I've made it the best draft that I can. When I get stuck, I stick with it. If I quit, it's a huge barrier to come back. Even if I can't quite figure out the problem, I'll try to re-outline it, or put some thoughts about what the problem might be in that section before I quit.

You've worked extensively as a public intellectual, particularly on issues relating to mass incarceration. What influence has your engagement and activism had on your writing?

Trying to write for the public, and trying to historicize this current crisis of incarceration, has changed my research and writing pretty dramatically. It has honed my research skills, in the sense that I now refuse to take no for an answer when someone tells me that there are no sources. To me it becomes a challenge—who might have a copy of what someone claims they no longer have? Who else might have chronicled or captured what I am interesting in learning about? And in terms of my writing, I am now over-aware of legibility. I want to make sure that whatever I write is easily accessed and understood by all readers.

How do you think historians can make themselves politically useful *as writers*? What risks do you think we need to run, and which do you think we're better off avoiding when we move into the public square?

I have thought a lot about this question, especially as someone who trains graduate students. Historians are always warned, strongly, against being "presentist." But I think that this warning has been used to silence people who should share what they have learned. In fact, I think historians are particularly and especially suited to weigh in on contemporary political debates precisely because they begin in the past, not the present, and work forward. We have an expertise that is invaluable when it comes to assessing contemporary events, and where we are today more generally, because a good historian always begins with the research not the argument. Once one has researched something thoroughly, and fully understands its origins or impact, I believe one has a responsibility to share those findings and conclusions with people today––particularly if they are relevant to something that is going on currently. Unlike a lawyer writing a brief (they are advocates who need to make an argument and so begin with the argument and go find the evidence to prove it), historians begin with the evidence—with what is there, not what they hope is there.

For that reason historians should weigh in as public intellectuals if they feel so compelled and not feel that they must keep their knowledge cloistered in the academy. To the extent that there are risks, I think if one is a good historian the risk is mostly personal. It is not easy to get hate mail, and threats, simply for rendering the past legible and relevant. But it is important to do it nevertheless.

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