

INVENTING
NADAR

MONTMARTRE

A History of Photographic Firsts

LES TERNES

EMILY DOUCET

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Russe*

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INVENTING NADAR



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Sign, Storage, Transmission

A series edited by Jonathan Sterne and Lisa Gitelman

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I N V E N T I N G

NADAR

A History of Photographic Firsts

EMILY DOUCET

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INTRODUCTION

“Who Do You Think Is the Greatest Photographer in the World?”

Many superlatives have been used to describe the French aeronaut, biographer, caricaturist, collector, journalist, inventor, novelist, and photographer known as Nadar (born Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, 1820–1910). In addition to the medium of photography, Nadar is repeatedly associated with discovery, invention, and extraordinary events; he is described as a legend, a master, an artist, and a celebrity.¹ But perhaps most prominently, he is described as “first.” This recurring claim repeats again and again across Nadar’s images and texts, contemporary responses to his feats, and the historical scholarship devoted to analyzing his work. If he is to be believed, Nadar produced

the *first* aerial photograph,
the *first* portraits by electric light,
the *first* underground photographs of the Paris catacombs and sewers,
the *first* photographic interview (in collaboration with his son Paul),
and, in a final act,
a memoir of photography’s *first* century.

Taking advantage of the unusually broad range of Nadar’s claims to priority, this book follows Nadar’s firsts, tracking how they entered the historical

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record via photography and other media. To do so, I play with the multiple meanings of invention—to create something new or, alternatively, something based in fiction—to trace the invention of man and medium.

Across this book, I recount the material specificity and narrative complexity of each of these photographic firsts to demonstrate the extent to which no one image, text, or event can singularly constitute a first, though all can be deployed to narrate one. In doing so, I argue that histories of photography have been—and continue to be—shaped by the history of the photographic first, a highly mediated process that canonizes the invention of novel applications of photography as discrete techniques with single authors/inventors.² As we will see, photographic firsts are both fact and fiction, simultaneously understood to be the “facts of the matter” and a “narrative of those facts.”³ So while photographic firsts are the products of complex processes of mediation, to their makers, collectors, compilers, and, yes, also to historians, they speak of a fantasy of pure historicity. This was first, unreservedly. But by demonstrating the operation of a novel photographic technology or photographic application, they also model a specific technicity—this technique was new. Photographic firsts bring these two formulations together: this was new and first *then*; here is visual proof.

It should come as no surprise to the reader that there is another, much less straightforward, version of these stories. Rather than a single iconic photograph resulting from technical innovation, photographic firsts are better understood as media constellations that render an image (or set of images) interpretable as first.⁴ They are at once images, objects, events, accounts, evidential results of experiments, and documents. They are constituted via texts, museum collections, patent applications, newspapers, and lawsuits, among other cultural forms and spaces. They can be evidence of an experiment, instigators of talk among colleagues, documents of a performance, gifts to professional organizations, arbitrators of patent disputes and lawsuits, and archival documents, among other uses to be described across this book. They are made by many media and often have many authors. They are historically transient, their meaning rearticulated or reaffirmed over time. Photographic firsts speak volumes.

Nadar's firsts were instrumental in the invention of his public persona and historical legacy. However, they are not the photographic genre that he is most associated with. Nadar was also a great portraitist, known for capturing the likenesses of some of the most memorable characters of nineteenth-century Paris. The various iterations of his commercial ateliers were fashionable destinations and the resulting portraits prized

commodities; these same portraits are now fixtures in surveys of the history of photography and illustrative material in French cultural histories. Not incidentally, Nadar has held an extraordinarily privileged place in the history of photography. This is, in part, because of Nadar's voluminous production (including an archive), but also because of where he worked and with whom he associated himself. During most of his career, Nadar worked in Paris—the city Walter Benjamin called the “capital of the nineteenth century”—and was friends with many of the artists, poets, and writers now firmly ensconced in the canon of European Modernism.⁵ His networks included politicians, actresses, musicians, industrialists, bankers, and journalists, among others. That he took portraits of so many of these individuals has only solidified these relationships to history post facto. But while his portrait production may have been voluminous, the media generated by his exploits in other domains produced an equally prolific—and enduring—archive. In this book, I put Nadar's portraits to the side (with a few strategic exceptions) to demonstrate how his archive offers one starting point for a media history of photographic history.

