Silencing the Past

Beacon Press Boston

Silencing the Past

Power and
the Production
of History

Michel-Rolph Trouillot

Beacon Press
Boston, Massachusetts
www.beacon.org

Beacon Press books
are published under the auspices of
the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.

Printed in the United States of America

Illustrations: Henry I, King of Haiti, courtesy Institut de Sauvegarde du Patrimoine National (ISPAN); Sans Souci–Milot, today, courtesy ISPAN; Sans Souci–Milot, a nineteenth-century engraving, courtesy ISPAN; Battle in Saint-Domingue, courtesy Fondation pour la Recherche Iconographique et Documentaire; Columbus's landing, courtesy Afriques en Création.

18 17 16 15 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Text design by Susan Hochbaum
Composition by Wilsted & Taylor

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Trouillot, Michel-Rolph.
Silencing the past : power and the production of history / Michel-Rolph Trouillot.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-8070-8053-5 (paperback : alk. paper)
1. Historicism. 2. Power (Philosophy). 3. Historiography. I. Title.
D16.9.T85 1995
901—dc20 95-17665
CIP

To the memory of my father,
Ernst Trouillot

To my mother,
Anne-Marie Morisset

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I am well aware
that by no means
equal repute
attends the narrator
and the doer of deeds.

Sallust
History of Catiline

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Contents

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Foreword

History is the fruit of power, but power itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots.

—Michel-Rolph Trouillot

It is the spring of 2013. The sun is streaming in through the windows of the Yale University Art Gallery where I am standing with a colleague, Laura Wexler. We're waiting for faculty and students to gather for a session we are about to teach in a new course for all students in the PhD program in American Studies: a practical forum on incorporating interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary methods, perspectives, and analyses into their scholarship. Two professors run the course, one an anthropologist and the other a historian. Laura and I are regarded as cultural-studies types, so following the sessions "In the Field" and " About the Archive," Laura and I are responsible for the session entitled "With the Texts." In the study gallery we are surrounded by the artwork on exhibit for our respective undergraduate courses that semester out of which we have each chosen one item for the graduate students in the research seminar to study. I have selected Ellen Gallagher's sixty-component print *Deluxe* (2004–2005), which dominates one entire wall; Laura has chosen a gorgeous gelatin silver print by An-My Lê, *Rescue, from the series Small Wars* (1999–2002).

What has Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* to do with these stunning works of art? Everything. When teaching in different spheres of knowledge and

across different geographies, it can be difficult for two faculty members to agree on a particular reading for a class they are teaching together. However, Laura and I agreed immediately and simultaneously that the one book we wanted all members of the seminar to read not just for our session but also to purchase for their own reading and rereading was *Silencing the Past.* Our objective was to make our students think across the problems of "the field," "the archive," and "the text"; to enable them to understand the politics of representation, the complexities and subtleties of the relation between what they were reading and seeing, and to comprehend the nature of that relation as a relation of power. For, as Trouillot argues, "Historical representations—be they books, commercial exhibits or public commemorations—cannot be conceived only as vehicles for the transmission of knowledge. They must establish some relation to that knowledge."

Many scholars have celebrated the contributions of Michel-Rolph Trouillot to the fields of anthropology and history, as well as to intellectual thought in Caribbean studies and to theories of globalization. I draw an anecdote from my classroom to stress that Trouillot's work has relevance, influence, and intellectual power beyond these disciplinary and critical frameworks. His forensic analysis of the four moments when silences enter the production of history reveals an entanglement of historicity with power that applies not only in the archives but also dominates the processes and practices by which pastness is authenticated, ratified, and organized into fields of knowledge. For Trouillot, history is always material; it begins with bodies and artifacts, agents, actors, and subjects. His emphasis on process, production, and narration looks to the many sites where history is produced: the academy, the media, and the mobilization of popular histories by a variety of participants.

