

History 007: The History of U.S.-Latin American Relations  
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations.— Chentian (Lionel) Jin

*Silencing the Past* by Michel-Rolph Trouillot—A Revolutionary History

by Chentian (Lionel) Jin

In what may be one of the most dramatic revolutions in history, a group of black slaves rose up against their colonial masters, fought off Napoleon's army and established the first state led by freed slaves—Haiti. The Haitian Revolution of 1791–1804 shook the world, challenging the prevailing worldview of scientific racism and altering the geopolitical landscape as the French withdrew from the Western Hemisphere. Remarkably, for two entire centuries, the story of this revolution was little told. In cases when it was told, it was relegated to a mere sideshow in the Age of Revolutions, an aberration in a larger narrative dominated by white peoples. In *Silencing the Past*, anthropologist and historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot peels apart the layers of silences surrounding the Haitian Revolution. He presents a compelling account of how power influences the telling of history, raising important questions about historical narratives that have been taken for granted.

History is defined not just by what is told but also by what is silenced, Trouillot writes. He points to the story of San Souci, the former slave turned general who chose to continue resisting the French when fellow revolutionary leaders Henry Christophe and Toussaint Louverture chose submission, but who was killed and subsequently written out of Haitian history by Christophe, later King of Haiti. Power is intricately tied to the production of these silences, Trouillot tells us, for silencing is an active act: “One ‘silences’ a fact or an individual as a silencer silences a gun” (p. 48). By influencing the way in which events are recorded, the

compilation of these records into archives, the writing of narratives, and ultimately the reading of these narratives, power determines how “what happened” translates into “what is said to have happened.”

Trouillot illustrates these silences and sets about deconstructing them in the subsequent chapters of the book. While he relies predominantly on secondary sources and on sources that were already available to historians, he provides a refreshing perspective by putting forward new narratives around known facts or alternative interpretations of the significance of established narratives. In “The Three Faces of San Souci,” Trouillot uses the story of this forgotten general to illustrate the factional strife within the Haitian revolutionaries. By doing so, he breathes life into these characters, transforming what was once a faceless, monolithic entity in the reader’s mind into a spirited group of individuals, each with their own voice. At the same time, this story challenges the high regard in which Haitians have held these revolutionary leaders, suggesting that a more nuanced view may be needed. In “An Unthinkable History,” Trouillot turns to the broader silencing of the Haitian Revolution in Western historiography. He explains this silence by observing the “unthinkable” nature of this revolution in a world deeply prejudiced against the black race, resulting in gross distortions in how the events were recorded in sources and in how narratives were later built around these sources. In “Good Day, Columbus,” Trouillot describes the Americanization of Columbus’s persona that allowed him to serve as a Yankee hero and also the relabeling of what could well be called an “invasion” as “the discovery of America.” These are just two instances where historical persons and events have been appropriated to suit the purposes of the narrator, and the reader is led to ponder what the silencing of conflicting viewpoints and the complexities of history means for us as we seek to understand our own history.

“Unthinkable History,” the third chapter, is where Trouillot is at his strongest. In his hands, the magnitude of this thundering silence hits home, as the reader comes to understand the enormous significance of this revolution and cries out against the injustice of this glaring omission. Drawing his evidence from government documents and speeches preserved in the French Parliamentary Archives as well as the words of French planters as recorded by other historians, Trouillot tells us that the Haitian Revolution was unthinkable because it did not fit into the world view of Western observers. Invoking the writings of Enlightenment thinkers such as Diderot, Trouillot observes that the ideas of the Age of Reason were essentially Eurocentric, even as they laid claim to universality. Scientific racism flourished, and the place of blacks was firmly set at the very bottom of this ladder of humanity (p. 77). That an inferior and obedient people could conceive of rebellion and organize themselves effectively, let alone defeat superior French troops simply could not be reconciled with the framework of Western thought, and Trouillot highlights that this led to a powerful silencing at the source. The recording of these unthinkable events was initially marked by a vehement denial that mass rebellion was actually taking place. When denial became impossible, the making of “facts” was distorted in a way that played down the role of the slaves and invoked the role of white actors—planters seeking to put pressure on France, non-slave conspirators, outside agitators. Trouillot empathetically rejects these “old conspiracy theories,” portraying the revolutionary generals as independent minded leader who were fighting for concrete improvements in their lives rather than abstract demands of freedom. Trouillot’s case is all the more convincing in light of studies looking at the communication systems in slave Haiti. Slaves who served as slave drivers or coachmen took

advantage of their positions to connect with slaves working elsewhere, permitting slaves spread across distant plantations to mobilize as one.<sup>1</sup>

This silencing at the source has been reinforced by silencing in the construction and interpretation of narratives about the Haitian Revolution. Two centuries might have passed, but Trouillot highlights the disturbing parallels between Western narratives, past and present. How could an entire revolution be silenced, one might wonder. Trouillot suggests that the answer lies in erasure and banalization. Western observers conveniently excluded this aberration when building their narratives about the Age of Revolutions, and when they did discuss events in Haiti, they looked to explain individual events as such, trivializing the issue and burying the larger revolutionary narrative. “The joint effect of these two types of formulas is a powerful silencing: whatever has not been cancelled out in the generalities dies in the cumulative irrelevance of a heap of details.” (p. 97).

In trying to make a forceful argument for his case, Trouillot might have oversimplified the way in which whites perceived slaves. The possibility of a slave revolution was far from “unthinkable” for many whites, argues historian Robert Paquette.<sup>2</sup> Ada Ferrer, professor at New York University specializing on slavery in the nineteenth-century Atlantic World goes further, writing that “everyone seemed to be talking and thinking about events in Saint-Domingue” in the days surrounding the revolution.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the prevailing racist beliefs that tinted the lenses through which the black peoples of Haiti were viewed certainly meant that whites failed to grasp the essence of this uprising: a bold statement by Haitian slaves asserting their equality to their former slave masters and their right to pursue a life free of oppression.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 38.

