



Silencing the Past

Michel-Rolph Trouillot

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Placing the West's failure to acknowledge the most successful slave revolt in history alongside denials of the Holocaust and the debate over the Alamo, Michel-Rolph Trouillot offers a stunning meditation on how power operates in the making and recording of history.

Silencing the Past Details

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Author : Michel-Rolph Trouillot

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From Reader Review Silencing the Past for online ebook

William says

This book was not really what I expected it to be. Rather than an account of the Haitian revolution this is book an explanation of specific events within the revolution and how the history of the revolution came to be what it is today. A history of history, this book requires more background knowledge about certain historical events than I possess and for that reason I have not rated this book by stars because I struggled to completely grasp the true value of what Trouillot has to say. Nonetheless, I think what is accomplished in this book is very interesting. I have not read many books about the way history is written and it is an important subject to understand before one can ever really hope to understand history itself. This book to will appeal to those interested in history and will perhaps change one's perspective on whatever history one has learned.

Ryan says

Trouillot's work admirably dissects how the work of crafting history is inherently couched in deep historical processes, and that both the producers and consumers of all forms of historical reproductions should understand the inherent silences within the sources, archives, and narratives of history.

Kobe Bryant says

I believe Chuck D said it best, "History shouldn't be a mystery, our story's real history, not his story"

Nicky says

This was a great introduction to historiography. Its discussion on myth making in history, using Columbus as an example, was especially intriguing.

Baris says

By today's standards, Silencing the Past may not have very original argument. Here Trouillot claims that each historical narrative no matter how fact oriented they are, always engages with the power (or hegemony) in the presence of the commentator (this include not only writers but also politicians, artists etc). Thus, accordingly, commentators always silence some part of the past without necessarily distorting the facts. Through this simple argument (presence of the past in the present), Trouillot gets behind the constructionist vs. positivist divide in the field (such divide arguably is already old-fashioned by 2016, but I guess it was not the case in 1994). Yet more important than the argument itself, I think this book deserves to be read for the beauty of its language and the way the writer describes his personal (Trouillot the anthropologist) and

collective (Trouillot the Haitian) encounters with past. Overall a recommended read.

Bobby Petricini says

An interesting view on how history is produced (or not produced). A must read for historians.

Denise M. says

This is a book for scholars of history and public history, so it's not a casual read. That said, I wish I had read it twenty years ago. Trouillot's analogies and use of layered stories explain the complexity of memory and history in ways that are both insightful and incredibly useful to me as a professor and public historian. It's one of those books in which I highlighted too many passages, and to which I will return again and again.

Minna says

Another book read for a history class (this one for Theory) but - wow. I suddenly wish I hadn't rented this book; it's packed full of so much that's interesting. About the way history is created, and the silences that enter into it at various stages of that process, of course. But also a lot about the responsibility of the historian and the historicity of the present. Trouillot writes poetically: there's something literary and lovely about the italicized introductions to each chapter, and the book becomes, in places, almost memoir-like as he discusses himself as a historian and a Haitian; he also writes with a lot of clarity and insight as he examines the historiography of slavery and colonialism in the Americas and the practice of history-writing. There's a precision and an intention to his writing, both structurally and at the level of phrasing, that lends a lot of power to the book as a whole. It's just so *invigorating* to read, and often perspective-shifting for this US-born history student. And it really reinforces: history isn't written in a vacuum. History, for that matter, doesn't happen in a vacuum.

Pamela J says

One of the most intellectually stimulating and influential reads. How did it take me 18 years to stumble across and read this slim yet important volume? Up there with Hayden White, Edward Said, and Michel Foucault as a text of "ahs!" and "Yeses!" I read The first three in grad school, and have returned often to their texts. Trouillot, read by my older self, breaks down the historiographic process, demonstrating how contexts, values, and, of course, power shape what ensues as historical narrative and as History.

ivan says

Main points: Historians should own up to their own role in (re)producing history and power relationships. Representation can never replicate the context of the event, but unsilencing is important to prevent things from becoming shrines rather than historical sites.