This archive has prompted a lot of response. Beginning in the 1930s, just twenty years after Nadar's death, well-known and much-cited figures like the German-born French photographer and writer Gisèle Freund and the philosopher and writer Walter Benjamin were registering his influence with frequent reference to his writings.⁶ In the 1950s, just after the Second World War, the Nadar studio archive entered the collection of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF) in Paris, making a vast new corpus accessible to curators and historians. The 1960s saw the advent of monographic publications and exhibitions on Nadar in France.⁷ The 1960s and 1970s also saw an uptick in Nadar's reputation in North America, including through the efforts of the prominent collectors André Jammes and Samuel Wagstaff. Nadar's photographs were part of the massive and lucrative market for photographs that developed in Europe and North America in the second half of the twentieth century. His presence in exhibitions multiplied, and he was featured in numerous articles and magazines—including the first issues of *October* and *Artforum* to focus exclusively on the medium of photography. Biographies of Nadar abound, in multiple languages.⁸ Nadar is, you could say, everywhere you look (photo-historically speaking).

In each period, Nadar's work has been instructively mutable—he was a sociologically minded eyewitness to the industrialization of European society in the 1930s, a master portrait artist of photography's *age d'or* in the

1950s and 1960s, a media theorist for postmodern critics writing in the 1970s, and a speculative commodity in the market for photographs in the latter half of the twentieth century. His market value was a cutting example for Marxist photography historians concerned with dismantling the bourgeois history of photography in the 1980s, and his enduring fame was a relic of the birth of celebrity culture for curators in the 1990s.⁹ I could go on.

It is through these acts of collection, exhibition, and writing that Nadar became central to an emergent canon of photographic history in the twentieth century—a process to be elaborated on in the epilogue of this book. But to be known as a “master” of photography’s “first century,” Nadar had to become Nadar, a figure crafted via the forms of media that he created, collected, and circulated during his lifetime. These media representations were produced and disseminated in concert with cultural and institutional processes of the period—the patent office, civic and technology museums, the scientific press, photographic societies, and international exhibitions, among other forms—to articulate the originality of his many and varied projects. For Nadar, “originality” was most often figured in the form of the photographic first. This proto-avant-gardism would prove extraordinarily intriguing to audiences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To denaturalize Nadar’s centrality to the history of photography, I turn away from his portraits and toward these stories. In doing so, *Inventing Nadar* shows that Nadar’s legacy and the history of photography—to whatever extent one can consider it to be singular—have been shaped by many of the same processes of mediation.

Much ink has been spilt on Nadar and his pictures, both by the photographer himself and his subsequent historical interlocutors—this author included. In returning to Nadar, *Inventing Nadar* inevitably invents Nadar, again. So why reinforce this historiographical trajectory by returning to this figure? An important question, for Nadar inarguably participates in what Lorraine Daston, speaking of the history of science more broadly, has called “a form of European self-portraiture,” in which his contributions to photography are conceptualized as an expansion of territory and imbricated in a history devoted to defining one man’s (and, in turn, Europe’s) exceptionalism and centrality to the history of the medium.¹⁰ And yet Nadar’s firsts are still regularly cited as facts. This book could be written in the corrective, demonstrating how Nadar was, in almost every instance, “not first.” However, to do so would risk replicating the kind of historical narratives that created these stories in the first place: one first in place of another, a game of besting that recapitulates Nadar’s original

impulse.¹¹ Instead, this book posits that there is value in understanding the history of such charismatic facts, if only to better recognize them when they appear elsewhere.

The metaphor of portraiture, as a rhetorical stand-in for historical representation and its omissions, is particularly useful in a study of a photographer who so prodigiously produced portraits (of himself and others) in many different media.¹² As will be unfolded in each chapter of this book, each first is both a portrait and a landscape: of self, of medium, and of the cultural surround. Nadar's self-invention via his media production parallels the processes that made his "photographic firsts" historically legible, but his firsts are not his alone. They were cocreated with the cultural processes and institutions within which he was embedded, narratives later shored up by the historical narratives crafted by other writers and scholars. So, to repeat myself (as my subject was so very fond of doing), in returning to Nadar, *Inventing Nadar* invents Nadar, again.

