Whether our primary sources are textual, visual, or oral, they hold unexpected surprises, joys, disappointments, and interpretive dilemmas. Feminist historians have never approached our sources as Ms. Grandgrinds, looking for ‘the facts and nothing but the facts,’ although the impression that we are hopelessly mired in empiricism may linger in some quarters. We rarely trumpet the need for pure objectivity, declare that we have found the truth, assume a naïve empiricism, or claim absolute insider knowledge; our interrogations of our sources usually fall somewhere on a “continuum between objectivity and relativism.” Nonetheless, there are differences of opinion among historians on how to treat sources, ranging from a primary preoccupation with their discursive construction to an emphasis on evidential truthfulness and a search for a measure of objectivity. The first paper in the section, on women’s letters to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW), grew out of an accidental discovery in the archives that in turn pushed me to consider how we interpret sources like these in light of long-standing debates about experience, working-class history, and feminist theory.

I was researching a chapter on the labour movement’s interactions with the RCSW that was supposed to explore their policy proposals relating to wage-earning women and was disappointed, not because the trade union briefs were too brief — quite the contrary — but rather because they were a little repetitive and boring (a subjective view, I know). I opened a box I had not intended to use, containing personal letters to the RCSW, and was immediately captivated. I admit to feeling as if I had finally found a better source, a more intimate and honest source, a source that would let me understand women’s changing experiences of work. I
had a sense of mining the primary documents at a deeper level, yet I also knew that my preconceived notion of personal letters as a more intimate source (and perhaps the historian’s well-known love of gossip), along with my generational interest in social history ‘from below’ and in ‘recovering women’s voices,’ were likely shaping this very subjective assessment. I was not naïve enough to think that I had arrived at women’s truest thoughts, that the letters were evidence of women’s truly ‘authentic’ experience as opposed to the thoroughly ‘ideological’ trade union briefs. However, there was something very compelling about the letters: they drew me in, as they were emotive, warm, funny, angry — in other words they conveyed some feeling. I imagined tired women at their kitchen tables firing off their thoughts to the head of the commission, Florence Bird, in between dishes and bedtime stories, something I could relate to. And I was also surprised at how many letters were eloquent, perceptive, and critical of the sex-gender system — and what feminist is not cheered by signs of resistance, however small?

My initial impulse was to read the letters as emblematic of women’s experiences, but if I was to use that highly charged term, I had to return to theoretical debates discussing our use of that concept. Just contemplating what was to follow, I became deflated: the letters were becoming a chore not a joy, more opaque, a source not to be listened to but justified, and ironically, an object of my ‘third-person’ feminist gaze, rather than the sentient source I had first encountered. The state of feminist theory, specifically our critical reflections on experience, voice, and identity — productively provoked by postmodern writing — was ruining my archival enjoyment. My response speaks to the influence of poststructuralist writing on the concept of experience in Anglo-American feminist writing; critiques by Joan Scott and others unsettled some of the assumptions embedded in an earlier feminist ‘moment of discovery’ in history writing, though questions about experience were not entirely new, as they had been central to earlier debates within Marxist social history. Although a younger colleague told me while I was writing this paper that the discussion of ‘experience’ was, well, generally over, I did not think so. Debates about experience may be somewhat ubiquitous, unsolvable, and always with us, but they are still important, not the least because they are often emblematic of significant differences in our political sensibilities
and theoretical perspectives; they are tied, for instance, to debates about human agency and the (death of the) subject in history. Perhaps social historians in general have been tortured more by this question (many economic historians I know are not wracked with doubt about whether ‘reality’ is discursively constructed), or perhaps debating experience has just become part of our own historical socialization and ongoing practice.

As I read through the letters, I kept going back and forth to feminist and Marxist theoretical writing, including feminists who have expressed some concern that we are in danger of losing a sense of feeling or affectivity in our writing, something I often instinctively felt when I was reading endless descriptions of discourses about women. Poststructuralist writing had been eye-opening precisely because it revealed much about the power of discourses and how they operated, but if experience became completely discursive, then what happened to the subject, human agency, and resistance? I was drawn, on the one hand, to Sonia Kruks’s suggestion (not unlike Susan Friedman’s model that I described in the introduction) that experience could be described as either “subjectively lived or as a discursive effect” and that, interpretively, we go back and forth between these poles, “depending on the nature of our questions and goals.” Experience could thus be seen from both a “first and third person” perspective, but to see it only as discursive was to obscure the role of human agency in subverting or choosing discourses, returning us to “high altitude thinking” and a “disembodied subject.” The latter comments also reminded me of E.P. Thompson’s much earlier claim — admittedly a little more sarcastic and directed towards structuralists — that experience was not only ideological, to be discovered by intellectuals. His notion of experience as a ‘junction concept’ between social being and social consciousness, and his argument that lived experience might exist in “friction with imposed consciousness,” opening up the possibility of alternative ideas emerging, still resonated for me. True, his definition suggested a ‘foundational’ investment in a prediscursive reality, in social relations framed by the structural relations of capitalism, but that was precisely the positive benefit of a materialist feminism.

Maintaining a materialist grip on the concept of experience was not unrelated to the second article in this section, on the working-class body. The idea emerged initially from reading white women’s comments in
their travel narratives about Inuit women’s bodies. In order to put these in context, I tried to catch up on ‘body studies,’ a whole new academic category that seemed to be everywhere. Suddenly, everything was embodied or about the body, even topics that had not before been ‘body identified.’ The influence of both feminism and Foucault, sometimes the intermingling of the two, registered all through body studies, but little was written about work and the body: “the libidinal body,” as Terry Eagleton noted, was “in, the labouring body was out.” This was dispiriting, since body studies did offer potential insights into labour-related topics such as sexual harassment, the gendered division of labour, and the work process. It also seemed that the body, now named, had been an unnamed presence in previous writing, such as Marx’s discussion of alienation, writing that was still relevant and useful, yet often dismissed. Moreover, feminists had done such a good job of denaturalizing the body, and of arguing it was socially constructed rather than biologically limited, that it was hard to talk, without being seen as essentialist, about the actual suffering, violated, maimed body — that is, the bodies of both workers and women. Body theory seemed to circulate in such abstract, esoteric forms: were we losing sight of the labouring body, the material body? By linking research on Indigenous and working-class history, specifically the labour that went into the making of a fur coat, it seemed possible to address some of these issues.

Notes


3 Kruks, quoting Merleau-Ponty, ibid., 143.
