

Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995), xix + 191 (Beacon Press, Boston, \$22.00).

Horace Pippin, apparently, used light very differently from most artists. While others usually start with a white canvas and then gradually fill it with colour and shade, Pippin started by coating his canvas with black paint and then added lighter colours on top. This gave his paintings a heavily layered texture, providing a sense (intended or otherwise) that there was something lying beneath the surface image. For an artist who, among other things, wanted to reveal the hypocrisies underlying American propaganda in the World Wars (fighting against intolerance abroad, condoning lynching at home), this approach may have seemed most fitting.¹

In his beautifully written and engaging work, accessible to scholars and students alike, Michel-Rolph Trouillot does something similar with history, working in an opposite direction from that of most historians and social scientists. While most scholars start with what they 'know', the information they have gathered, and build from there, Trouillot starts with silence – and the related assumption that where there is silence there must also be silencing, the muffling of noise. Any historical narrative, he suggests, is 'a particular bundle of silences', and incorporated within each 'bundle' is a process of silencing others that might otherwise drown it out in cacophony. The result in Trouillot's hands is a text that lies 'between truth and fiction', reminiscent of a Michelle Cliff or Toni Morrison novel.²

To illustrate this process of silencing at work, Trouillot provides a new reading of events in Haiti at the turn of the nineteenth century, focusing on the silences beneath the histories of the revolution. These revolve around 'the three faces of Sans Souci', the African-born slave who

¹ Judith Wilson, 'Scenes of war' in Judith E. Stein (ed.), *I Tell My Heart: The Art of Horace Pippin* (Philadelphia, 1994), 56–69.

² For example, Michelle Cliff, *Free Enterprise* (New York, 1994) or Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New

York, 1987) and *Jazz* (New York, 1992). *Free Enterprise* deals very specifically in the 'silences' Trouillot is describing. I am grateful to Rajeswari Mohan for this observation.

led a faction against and was killed by Henri Christophe, the palace given that name (for obscure reasons) by the victor of this 'war within the war', and the palace in Germany that may or may not have been a model for the Haitian building. In the process of delineating these silences, Trouillot reveals the tensions within the revolution, its complexities, the fact (which is downplayed by many inside and outside Haiti), that the revolution was not a singular struggle of slave against French master, but was rather a factionalized saga with many different trajectories.

After highlighting these silences, Trouillot turns to the silencing of the revolution itself. This revolution, about which the German Heinrich von Kleist would pronounce 'the world knew',³ became in the hands of contemporaries and historians a sideshow in the Age of Revolutions. Trouillot explores how this came to pass. He shows how the silence regarding the Haitian revolution in the works of historians as notable as Eric Hobsbawm⁴ have their origins in the silencing undertaken by a wide range of people from planters and politicians (who desired to limit the revolution's influence), to observers and scholars (who wanted to explain away behaviour that at the time was considered 'unthinkable'). And by bringing sound to this silence, Trouillot reminds us of the significance of this revolution for modern history – that it made vital contributions to the process of slave emancipation and to shaping the United States, and that it dictated the course of the Napoleonic Wars and the future direction of British imperial policy – and thereby points to an enormous gap in most scholarly and popular histories.

Of course, Trouillot presents the reader with a dilemma here. How do we weave a path between the silences of the revolution itself, and the silencing of the revolution? For in revealing the three faces of Sans Souci, bringing complexity to the story of the revolution, we may be doing the work of those who would mask that revolution's significance. But one of the beauties of Trouillot's work is that it begins with the premise that history is a 'messy' business. We cannot uncover all silences, and the choices we make as to what to uncover and what to leave in silence are political (they actively contribute to silencing the past), shaped by our own locations. 'Power does not enter the story once and for all,' Trouillot points out, 'but at different times and from different angles' (28–9); and one of these occasions is in the historian's act of description. Trouillot, then, does not present us with an either/or: coherent revolution, or events that 'got out of hand'. Rather, he forces us to search for the complexities in the power relations that we ourselves face, where every intervention must in some way only be strategic lest it become the pillar of its opposite. And this power to act strategically and incompletely has to be recognized in the slave as we would like to claim it for ourselves.

The messiness of history is revealed most clearly in 'Good day, Columbus' which follows the posthumous career of the Genoese adventurer, showing how he has come to be celebrated in the United States – how, in fact, History has come to revolve around his act of sailing the ocean blue. This North American career, dating from endorsements by the Irish Knights of Columbus, by promoters at the Chicago Worlds Fair and later by Italian immigrants, stands in stark contrast to Columbus's more humble career in Latin American countries, where his endorsements only seemed to represent the Spanish yoke. This essay includes a flourish on the

³ Heinrich von Kleist, 'The betrothal in Santo Domingo' in *The Marquise of O and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth, 1985), 232.

⁴ Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848* (New York, 1962).

'whitening' of Columbus that contributes to work on the invention of whiteness.⁵ In order to become American, 'Columbus had to become white, in spite of the anti-Italian racism prevailing at the time of the Chicago Fair. As Columbus became whiter he also contributed to the whitening of people who claimed him as part of their past, further opening to multiple interpretations the narrative officialized at Chicago' (133-4). In looking for the silencing of Columbus here, and in engaging with silences generally (starting with a black, not a white canvas), Trouillot adds layers and textures to historical narratives bringing to light the power in the story.

Trouillot begins and ends by recognizing his own location and his own power to shape the narrative. While many historians will feel comfortable with his assertions on this score, members of 'the guild' may be less aware of the ways in which 'positivism' has remained central to 'the public's sense of Europe and North America' and has quietly worked its way into our own scholarly contributions undetected. In *Silencing the Past*, Trouillot brings the sound of silence to histories muffled by such positivism.

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