FIRST, NADAR

There is a telling symmetry between the production of Nadar's photographic firsts and the self-fashioning of his public identity. Images, documents, and lawsuits are all part of the media production by which Nadar invented himself, narrated his innovations, and, in doing so, created the material through which later historians could assign him priority. Born Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, "Nadar" began using the pseudonym early in his career as a writer, journalist, and caricaturist. He quickly established the name as synonymous with his public persona. This moniker was visually identifiable via the flourish of the *n* in his signature, often rendered in a dashing, brilliant red—perhaps most famously as a gaslit sign on the facade of his studio (figure I.1).¹³ Much of the detail we know about the production of this "brand" is, as would become a trend, due to my subject's strategic propensity for using priority as fuel for media spectacle, thereby producing profusive documentation. We begin with a lawsuit and end with an image.

In 1856, Nadar sued his younger brother Adrien over the latter's use of the name "Nadar" in his photography studio.¹⁴ The case was brought before the members of the Tribunal de commerce de la Seine, the judicial body charged with ruling on disputes of a commercial nature. The suit ended with Nadar being legally recognized as the sole proprietor of the name "Nadar," effectively trademarking the pseudonym in perpetuity.



1.1 Félix Nadar, *Atelier de Nadar au 35, boulevard des Capucines à Paris* (Nadar's studio, 35 boulevard des Capucines, Paris), ca. 1861–72. Collection of the Département des Estampes et de la photographie, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

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1.2 Félix Nadar, *Panthéon Nadar*, 1854. Collection of the Département des Estampes et de la photographie, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

Describing his motivation for the lawsuit, Nadar postulated that, in his estimation, great artists (like him, we must assume) are usually in it for fame rather than money, but, if you *were* to consider it from the point of view of material interest, “it is obvious that the artist’s name is of greater value the more and better known that name is. In the arts, as in industry and commerce, reputation is money.”¹⁵ Therefore, when Adrien took Nadar’s name (even with the appended *jeune* to designate the older brother’s seniority), he “commit[ed] a usurpation no less reprehensible and prejudicial than the manufacturer who counterfeits the trademark of a neighboring manufacturer.”¹⁶ In order to make his case to the tribunal, Nadar authored a report summarizing the constellation of media that affirmed his priority in the use of the pseudonym and the personal celebrity associated with his use of the name. This document included a list of various instances where he had used the name and included references to images like the *Panthéon Nadar* (figure 1.2). As we will see, making multimedia arguments shoring up his legacy was something of a specialty of Nadar’s.

Nadar’s case may have been made to a set of judges in a commercial court, but the documents he called upon to do so had a much wider address,

even anticipating future historical interest in his work. Self-published in 1856, the same year as the initial lawsuit, the *Panthéon Nadar* is one of the many documents that the judges used to rule upon the use of the pseudonym. The monumental lithograph features a mass of portraits of historic figures, crowded together in a long snaking line. Nadar presents the image to a reader far into the future, his own long-legged avatar seated leaning against a rock at center right. We have not yet arrived as the future audience Nadar imagined for this print, for, at the time of writing, we remain in 2025 rather than the year 3607. He speculated that, in the middle of the third millennium, someone would be searching for a rare (and highly valuable) version of this lithograph. Each figure is numbered and labeled except for Nadar himself, who, while numbered, is labeled in the legend with three asterisks instead of a name. Nadar places himself as both a participant in this parade of celebrity and as its author, signaled in the repetition of his name three times across the lithograph.¹⁷

Called upon as evidence in the lawsuit against his brother, the image does more than affirm Nadar's license to the name. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the lithograph acted as a preconceived "pantheon" of important individuals who would be remembered by history. Placing himself among a pantheon of figures of significance, but also as the author of their likenesses and witness to their gathering, Nadar is both an image maker and a historian—roles he will reprise again and again. The case was precipitated by Nadar's desire to begin a profitable photographic studio, a project hampered (he thought) by his brother's use of the name in his own studio. Likewise, the documents and images brought together to make his case prefigure the media-archival role that the photographic image would come to hold in Nadar's archive, as well as the role that commercial value had in each of Nadar's exhortations to priority.