<sup>2</sup> Robert L. Paquette, “Review of *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. by Michel-Rolph Trouillot,” *The Journal of American History* 84, no. 1 (June 1, 1997): 189–90, doi:10.2307/2952745.

<sup>3</sup> Ada Ferrer, “Talk about Haiti,” in *Haitian History*, ed. Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 140.

The reader may ask why Haitians have not managed to tell their side of the story. Power lies at the heart of the answer. Ostracized by foreign countries reluctant to accept the reality of an independent slave state and splintered by internal strife, the crown jewel of France's colonial empire fell into a deep economic and political decline.<sup>4</sup> Haiti became irrelevant to Western observers, "an improbability in an awkward past and for which no one had a rational explanation." (p. 98). Haitians themselves had pressing issues to confront, and it is remarkable that the first non-fiction of the revolution written in Haitian Creole was only written in 1977<sup>5</sup>.

This book was written by Trouillot himself. Born in Port-au-Prince in 1949, he witnessed firsthand the aftermath of the American occupation of 1915–1934 and the deep-set prejudices about the Haitian people. Shaped by this personal connection yet proceeding with a learned discipline and tact, Trouillot delivers a powerful account of this "unthinkable history," turning reader into firm converts. The weight of the contextual evidence makes it impossible to conclude otherwise.

While initially received to mixed reviews, *Silencing the Past* has established itself as a seminal work not just in Haitian history but also in the study of history itself. *Silencing* has had a major influence on scholarly work. With nearly two thousand citations listed on Google Scholar as of October 2014, it has acquired a status that few contemporary books in the humanities and social sciences have attained. Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, scholar in Haitian and European history, highlights the tremendous increase in interest in the Haitian Revolution among academics in the Anglophone world since the publication of this book and the resulting

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<sup>4</sup> Mary A. Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 47–53.

<sup>5</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Ti difé boulé sou istoua ayiti* (Kólleksion Lakensièl, 1977).

consensus that it must be included in any narrative of the Atlantic Revolutions.<sup>6</sup> The clear, engaging style that Trouillot writes in has also made the book accessible to the general reader. This book has been assigned in universities across the United States, with professors lauding its ability to elegantly capture complex ideas of how the past translates into what we know as history even as it exposes students to an important historical event that most people still have only a vague idea of.

Even as Trouillot discusses the history of the Haitian Revolution, readers will walk away asking profound questions about their own histories. Trouillot shows us that history is by nature complex and multi-faceted, yet it is tempting to celebrate a glorified version of the past and to silence events and viewpoints that refuse to fit into this cogent narrative. In France, the Haitian Revolution remains to this day little discussed, with the French preferring to conveniently forget their involvement with slavery. In Haiti, figures such as Christophe, Louverture and Dessalines continue to be held up uncritically, their failings going unexamined. Whoever we are, wherever we come from, a look back at our history in the light of *Silencing the Past* reveals numerous portraits of people or events that are too good to be true. Deconstructing the silences that surround them may be hard work; it will also likely be painful. Yet, readers of Trouillot will conclude that this is an endeavor that we must undertake for the simple reason that the truth matters to us. Whitewashing the wrongs of the past may offer temporary relief. It is however only the honest facing up to history that frees a people from glancing nervously back at the ghosts of the past, and that empowers them to turn their attention to the future while drawing on the lessons that history has to offer. In a striking illustration of this principle, it was precisely Germany's atonement for the atrocities committed during the Second World War that served not

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<sup>6</sup> Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, "Still Unthinkable?: The Haitian Revolution and the Reception of Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past*," *Journal of Haitian Studies* 19, no. 2 (2013): 75–103, doi:10.1353/jhs.2013.0036.

just to promote reconciliation with its neighbors but also to help its people move on from the past.<sup>7</sup>

Besides, the Haitian Revolution clearly demonstrated that while planters and intellectuals had the power to force this unthinkable event into their desired narrative, this self-deception prevented them from dealing effectively with the growing unrest, contributing to their eventual defeat. Building a sanitized narrative of history may help us avoid questioning the worldviews that we cling on to, even when they are deeply flawed. But Trouillot's book suggests that this silencing will ultimately come back to haunt us. This lesson has a special resonance when we look back upon the numerous upheavals that have caught us off guard in recent decades—the Iranian Revolution, the Arab Spring, the rise of the Islamic State. In each of these cases, the Western world was blindsided by events that few imagined were possible due to our deeply flawed interpretation of the situation on the ground. If we had tried stepping into the shoes of the people in those countries and looking at events from their perspective, might we have been able to construct a more faithful narrative and thus acted in a timelier manner to address the situation?

Ultimately, we have to recognize that “any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences,” for in constructing a narrative, we actively decide what to include, and what to leave out. Yet, Trouillot leaves us with the important idea that “not all silences are equal.” (p. 27). What are the deafening silences that permeate our narratives today and how do we go about deconstructing them? *Silencing* does not provide all the answers, but it suggests a promising place to start: a critical examination of how history is produced and the complex ways in which power generates silences. Giving voice to these silences will empower us to develop a deeper understanding of the past and to more vigorously engage the future.

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<sup>7</sup> Stephen Van Evera, “Primed for Peace: Europe after the Cold War,” *International Security* 15, no. 3 (December 1, 1990): 7–57, doi:10.2307/2538906.

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