What history *is* matters less to Trouillot than how history *works.* The production of historical narrative, he argues, should not be

studied as a mere chronology of its silences. In the pages of *Silencing the Past* we learn how to identify that what appears to be consensus actually masks a history of conflicts; we learn that silences appear in the interstices of these conflicts between narrators, past and present. There are many forms of pastness in *Silencing.* The book opens with an act of memory, which locates Trouillot in a very particular time and locale, a family, a community, a place: Haiti under the terror of the Duvaliers, where he learned that people can be "complaisant hostages of the pasts they create." It closes with Trouillot considering how "history works in a country with the lowest literacy rate on this side of the Atlantic," after witnessing an angry crowd taking a statue of Columbus and throwing it into the sea.

Silencing the Past has been required reading for my students since it was first published in 1995, and I refer to it continually in my own work. My only regret is that I never met Michel-Rolph Trouillot in person. But I have his words, his provocative questions, his insights, and they prick my conscience if I ever feel satisfied with just "imagin[ing] the lives under the mortar," remembering that Trouillot also asks how we "recognize the end of a bottomless silence."

What is at stake in pastness for Trouillot is the future, the process of becoming. *Silencing the Past* provides strategies for countering inequalities of power in knowledge of the past. We learn how scanty evidence can be repositioned to generate new narratives, how silences can be made to speak for themselves to confront inequalities of power in the production of sources, archives, and narratives. We need to make these silences speak and, in the process, lay claim to the future. For, as Trouillot warns, "While some of us debate what history is or was, others take it into their own hands."

—Hazel V. Carby

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Acknowledgments

I have carried this book in so many shapes and to so many places that in no way can I measure the debts accumulated along the way. My trail of paper and diskettes cannot adequately register why a particular scene became a *relievo* or when a particular argument became mine.

Time is not the only reason I cannot retrace all my debts: this book stands at the junction of emotive and intellectual communities that it straddles and unites without closure. Ernst and Hénock Trouillot influenced this project both during their lifetime and from beyond the grave in ways that are both transparent and intricate. I cannot date my interest in the production of history, but my first conscious marker is my perusal of the work they coauthored with Catts Pressoir, the first historiography book I read. They and other Haitian writers who preceded them are still privileged interlocutors at the boundaries of a custom-made intellectual community of relatives and friends I have in mind whatever I write. At the living center of that intellectual community, Michel Acacia, Pierre Buteau, Jean Coulanges, Lyonel Trouillot, Evelyne Trouillot-Ménard, and Drexel Woodson—who is too close to me and to Haiti not to be drafted into the family—have provided in-

spiration, comments, tips, and criticisms. I know that words are not enough, but *mèsi anpil.*

I started to write on the production of history as a distinct topic in 1981. Some of these writings found a transcontinental community of debate in 1985 when David W. Cohen asked me to join the International Roundtable in History and Anthropology. My involvement in the Roundtables, my continuous and fruitful exchanges with other participants, including David himself, influenced my grasp of some of the issues treated here. Both chapters 1 and 2 evolved in different ways from papers I originally prepared for the Fifth and Sixth International Roundtables, respectively held in Paris in 1986 and Bellagio in 1989.

Johns Hopkins University constitutes a third intellectual community that made this book possible. For the last six years, the Homewood campus provided my most demanding grounds for testing specific ideas: graduate and faculty seminars, and the most difficult audience to convince—students. Recurrent conversations in my theory classes, in the seminar on "The Perspective of the World," in the seminar in methodology in anthropology and history I taught with Sara Berry, and the general seminar of the Institute for Global Studies in Culture, Power and History helped me find the proper expression for many of the ideas exposed here. My colleague Sara S. Berry has been a generous intellectual companion, a stimulating source of ideas, and a sharp critic. Her formulations helped me to articulate some of my views. My colleagues in the Department of Anthropology during the years this book matured have been supportive friends and daily interlocutors: Eytan Bercovitch, Gillian Feeley-Harnik, Ashraf Ghani, Niloofar Haeri, Emily Martin, Sidney W. Mintz, Katherine Verdery, and, more recently, Yun-Xiang Yan. Sid's vast knowledge greatly improved chapter 4. Niloofar coached me on language matters, such as evidentials. Katherine commented on multiple versions

of various chapters. Brackette F. Williams moved in as I was nearly finished but early enough to make the usual difference, especially in chapter 5. For the third time we were neighbors; for the third time, the intellectual landscape changed.