Further underscoring his belief in the commercial and rhetorical value of the Nadar name, Nadar would later formally authorize his son Paul to use the pseudonym so that he might continue to operate a commercial photography studio under the name. While Paul took over ownership of the studio as of 1895 (and practically much earlier), a 1903 letter from Nadar *père* to Paul outlines how Nadar considered this a formal business handover. Nadar writes: "I, the undersigned, give my son Paul Tournachon authorization to take as his name . . . my pseudonym Nadar which remains mine as well."¹⁸ The recent 2018 exhibition *Les Nadar: Une légende photographique* at the BNF underscored the significance of the intergenerational perseverance of the studio in crafting the legacy of the brand "Nadar." Paul

not only kept the studio legacy alive but also, arguably, was much more adept at running the business side of the studio, becoming Eastman Kodak's Paris representative for a time (to be discussed at greater length in chapter 3). The perseverance of the photography studio as a business under Paul and later his daughter Marthe (bolstered by the legacy of Nadar *père*) is a large part of why the Nadar studio archive was so well preserved prior to its entrance into museum and library collections. Nadar's firsts bolstered, and in turn were fortified by, the family business.

CONCEPTUALIZING (AND SELLING) THE NEW

Like Nadar's firsts, photography's inaugural first (usually known as the "invention" of photography) also comprised a set of events, images, texts, and exchanges deployed to cement a series of stories about priority. As many have observed, the invention of photography was not a single, isolated event but rather multiple, unfolding episodes that have been described, narrated, presented, displayed, preserved, and reanimated over time by many different actors at many points in history for many different purposes.¹⁹ Nor was "photography" ever a single process, technique, or method. The literature on photography's origins is therefore necessarily historiographical. Rather than attempt to determine when and where a specific technology or technical process was invented, scholars have analyzed how and why photography's invention was inscribed in other media and narrated by a variety of individuals and institutions. Writing in the afterword to his edited anthology of texts published about photography in the storied year of 1839, Steffen Siegel notes that "it is more from convention than necessity that the attempts to find an origin of photography are directed especially towards these durable photographic products that we refer to as 'images.'"²⁰ Images—absent their textual and social-historical surrounds—are something of a liability in the history of photography, as the search for a single, original photograph may obfuscate historical complexity. Histories of the invention of photography are thus necessarily also histories of photography and *other* media.²¹

So too with photographic firsts. These historical amalgams are primarily legible through the recurring claims to priority by their authors and champions, arguments made, like those surrounding photography's invention, via a multiplicity of media. It is only with ink, pencil, and glue, through performance, memoirs, collection, circulation, and annotation, that photographic firsts come into view. In its discursive and intermedial

formation, the first thus shares ground with “the new”—a key analytic for studies of media in the nineteenth century. While the term *new media* was, from the 1990s, used primarily to describe the development of interactive digital media, scholars have since used the concept to examine how so-called *old* media were once themselves new. This scholarship examines the mutual discursive formation of media and media history.²² Historical writing about new media is refractive, inevitably drawing on sources that mediate media.²³ “The history of emergent media, in other words, is partly a history of history,” as Lisa Gitelman has put it, “of what (and who) gets preserved—written down, printed up, recorded, filmed, taped, or scanned—and why.”²⁴ Media history is always already a history of mediation.

But newness (or firstness) is never a historically neutral descriptor for technology or events. As Wendy Hui Kyong Chun puts it, the new is “a historical category linked to the rise of modernity.”²⁵ Written in the 1890s at the apex of the nineteenth century, Nadar’s description of the “appearance of the daguerreotype” exemplifies the ideological power of this historical concept:

Exploding unexpectedly, totally unexpectedly, surpassing all possible expectations, diverting everything that we thought we knew and even what could be hypothesized, the new discovery indeed appeared as, and still is, the most extraordinary in the constellation of inventions that have already made our still unfinished century—in the absence of other virtues—the greatest of the scientific centuries.²⁶

In Nadar’s words, the “new discovery” of photography is “the most extraordinary” invention in “the greatest of the scientific centuries.” As Chun reminds us is true of the “new” in “new media,” here the superlative verbiage used to describe photography’s newness “more often than not works to erase X’s previous existence,” creating a narrative of rupture and discontinuity.²⁷ In Nadar’s words, photography is both a discovery and an invention, something newly found and something newly created. Yet, as Nadar knew all too well, inventions are rarely sudden, usually being the result of painfully iterative processes of failure and experimentation. These processes of self-historicization are not specific to Nadar. Photography emerged alongside the cultural techniques and institutions dedicated to the constitution of science, industry, the fine arts, and history itself as productive forces undergirding France’s self-image as a great, industrializing nation.

