Silencing the Past

Power and
the Production
of History

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To the memory of my father,
Ernst Trouillot

To my mother,
Anne-Marie Morisset

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

Sallust
History of Catiline

Contents

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.

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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.

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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.

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 history 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.