I owe more to my students than they will ever know, the undergraduates from different classes and, especially, the Ph.D. candidates in anthropology and history who worked with me on issues that touched the production of history. Pamela Ballinger, April Hartfield, Fred Klaits, Kira Kosnick, Christopher McIntyre, Viranjini Munasinghe, Eric P. Rice, Hanan Sabea, and Nathalie Zacek are among those whose reactions to my ideas and specific comments on parts of this book forced me to revisit points I thought obvious.

Previous versions of parts of this book were published in *Public Culture* and the *Journal of Caribbean History.* I thank both publications for the opportunity of publishing these earlier articles and for the permission to reprint here. I also presented parts of this book in a number of academic settings: the International Roundtables in History and Anthropology, the conference "Révolution Haïtienne et Révolution Française" (Port-au-Prince, Haiti, 12 December 1989), and various seminars at Harvard, the University of Michigan, the University of Pennsylvania, and Johns Hopkins University. In each case, I benefited from stimulating discussions. David W. Cohen, Joan DeJean, Nancy Farriss, Dorothy Ross, Doris Sommer, Rebecca Scott, and William Rowe deserve special thanks for making these encounters both possible and fruitful. I also thank the institutions mentioned, as well as the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Paris, and the Max Plank Institut, Göttingen, which cosponsored the Roundtables.

A number of institutions provided support for the research, writing, and editing that went into this book: the National Humanities Center, the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, the

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and Johns Hopkins University. Special thanks to Charles Blitzer who was twice a gracious host.

A number of individuals worked closely with me on the final version. Elizabeth Dunn provided research assistance on memory and commented on chapter 1. Anne-Carine Trouillot's comments were useful throughout and her help was crucial to chapter 4. Rebecca Bennette, Nadève Ménard, and Hilbert Shin commented on various parts of the final draft and assisted me both in research and throughout the final writing and editing. I thank them for having not rebelled more often. Special thanks to Hilbert Shin for protecting my research time. Deb Chasman, my editor at Beacon Press, nurtured this book with care and attention. Her extraordinary patience, her contagious enthusiasm, and her close collaboration made its completion possible. To Wendy Strothman, Ken Wong, Tisha Hooks, and the rest of the Beacon team, thanks also for sharing that enthusiasm. Warm thanks to Marlowe Bergendoff for her sensitive copy editing.

Both within and beyond the boundaries of these overlapping communities of labor, interest, and emotion, a number of individuals stand out for different reasons. From a vague suggestion that turned into a great lead, from a carefully written comment to a newspaper clip, or a document they took the pains to unearth especially for me, they have made subtle yet significant differences in the outcome. Some of them I have not yet named. Others will suffer an additional mention. Arjun Appadurai, Pamela Ballinger, Sara Berry, Carol A. Breckenridge, Pierre Buteau, David W. Cohen, Joan Dayan, Patrick Delatour, Daniel Elie, Nancy Farriss, Fred Klaits, Peter Hulme, Richard Kagan, Albert Mangones, Hans Medick, Sidney W. Mintz, Viranjini Munasinghe, Michèle Oriol, J. G. A. Pocock, Eric P. Rice, Hanan Sabea, Louis Sala-Molins, Gerald Sider, Gavin Smith, John Thornton, Anne-Carine Trouillot, Lyonel Trouillot, Katherine Verdery, Ronald

Walters, and Drexel Woodson contributed to this book in various ways. Understandably, their input—and that of others—led to results they did not always intend.

I started these acknowledgments with family. I will also end there. My uncle, Lucien Morisset, provided a much-needed and idyllic retreat in Saint-Paul de Vence, where chapter 1 took definitive form and where the book finally emerged as a single whole. Anne-Carine and Canel Trouillot provided both the context of work and the context away from work. They added meaning to this and other ventures. I thank them for their presence and for mediating on the home front the pain and the perverse pleasure of writing in a second language.

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Preface

I grew up in a family where history sat at the dinner table. All his life, my father engaged in a number of parallel professional activities, none of which alone defined him, but most of which were steeped in his love of history. I was in my teens when he started a regular program on Haitian television that explored little-known details of the history of the country. That program rarely surprised me: the stories my dad told his audience were not different from those he told at home. I had catalogued some of them on the yellowed cards that embodied a massive biographical dictionary of Haitian history my father never finished. Later, in the class he taught in world history in my high school, I worked harder than my classmates to earn a passing grade. But his lectures, good as they were, never matched what I learned at home on Sundays.