Nadar's priority-obsessed narratives are, I argue, deeply connected to the commercial and legal nature of many of his inventive claims, but also, and no less importantly, to the greater hagiography proclaiming France as an industrial capitalist power and French science as a motor for that system of exploitation.

The commodity status of new media technologies and the entrepreneurial nature of invention in the nineteenth century are thus a key context for these technologies' mediation. Speculation and promotion are, of course, processes that occur in relation to capital. The history of photography during Nadar's period is no exception, as several key texts on the history of French photography have noted.²⁸ A challenge to the history of art and the history of photography, Abigail Solomon-Godeau noted in 1994, is "that the object of study exists also as a commodity within a market system."²⁹ Indeed, drawing on this literature among other work, Steve Edwards has recently gone so far as to ask (again), "Why pictures?" proposing that the study of photography history instead be carried out as a kind of business history.³⁰ As Edwards writes, "It is intriguing to consider why the history of photography took root in the academic discipline of art history, with its focus on images. Initially, most accounts of photography were written as 'invention stories' and 'recipes' with claims to priority taking central place; few of these works had anything to say about photographs as pictures."³¹

Edwards asks why it is that photography hasn't been central for "historians of the trades, for studies of the commercial dealings of the middle class or for accounts of consumption and 'lifestyle.'"³² It is within this framework that I suggest we place the photographic first. Nadar's priority claims, and the conceptual history of the photographic first that I am tracing more generally, are embroiled within the history of photography as a business and of invention as a speculative method for the accrual of capital—financial or otherwise. Understood within the history of nineteenth-century photographic capitalism, we might understand Nadar's claims and aspirations—to being a photographic "artist," to being first, and to being remembered—as part and parcel of his, and subsequently his son's, entrepreneurialism. Nadar was, by most accounts, not a very good businessman and even spent time in debtor's prison. Ernestine Tournachon, his wife, kept the studio business up and running and assistants taking and printing portraits while Nadar was off undertaking the various exploits that will be described across this book. And yet the commercial studio (in its various iterations) is the most consistent thread across

Nadar's life. Being bad at business, it would appear, doesn't preclude one from devoting one's life to trying to succeed. So it seems worth asking: Is Nadar's legacy to artistic Modernism an aesthetic or a commercial one?³³

INVENTING NADAR, AGAIN

Firsts also point to what they negate. *Inventing Nadar* undermines any neutrality that might have previously been ascribed to the Nadar archive (a cultural form often taken to be analogous with Nadar the man). By arguing for the invention of Nadar as a process of archive making, I investigate how archival production and, in turn, archivally focused scholarship reproduce these forms.³⁴ His photographic firsts must be understood in concert with the cultural techniques that reproduced his priority (and, correspondingly, his legacy)—institutions like the museum, the archive, the newspaper, and patent law. That these same institutions have served to enshrine the history of French photography as central to the history of photography writ large warrants further reflection. It is through these processes that Nadar's legacy became part of France's artistic and cultural capital or, as it is often diminutively referred to, its "heritage."

In each chapter of *Inventing Nadar*, I describe a constellation of media that has come to stand as a "photographic first," suggesting that each episode is characteristic of a particular set of material and social entanglements that have characterized the development and historicization of photographic technology. The first three chapters focus on a series of entwined cultural institutions that coproduced Nadar's firsts: the museum, patent law, and the newspaper. The fourth chapter examines how these three often worked in concert, creating the archives of photo-historical inquiry that form the basis for my study. Paying attention to these sites of mediation and circulation cuts against the grain of Nadar's desire for historical fixity, revealing the processes by which he created his legacy. The last chapter examines Nadar's own observations on historical writing. My epilogue concludes with an examination of what was done with Nadar's legacy after his death in 1910.

Chapter 1 explores the history of Nadar's "first aerial photograph." I examine the constitution of the "idea of aerial photography" across a series of texts, including speculative fiction, patent descriptions, and memoirs. Moving from Nadar's experiments in aerial photography to his photographs of model helicopters and his monumental balloon project the *Géant*, I conclude with an analysis of how the years in which the aerial

photograph came into focus as a “first” coincide with the years in which Nadar was dedicated to compiling and cataloging his collection on the history of human flight and arranging for its sale to the municipal museum and library of Paris.