Paul says

This is one of the ten best books I've read in my life. I can't believe I'd never heard of it until now. The author's thesis is that history consists of two parts: what happened and the narrative of what happened. The latter is what determines the current consensus view.

The book argues that one of the most important events in human history, the slave revolt in Haiti that led briefly to a black-led government, has been virtually forgotten because those who write history (typically white Western men) have found it unthinkable that a group of black slaves could revolt, overturn a government, and establish a modern working state of free citizens. The prevailing narrative of blacks' abilities, intellect, characteristics has always operated on the unverbalized assumption that the black race is inferior in intellect to the white race. Thus, it has been unthinkable to the Western mind that black slaves could revolt and establish an enlightened government. Because of that unthinkability, the historical fact of the slave revolt in Haiti has been continuously silenced by what has been written and not written about it through history.

The revolt and defeat of the French was actually what stopped France from making further incursions into the Western hemisphere and the reason France sold the Louisiana Purchase to the United States. More French soldiers were killed in the Haitian revolt than died at Waterloo.

This is a profound and brilliant book. At first I thought it was over my head, but the more I read the more I understood. The very idea that history is prescribed by those in power is brilliant. The author details the elaborate means by which various European states (and later, the United States as well) refashioned Christopher Columbus to represent things that he had no idea he would be representing while he was alive. The entire IDEA of Christopher Columbus is a series of public-relations gestures by various nations and cultures to claim him as their historical forebear.

This book will transform your understanding of history as narrative.

Nicholas Seider says

This book has completely changed how I look at history. My previous framework for observing the past has been dismantled, and a new one is being built in its place. I will forever study and write history differently. A must read for anyone interested in history.

Stephen Matlock says

This is an excellent book, for many reasons.

First, it's a book about the history of the Western Hemisphere (mostly), centering on Haiti and San Souci, and then upon Columbus.

Second, it's a book about how history is determined. It's not just a compendium of facts. History is developed

and managed based upon certain facts and upon the suppression of other certain facts.

Third, it's a book about what history means, how facts are presented or suppressed, what the history of that history is.

Fourth, it is simply an excellently written book. The language is crisp and accurate, the thought advances at a smooth but swift state, and the author is present in every paragraph and word. There is no hesitancy or evasiveness.

I enjoyed this book. It's a history book, but I enjoyed it.

Ashley says

"Is history real?" That is a question I asked one of my academic advisers several years ago in the midst of some soul-searching about just why I was writing the thesis I wrote. Oh how I wish I'd know about Trouillot then! This book doesn't suggest that history is (or isn't) real. Rather,

Trouillot's book is about the practice, process, negotiation, and meaning of History. Trouillot moves far beyond the "history is written by the victors" cliche to discuss just how those "victors" create, archive, recall, and describe/narrate "facts."

The chapters on the evolution of Columbus Day and Disney's plans to build a US-history theme park are especially fascinating. In these chapters, Trouillot's arguments about how The Past and present are codependent are clearest and, for me at least, the most accessible.

Alternately meditative, scholarly, and theoretical, this book requires sustained attention and effort to fully process. Trouillot is writing to an academic audience and assumes a degree of familiarity with literary theory, post-modernism, and other subjects.

Linda says

History is composed of what happened and what is said to have happened. In the production of history there are silences at every stage. Trouillot argues eloquently that these silences are determined by power. He illustrates his argument with the Haitian revolution, Columbus and the holocaust as examples.

Josh says

Brilliantly written. Insightful way beyond the case of Haiti...

Chris says

Trouillet isn't writing for a mass-market audience, but he manages to be readable so that a relative lay-person as myself who hasn't been in accademia for almost a decade didn't feel too excluded. The book looks at how

the Haitian revolution has been marginalized, misrepresented, or more often entirely silenced. Trouillot contrasts this to the rise of Columbus Day, where a minor (or most likely even non-existent) event became central to American mythos within the last century. Very thoughtful, challenging, and important.