Sunday afternoon was when my father's brother, my uncle Hénock, came to visit. He was one of the few people I knew who actually earned a living from knowing history. He was nominally the director of the National Archives, but writing was his true passion and he published historical research too fast for most readers to keep up with—in books, journals, and newspapers, at times his preferred medium. On Sundays, he tested his ideas on

my dad, for whom history was increasingly becoming only a favorite hobby as his law practice expanded. The brothers disagreed more often than not, in part because they genuinely saw the world quite differently, in part because the heat of their divergences, both political and philosophical, fueled their ceremonial of love.

Sunday afternoon was ritual time for the Trouillot brothers. History was their alibi for expressing both their love and their disagreements—with Hénock overplaying his bohemian side and my father stressing bourgeois rationality. They argued about long-dead figures, Haitian and foreign, the way one chats about neighbors—with the concerned distance that comes from knowing intimate details of the lives of people who are not family.

Were I not suspicious of obvious genealogies, I could claim this mixture of intimacy and distance, and the class, race, and gender positions that made it possible, as the central part of my intellectual heritage. But I have learned on my own that the point about such claims may be less what they assert than the fact of their assertion. Growing up who I was, I could not escape historicity, but I also learned that anyone anywhere with the right dosage of suspicion can formulate questions to history with no pretense that these questions themselves stand outside history.

Long before I read Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*, I knew intuitively that people can suffer from historical overdose, complaisant hostages of the pasts they create. We learned that much in many Haitian households at the peak of the Duvaliers' terror, if only we dared to look outside. Yet being who I am and looking at the world from there, the mere proposition that one could—or should—escape history seems to me either foolish or deceitful. I find it hard to harness respect for those who genuinely believe that postmodernity, whatever it may be, allows us to claim no roots. I wonder why they have convictions, if indeed they have any. Similarly, allegations that we have reached the end of his-

tory or that we are somewhat closer to a future when all pasts will be equal make me wonder about the motives of those who make such claims. I am aware that there is an inherent tension in suggesting that we should acknowledge our position while taking distance from it, but I find that tension both healthy and pleasant. I guess that, after all, I am perhaps claiming that legacy of intimacy and estrangement.

We are never as steeped in history as when we pretend not to be, but if we stop pretending we may gain in understanding what we lose in false innocence. Naiveté is often an excuse for those who exercise power. For those upon whom that power is exercised, naiveté is always a mistake.

This book is about history and power. It deals with the many ways in which the production of historical narratives involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production. The forces I will expose are less visible than gunfire, class property, or political crusades. I want to argue that they are no less powerful.

I also want to reject both the naive proposition that we are prisoners of our pasts and the pernicious suggestion that history is whatever we make of it. History is the fruit of power, but power itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots.

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Silencing the Past

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The Power in the Story

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This is a story within a story—so slippery at the edges that one wonders when and where it started and whether it will ever end. By the middle of February 1836, the army of general Antonio López de Santa Anna had reached the crumbling walls of the old mission of San Antonio de Valero in the Mexican province of Tejas. Few traces of the Franciscan priests who had built the mission more than a century before had survived the combined assaults of time and of a succession of less religious residents. Intermittent squatters, Spanish and Mexican soldiers, had turned the place into something of a fort and nicknamed it "the Alamo," from the name of a Spanish cavalry unit that undertook one of the many transformations of the crude compound. Now, three years after Santa Anna first gained power in independent Mexico, a few English-speaking squatters occupied the place, refusing to surrender to his superior force. Luckily for Santa Anna, the squatters were outnumbered—at most 189 potential fighters—and the structure itself was weak. The conquest would be easy, or so thought Santa Anna.

The conquest was not easy: the siege persisted through twelve days of cannonade. On March 6, Santa Anna blew the horns that Mexicans traditionally used to announce an attack to the death.

Later on that same day, his forces finally broke through the fort, killing most of the defenders. But a few weeks later, on April 21, at San Jacinto, Santa Anna fell prisoner to Sam Houston, the freshly certified leader of the secessionist Republic of Texas.