Chapter 2 recounts the embroilment of Nadar’s “first” photographs by electric light in a dispute between several commercial studio photographers in the 1880s. As with the story of the first aerial photograph, the multivalent “first” photographs by electric light were stabilized not simply by their execution but also, and even more assuredly, via their relevancy to institutional processes decades later (museum collections, in the case of the aerial photograph). In this chapter, I outline how Nadar’s first photographs by electric light were put into relief by a patent dispute between the Paris-based photographers Alphonse Liébert and Pierre Petit regarding their respective legal rights to processes designed to facilitate the production of studio photographic portraits by electric light in the 1880s, decades after Nadar’s first images by electric light. In tracing the story of Nadar’s “first” photographs by electric light, I show how patents for photographic techniques became a lucrative marketing mechanism for studio photographers, due to both the technical innovations that they afforded working photographers and the prestige attached to the ownership of intellectual property.

Chapter 3 analyzes a collaborative project between Nadar and his son Paul: a photographic interview with the centenarian scientist Michel Eugène Chevreul. As in the previous chapters, this work exemplifies the intersection of historicism and media. The interview was simultaneously a celebration of Chevreul’s life in science and an occasion for the introduction of the new “instantaneous” Eastman roll film in France by Paul, Eastman Kodak’s Paris representative. The photographic interview indexes conversations about media fidelity and historical objectivity across different media, including recorded sound, photography, and photomechanical reproduction. Marshaling new-media discourse for the ideological program of the Third Republic, the photo-text offers a meta-epistemological reflection about how photography, as a new media format, made history rather than represented it.

Chapter 4 begins with Nadar’s images of underwater work on Marseille’s port to better read his larger body of images of infrastructure illuminated by electric light. In Marseille, Nadar documented an infrastructure project that employed construction techniques developed by French engineers working to expand the port of Algiers, material processes wedded to the

development of infrastructure critical to continued French exploitation of the colony. The images were described in newspapers as the first underwater photographs, though Nadar himself did not make this claim. Decades earlier, however, Nadar had photographed the renovations of the Parisian sewers and catacombs—projects central to the infrastructural renovation of the capital as a site of circulation and the multimedia project of representing the city as an icon of industrial modernity. These Nadar proudly claimed as the first photographs of the newly renovated Parisian underground. Rather than examine these images as single iconic prints, I argue that—compiled in photographic albums by the Corps des ponts et chaussées (France’s national civil engineering body) or commissioned by municipal engineers, reproduced in newspapers, and collected by museums—Nadar’s photographs of infrastructure became infrastructural themselves in that they created the material substrate for future histories, whether written by state engineers, by Nadar himself, or by photography historians like myself.

In the book’s first four chapters, I describe the institutions, individuals, and infrastructures that shaped Nadar’s archive and existing historical accounts of it. In my final chapter, I analyze the photographer’s own summative, albeit eccentric, version of events, offering a close reading of Nadar’s book *Quand j’étais photographe* (*When I Was a Photographer*), first published as a series of texts in his son Paul’s journal *Paris-Photographe* in the early 1890s and later reprised as a book in 1900. While several of the individual texts are discussed across this book, particularly those which lay claim to various firsts, this final chapter lays out Nadar’s ideas about history and the place of media within it. In so doing, I argue that Nadar’s book is best read as a meditation on the nature of the relationship between new media and historical experience. I track the diverse references in several of the texts to demonstrate how, in Nadar’s estimation, photography was enmeshed in a larger history of science and technology, the development of which was akin to that of history itself.

Inventing Nadar unpacks the assumption that Nadar is, unreservedly, one of the “masters” of photography’s early years by following Nadar around the history of photography and emphasizing the media techniques by which his position in this historiography was assured. The photographic first was central to this process of canonization. The epilogue follows these firsts into the century after Nadar’s death, examining how these photographs entered the spaces of the Modernist art museum, the North American historiography of photography, the market for photographs, and

North American museum collections. Constituted by a surfeit of media, photographs dubbed “first” are often necessarily hyperlegible to historians. Rather than deploying the archival materials and historical methods described above as evidence for who and what was first, displacing one figure in favor of another, in this book I make the process of making a photographic first itself the subject of historical inquiry. In doing so, I’ve been continually made aware of how photographic firsts return us to some of the basic problems of history writing itself: the (non)authority of historical documents, the assertion of facts, and the wrinkles in linear historical narratives. In tracing the invention of Nadar and the photographic first, I do not assume Nadar’s role as a prime protagonist in the history of photography but instead examine how it is that others might have come to do so—first and foremost, Nadar himself.

