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A Review of Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*

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In times when history is made every day of the year and previously understood precedents are made irrelevant, a dedicated reading of *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Trouillot) presents itself as an opportunity of ultimate reckoning for eras when social media could not bear witness to the plight of everyday people. Trouillot expertly brings to the table a criticism of the perception of historical events and who gets to discuss them. He relays the details of each event, such as the brainstorming sessions of a nationalistic Disney Park, in a way that helpfully accustoms the reader to the concept of silencing. “Silencing” as a historiographical concept involves the active erasure of histories not in alignment with

the prevailing narratives of supremacy and conquest. He also sheds light on the often-referenced discoveries made by Columbus, the convoluted perceptions of the Alamo, doubts regarding the common understanding of the Holocaust, and the legacy of the Haitian Revolution. This work is groundbreaking through the author’s curated highlighting of where silences occur, when many historians have decided against deviating from the known narrative. Trouillot forces the reader to confront the destructive nature inherent in popular, sanitized narratives and the power they can hold over generations of people. First published in 1995, *Silencing the Past*- long appreciated by historians from all focuses- is a primer in contemplative historiographical analysis and is conscious of the necessity of its own existence.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot, himself a Haitian historian, places lesser-known details about the Haitian Revolution as the strongest examples of historic silences in this text; the author presents the ulterior meanings behind the name of Henry I’s glorious palace, Sans Souci- literally translated from the Haitian and French languages as ‘carefree’ (Trouillot 36), but also the name of a man killed by the king himself. Sans Souci was an essential influence during the Revolution, yet Trouillot acknowledges that it is only his death, which is widely remembered, and allows the reader to infer that Henry I could have considered the palace’s name an ultimate force of power over the strong will of one who defied him. He argues that the disconnect between Sans Souci and the lack of a written legacy following him proves a clear engagement of silencing through chosen, decisive exclusion (Trouillot 48) to produce a more straightforward history (Trouillot 49). Trouillot

also distinguishes between specific cultural techniques for remembering and understanding the past, and the Western historiographical conventions that can destroy it (55).

In order to help his readers better understand the surprise that was the Haitian Revolution on behalf of the colonists, Trouillot provides a condensed timeline of the “othering” of black people during the onset of global trade and assertion of dominance through the establishment of new civilizations (74-75). For some readers, this move proves to be the first time they encounter a straightforward explanation as to the roots of racism as it is known in the Western world, and Trouillot effectively posits for the reader the frequent moral contradictions present amongst those in power, who valued both freedom and enslavement with few consequences (78). He excels in describing the formulation of oppression and accurately follows the logical lines drawn between cause and effect; the author puts into words the ultimate realization that silences are often created in history when those in power refuse to admit that the systems over which they preside are imbalanced and discriminatory (Trouillot 84).

Regarding both the aforementioned events and others contained in *Silencing the Past*, the author’s strength lies in his profound arguments, clearly delivered with a thoughtful prose that engages his supporting sources- ones which are highly varied and acknowledge the struggling majority of historical actors. Not only does he consider opinions and interpretations from other historians, he actively analyzes primary documents and interacts with communities currently carrying the legacy of these stories with them and sharing them with the world, in whatever ways they

believe is best (Trouillot 159, note 11). The conjunction of passive and active understanding of events through a historical lens presents itself as a complete effort, one that is not always appreciated as a standard for academia. Trouillot’s historiographical Marxism breathes into the lungs of this misaligned power and exhales a clarified justification for distrusting popular narratives. The reader of this text would be hard-pressed to close its pages and not marvel at the vast manipulation of the human race through active, curated silencing of their own suffering and struggles. This proves the essential category *Silencing the Past* finds itself in and explains why its contemplation is paramount for a broader understanding of history.

The main weakness of this work is the somewhat unfocused arrangement of examples Trouillot employs in order to prove his point regarding these silences present in the legacies of history. Each example is undoubtedly important and thought-provoking when isolated, but it stands to reason that the obvious strength of this book- his exploration surrounding lesser-known details of the establishment of Haiti and its incredible Revolution- should have been made instead of the main example for identifying silences in all other narratives. The legacy and complexity of Haiti’s history seems out of place when sharing pages, however thought-provoking in nature, with a discussion of a Disney Park (Trouillot ch.5). Perhaps this variety of somewhat disjointed examples could find a more appropriate flow if the text did not suffer from a disappointing shortness of pages; each topic begs for an even deeper dive into its material as the author’s writing proves itself to be a fresh respite amongst both power-narratives and detailed profiles of white winners as its peers.

A compositional difficulty presents itself when approaching the formulation of proper urgency to convey to an audience in the way of a recommendation; the most appropriate attitude is indeed an urgent one, as the concept of misunderstood historical undercurrents is not frequently considered by students. To skip this book would be a mistake, despite some potential head-scratching regarding topical connections; all chapters of this book contain hard-hitting truths worth more than a moment’s reflection. Those whose interest is piqued regarding the legacy of the Haitian Revolution have a breadth of newer scholarship to explore; Trouillot left an impressive precedent with *Silencing the Past* that inspired a new generation of scholars to take up the mantle and fill in silences where possible. (*The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* by Julius S. Scott is a notably recent addition.) Navigating the realm of reformulation and representation of maligned narratives with an educated deftness, Trouillot’s classic work stands out as timeless against a backdrop of frequently formulaic texts, both watered-down and hyper-specific alike, and remains alive and relevant in an age of globally involved struggles against racism and classism.

Works Cited

Scott, Julius S. 2018. *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution*. Brooklyn: Verso Books.

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About the Author

Amber Shannon is currently pursuing her MA in History with a public history concentration at Salem State University. Her review was completed in the fall of 2020 under the mentorship of Dr. Christopher Mauriello. Along with writing, Amber aspires to participate in the preservation and interpretation of parks and house museums in New England upon graduation with her master’s degree.