Santa Anna recovered from that upset; he went on to be four more times the leader of a much reduced Mexico. But in important ways, he was doubly defeated at San Jacinto. He lost the battle of the day, but he also lost the battle he had won at the Alamo. Houston's men had punctuated their victorious attack on the Mexican army with repeated shouts of "Remember the Alamo! Remember the Alamo!" With that reference to the old mission, they doubly made history. As actors, they captured Santa Anna and neutralized his forces. As narrators, they gave the Alamo story a new meaning. The military loss of March was no longer the end point of the narrative but a necessary turn in the plot, the trial of the heroes, which, in turn, made final victory both inevitable and grandiose. With the battle cry of San Jacinto, Houston's men reversed for more than a century the victory Santa Anna thought he had gained in San Antonio.

Human beings participate in history both as actors and as narrators. The inherent ambivalence of the word "history" in many modern languages, including English, suggests this dual participation. In 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." The first meaning places the emphasis on the sociohistorical process, the second on our knowledge of that process or on a story about that process.

If I write "The history of the United States begins with the Mayflower," a statement many readers may find simplistic and controversial, there will be little doubt that I am suggesting that the first significant event in the process that eventuated in what we now call the United States is the landing of the Mayflower. Consider now a sentence grammatically identical to the preceding

one and perhaps as controversial: "The history of France starts with Michelet." The meaning of the word "history" has unambiguously shifted from the sociohistorical process to our knowledge of that process. The sentence affirms that the first significant narrative about France was the one written by Jules Michelet.

Yet the distinction between what happened and that which is said to have happened is not always clear. Consider a third sentence: "The history of the United States is a history of migration." The reader may choose to understand both uses of the word history as emphasizing the sociohistorical process. Then, the sentence seems to suggest that the fact of migration is the central element in the evolution of the United States. But an equally valid interpretation of that sentence is that the best narrative about the United States is a story of migrations. That interpretation becomes privileged if I add a few qualifiers: "The true history of the United States is a history of migrations. That history remains to be written."

Yet a third interpretation may place the emphasis on the sociohistorical process for the first use of the word "history" and on knowledge and narrative for its second use in the same sentence, thus suggesting that the best narrative about the United States is one of which migration is the central theme. This third interpretation is possible only because we implicitly acknowledge an overlap between the sociohistorical process and our knowledge of it, an overlap significant enough to allow us to suggest, with varying degree of metaphorical intent, that the history of the United States is a story of migrations. Not only can history mean either the sociohistorical process or our knowledge of that process, but the boundary between the two meanings is often quite fluid.

The vernacular use of the word history thus offers us a semantic ambiguity: an irreducible distinction and yet an equally irreducible overlap between what happened and that which is said to have happened. Yet it suggests also the importance of context: the

overlap and the distance between the two sides of historicity may not be susceptible to a general formula. The ways in which what happened and that which is said to have happened are and are not the same may itself be historical.

Words are not concepts and concepts are not words: between the two are the layers of theory accumulated throughout the ages. But theories are built on words and with words. Thus it is not surprising that the ambiguity offered by the vernacular use of the word history has caught the attention of many thinkers since at least antiquity. What is surprising is the reluctance with which theories of history have dealt with this fundamental ambiguity. Indeed, as history became a distinguishable profession, theorists have followed two incompatible tendencies. Some, influenced by positivism, have emphasized the distinction between the historical world and what we say or write about it. Others, who adopt a "constructivist" viewpoint, have stressed the overlap between the historical process and narratives about that process. Most have treated the combination itself, the core of the ambiguity, as if it were a mere accident of vernacular parlance to be corrected by theory. What I hope to do is to show how much room there is to look at the production of history outside of the dichotomies that these positions suggest and reproduce.

One-sided Historicity

Summaries of intellectual trends and subdisciplines always shortchange the various authors they somewhat compulsively regroup. I do not even attempt such a regrouping here. I hope that the following sketch is sufficient to show the limitations that I question.[1]

Positivism has a bad name today, but at least some of that scorn is well deserved. As history solidified as a profession in the nine-