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“THE GREATEST PHOTOGRAPHER IN THE WORLD?” 15

NOTES

INTRODUCTION: "WHO DO YOU THINK IS THE GREATEST PHOTOGRAPHER IN THE WORLD?"

- 1 For example, Walter Benjamin said of Nadar's photographs of underground Paris that they were "the first time the lens was deemed capable of making discoveries." He further described Nadar as a "master" of photography's early period. Roland Barthes also spoke in hyperbolic terms (which I have borrowed here as a title) regarding Nadar: "Who do you think is the greatest photographer in the world?" "Nadar," answers Barthes. Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," 6; Benjamin, "Small History of Photography," 240; Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 68.
- 2 A 2012 exhibition curated by Luce Lebart titled *Un laboratoire des premières fois* (A laboratory of firsts) and displayed at the Rencontre d'Arles brought together examples of such "*premiers essais*" from the collections of the Société française de photographie, including several of Nadar's photographs.
- 3 As Michel-Rolph Trouillot has noted, "In its vernacular use, history means both the facts of the matter and a narrative of those facts, both 'what happened' and 'that which is said to have happened.'" Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 2.

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- 4 Christopher Pinney has similarly described images as “unpredictable ‘compressed performances’ caught up in recursive trajectories of repetition and pastiche whose dense complexity makes them resistant to any particular moment.” Pinney, “Things Happen,” 266.
- 5 Benjamin, “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century.”
- 6 Freund’s doctoral dissertation, “La photographie en France au dix-neuvième siècle: Essai de sociologie et d’esthétique,” broadly considered to be the first doctoral dissertation to focus on the history of photography in France, was published as a book by the influential author and publisher Adrienne Monnier in 1936. As Eduardo Cadava has noted, in the afterword to Benjamin’s *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, Theodor Adorno compellingly analogized Benjamin the author with Nadar the photographer. Freund, *La photographie en France*; Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 6, 90–91, 309, 673–74, 681; Theodor Adorno cited in Cadava, *Words of Light*, xxi.
- 7 Chevallier, *Nadar*; Prinnet and Dilasser, *Nadar*; Braive, *L’âge de la photographie*. On the collection history of the Nadar studio, see Jammes, “Nadar Studio,” 116. On Nadar in North American museum collections, see Hellman, “Nadar dans les collections Nord-Américains.”
- 8 See, for example, Begley, *Great Nadar*; Greaves, *Nadar*; Gosling, *Nadar*; Stiegler, *Nadar: Bilder der Moderne*.
- 9 These theoretical trajectories will be elaborated on in the epilogue to this book. See the summer 1978 issue of *October* and the September 1976 edition of *Artforum*. To these we might also add the spring 1970 issue of *Aperture*, “French Primitive Photography,” a title that partially borrows from the title of Nadar’s essay “Les primitifs de photographie” in *Quand j’étais photographe*. See also Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock*, xxii; Sekula, “Neither Metaphysics nor Positivism”; Baldwin and Keller, *Nadar–Warhol, Paris–New York*.
- 10 Daston, “History of Science.”
- 11 On the dangers of reparative history replicating colonial metaphors, see Loveday, “Pioneer Paradigm.”
- 12 On Nadar’s self-portraits, see Lerner, *Experimental Self-Portraits*, 32–58.
- 13 On Nadar’s signatures, see Lerner, “Nadar’s Signatures.”
- 14 Where possible, I have elected to include quotations from existing English translations of primary sources. Where this wasn’t possible, translations from the French are my own. Nadar initially withdrew permission for his brother to use the name in 1855, an act which was

no doubt prompted by his establishment of his own photographic studio that same year. In response to Adrien continuing to sign “Nadar jeune” on his photographs, Nadar decided to bring a suit to the tribunal. After several judgements (on February 28 and April 22, 1856), the definitive ruling was made in favor of Nadar on December 12, 1857.