Lauren says

Can the citizens of Quebec whose license plates proudly state "I remember" (Je me souviens) actually retrieve memories of the French colonial state? ...the collective subjects, who supposedly "remember", did not exist as such at the time of the events that they claim to remember. Rather, their constitution as subjects goes hand-in-hand with continuous creation of the past.

Starting with a pretty tame example of Quebec, Professor Trouillot goes on to broaden his examples, most specifically a comparative analysis of slavery in the Americas, specifically in his native Haiti and its revolution against French colonialism in the early 19th century, and what was happening in the US and Europe at this same point in time. Trouillot provides further context of this "continuous creation of the past" by studying Holocaust denial, history of Texas and the Alamo, and later delves into Christopher Columbus.

The fact that I did both undergrad and graduate level history and archival studies (including a seminar on Atlantic/Caribbean history) and didn't encounter this book until now (22 years after original publication!) is a problem - and it further underlines the premise of the book. However, a quick Google search - and other Goodreads reviews of many others who read this in a classroom - gives me hope, and also shows that even after decades, this book remains important scholarship in historiography.

What we often call the legacy of the past may not be anything bequeathed by the past itself.

Paula says

I found *Silencing the Past* (published in 1995) both fascinating and illuminating, still new, while at the same time anchored in the scholarly discourse of the 1990s. Since the January, 2010 earthquake in Haiti, Trouillot's book seems to have appeared on every bookseller's recommended shelf. But I wonder why I didn't know about or read it fifteen years ago. Back then, I was a graduate student in English. Although my focus was Creative Writing, I had a special interest in what was/is called postcolonial literature and theory. Trouillot was not on my reading list in 1998, however, at least not at Sonoma State University. Although he talks about particular events (the Haitian Revolution, Columbus's landfall in the Bahamas in 1492) and historical characters (Christophe, Sans Souci, Columbus), the author's primary concern here is with the production of history and the relation of power to that production with its consequential silences: "Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance)."

Trouillot's stance is neither that of the positivist nor the constructivist. He states rather that "Whereas the

positivist view hides the tropes of power behind a naive epistemology, the constructivist one denies the autonomy of the sociohistorical process.” He rejects “both the naive proposition that we are prisoners of our pasts and the pernicious suggestion that history is whatever we make it. History is the fruit of power, but power itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous.”

I particularly appreciated and remain intrigued by Trouillot’s reminders to his readers regarding the materiality of history, “that history begins with bodies and artifacts: living brains, fossils, texts, buildings” as well as his discussion of the “ethical differences between scholars and intellectuals.” *Silencing the Past* is nothing less than (and what could be better?) a thought-provoking read.

Dusty says

If Marx, Foucault, and Howard Zinn wrote a book together, it would probably look something like Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s *Silencing the Past*. This isn’t a slur, though; as you can tell from my five-star rating, I obviously appreciated the book, its author’s cobbled personal reflections plus broader historical claims, and its humanity. Part of me wonders why this book isn’t as well known (at least in my literary circles) as, say, Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* or Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, but I guess I already know the answer: Usually when people want to learn about the nineteenth century and the consolidation of Althusserian “ideological apparatuses” like the school, the prison, the concept of nationality, or the field of history, they’d rather read about white American and European countries than about Haiti. I suppose it’s true that in the fifteen years since this book’s publication several of Trouillot’s claims have become so mainstreamed they read a bit like clichés. You probably already know that Columbus Day celebrations vaunt a celebrity Columbus the 15th century wouldn’t have recognized. You probably already know that comparatively enfranchised people are more likely to leave traces of their purchases, their properties, their marriages, etc., than their disenfranchised comrades, and thus the history of any society tends to be the history of that society’s rich and educated. Still, you should read the book for its methodological framework, its author’s diary-like chapter-starters, and plenty of other reasons. Very highly recommended.