- 15 “Exposé de motifs pour la revendication de la propriété exclusive du pseudonyme Nadar. Mémoire adressé à MM. les membres du tribunal de Commerce de la Seine,” April 23, 1856, Fonds Nadar, YB3-2340, Box 9, Département des estampes et de la photographie, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.
- 16 “Mémoire adressé à MM. les membres du tribunal de Commerce de la Seine,” April 23, 1856, Fonds Nadar, YB3-2340, Box 9, 3.
- 17 As Jillian Lerner notes, we can see his name in bold capital letters in the title at the top, in smaller capital letters at the bottom of the dedication, and in the form of his signature at the bottom left. See Lerner, “Nadar’s Signatures,” 110.
- 18 “Lettre de G. Félix Tournachon (Nadar) à Paul Tournachons” (Letter from G. Félix Tournachon (Nadar) to Paul Tournachon), December 17, 1903, Papiers Nadar, NAF24992, f. 80; See also Lacoste, “Paul Nadar, l’ère de la modernité,” 49; Aubenais, Lacoste, and Roubert, “La maison n’a pas de succursale.”
- 19 See Batchen, *Burning with Desire*; Brunet, “Literary Prehistory of Photography”; Brunet, *La naissance de l’idée*; Gasser, “Histories of Photography 1839–1939”; McCauley, “Writing Photography’s History Before Newhall”; Siegel, *First Exposures*; Sheehan and Zervigon, *Photography and Its Origins*.
- 20 Siegel, “Afterword,” 404.
- 21 For a summary of recent approaches to the problem of media specificity in the nineteenth century, see Leonardi and Natale, *Photography and Other Media*.
- 22 On the evolution of the term *new media*, see Chun, “Did Somebody Say New Media?” Importantly for my argument here, Chun notes that, in the 1990s, the literature on new media often sidelined the commercial history of new media. On the newness of old media, see Gitelman and Pingree, *New Media, 1740–1915*; Gitelman, *Always Already New*; Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New*; Thorburn and Jenkins, *Rethinking Media Change*.
- 23 Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines*, 8.
- 24 Gitelman, *Always Already New*, 26.
- 25 Chun, “Did Somebody Say New Media?,” 3.

- 26 English translations from *Quand j'étais photographe* are from the 2015 translation by Eduardo Cadava and Liana Theodoratou. Nadar, *When I Was a Photographer*, 1–2.
- 27 Chun, “Did Somebody Say New Media?,” 3. In this regard, newness and firstness are inextricable from colonial modernity. On the use of history writing and the practice of “firsting” as a tool of colonization, see O’Brien, *Firsting and Lasting*.
- 28 See, in particular, McCauley, *Industrial Madness*; Nesbit, *Atget’s Seven Albums*.
- 29 Solomon-Godeau, “Calotypomania,” 4.
- 30 Edwards, “Why Pictures?”
- 31 Edwards, “Why Pictures?,” 1. I have written about the history of photography as a history of invention elsewhere; see Doucet, “In History, the Future.”
- 32 Edwards, “Why Pictures?,” 1.
- 33 In asking these questions, I am indebted to the work done by scholars such as Elizabeth Anne McCauley and Molly Nesbit. See McCauley, *Industrial Madness*; Nesbit, *Atget’s Seven Albums*.
- 34 The premise that archives shape how history is written has been the subject of much scholarship by both historians and archivists. For a summary of some of this work (with particular attention to the practices of working archivists), see Schwartz, “Archives, Records, and Power.” See also Azoulay, *Potential History*.

CHAPTER 1. COLLECTING THE IDEAS IN THE AIR:

THE FIRST AERIAL PHOTOGRAPH

- 1 See, for example, Cosgrove and Fox, *Photography and Flight*, 24–25; Dorrian and Poussin, *Seeing from Above*; Gervais, “Experimentations photographiques,” 52; Gervais, “Un basculement du regard”; Haffner, *View from Above*; Kaplan, *Aerial Aftermaths*; Newhall, *Airborne Camera*, 19–21, 30–33; Parks and Kaplan, *Drone Warfare*.
- 2 On the technical improbability of this early print, see Gervais, “Experimentations photographiques,” 52.
- 3 Schaffer, “Making up Discovery,” 16.
- 4 *Online Etymology Dictionary*, “Symptom,” by Harper Douglas, accessed October 28, 2024, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/symptom>.
- 5 See, for example, Begley, *Great Nadar*, 1–8, 123–52; Braive, “Nadar premier voyageur dans la lune,” 2–3.