

Silencing the Past

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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	xi
	: Preface	xvii
<i>1</i>	: The Power in the Story	1
<i>2</i>	: The Three Faces of Sans Souci	31
<i>3</i>	: An Unthinkable History	70
<i>4</i>	: Good Day, Columbus	108
<i>5</i>	: The Presence in the Past	141
	: Epilogue	154
	: Notes	157
	: Index	193

Silencing the Past

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The Power in the Story

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: : : : : This is a story within a story—so slippery at the edges
: : : : : that one wonders when and where it started and whether
: : : : : it will ever end. By the middle of February 1836, the
: : : : : army of general Antonio López de Santa Anna had reached the
: : : : : crumbling walls of the old mission of San Antonio de Valero
: : : : : in the Mexican province of Tejas. Few traces of the Franciscan
: : : : : priests who had built the mission more than a century before had
: : : : : survived the combined assaults of time and of a succession of less
: : : : : religious residents. Intermittent squatters, Spanish and Mexican
: : : : : soldiers, had turned the place into something of a fort and nick-
: : : : : named it “the Alamo,” from the name of a Spanish cavalry unit
: : : : : that undertook one of the many transformations of the crude
: : : : : compound. Now, three years after Santa Anna first gained power
: : : : : in independent Mexico, a few English-speaking squatters occu-
: : : : : pied the place, refusing to surrender to his superior force. Luckily
: : : : : for Santa Anna, the squatters were outnumbered—at most 189
: : : : : potential fighters—and the structure itself was weak. The con-
: : : : : quest would be easy, or so thought Santa Anna.

The conquest was not easy: the siege persisted through twelve days of cannonade. On March 6, Santa Anna blew the horns that Mexicans traditionally used to announce an attack to the death.

Later on that same day, his forces finally broke through the fort, killing most of the defenders. But a few weeks later, on April 21, at San Jacinto, Santa Anna fell prisoner to Sam Houston, the freshly certified leader of the secessionist Republic of Texas.

Santa Anna recovered from that upset; he went on to be four more times the leader of a much reduced Mexico. But in important ways, he was doubly defeated at San Jacinto. He lost the battle of the day, but he also lost the battle he had won at the Alamo. Houston's men had punctuated their victorious attack on the Mexican army with repeated shouts of "Remember the Alamo! Remember the Alamo!" With that reference to the old mission, they doubly made history. As actors, they captured Santa Anna and neutralized his forces. As narrators, they gave the Alamo story a new meaning. The military loss of March was no longer the end point of the narrative but a necessary turn in the plot, the trial of the heroes, which, in turn, made final victory both inevitable and grandiose. With the battle cry of San Jacinto, Houston's men reversed for more than a century the victory Santa Anna thought he had gained in San Antonio.

Human beings participate in history both as actors and as narrators. The inherent ambivalence of the word "history" in many modern languages, including English, suggests this dual participation. In vernacular use, history means both the facts of the matter and a narrative of those facts, both "what happened" and "that which is said to have happened." The first meaning places the emphasis on the sociohistorical process, the second on our knowledge of that process or on a story about that process.

If I write "The history of the United States begins with the Mayflower," a statement many readers may find simplistic and controversial, there will be little doubt that I am suggesting that the first significant event in the process that eventuated in what we now call the United States is the landing of the Mayflower. Consider now a sentence grammatically identical to the preceding

one and perhaps as controversial: "The history of France starts with Michelet." The meaning of the word "history" has unambiguously shifted from the sociohistorical process to our knowledge of that process. The sentence affirms that the first significant narrative about France was the one written by Jules Michelet.

Yet the distinction between what happened and that which is said to have happened is not always clear. Consider a third sentence: "The history of the United States is a history of migration." The reader may choose to understand both uses of the word history as emphasizing the sociohistorical process. Then, the sentence seems to suggest that the fact of migration is the central element in the evolution of the United States. But an equally valid interpretation of that sentence is that the best narrative about the United States is a story of migrations. That interpretation becomes privileged if I add a few qualifiers: "The true history of the United States is a history of migrations. That history remains to be written."

Yet a third interpretation may place the emphasis on the sociohistorical process for the first use of the word "history" and on knowledge and narrative for its second use in the same sentence, thus suggesting that the best narrative about the United States is one of which migration is the central theme. This third interpretation is possible only because we implicitly acknowledge an overlap between the sociohistorical process and our knowledge of it, an overlap significant enough to allow us to suggest, with varying degree of metaphorical intent, that the history of the United States is a story of migrations. Not only can history mean either the sociohistorical process or our knowledge of that process, but the boundary between the two meanings is often quite fluid.

The vernacular use of the word history thus offers us a semantic ambiguity: an irreducible distinction and yet an equally irreducible overlap between what happened and that which is said to have happened. Yet it suggests also the importance of context: the

overlap and the distance between the two sides of historicity may not be susceptible to a general formula. The ways in which what happened and that which is said to have happened are and are not the same may itself be historical.

Words are not concepts and concepts are not words: between the two are the layers of theory accumulated throughout the ages. But theories are built on words and with words. Thus it is not surprising that the ambiguity offered by the vernacular use of the word history has caught the attention of many thinkers since at least antiquity. What is surprising is the reluctance with which theories of history have dealt with this fundamental ambiguity. Indeed, as history became a distinguishable profession, theorists have followed two incompatible tendencies. Some, influenced by positivism, have emphasized the distinction between the historical world and what we say or write about it. Others, who adopt a "constructivist" viewpoint, have stressed the overlap between the historical process and narratives about that process. Most have treated the combination itself, the core of the ambiguity, as if it were a mere accident of vernacular parlance to be corrected by theory. What I hope to do is to show how much room there is to look at the production of history outside of the dichotomies that these positions suggest and reproduce.

One-sided Historicity

Summaries of intellectual trends and subdisciplines always short-change the various authors they somewhat compulsively regroup. I do not even attempt such a regrouping here. I hope that the following sketch is sufficient to show the limitations that I question.¹

Positivism has a bad name today, but at least some of that scorn is well deserved. As history solidified as a profession in the nine-

teenth century, scholars significantly influenced by positivist views tried to theorize the distinction between historical process and historical knowledge. Indeed, the professionalization of the discipline is partly premised on that distinction: the more distant the sociohistorical process is from its knowledge, the easier the claim to a "scientific" professionalism. Thus, historians and, more particularly, philosophers of history were proud to discover or reiterate instances where the distinction was supposedly indisputable because it was marked not only by semantic context, but by morphology or by the lexicon itself. The Latin distinction between *res gesta* and *(historia) rerum gestarum*, or the German distinction between *Geschichte* and *Geschichtschreibung*, helped to inscribe a fundamental difference, sometimes ontological, sometimes epistemological, between what happened and what was said to have happened. These philosophical boundaries, in turn, reinforced the chronological boundary between past and present inherited from antiquity.

The positivist position dominated Western scholarship enough to influence the vision of history among historians and philosophers who did not necessarily see themselves as positivists. Tenets of that vision still inform the public's sense of history in most of Europe and North America: the role of the historian is to reveal the past, to discover or, at least, approximate the truth. Within that viewpoint, power is unproblematic, irrelevant to the construction of the narrative as such. At best, history is a story about power, a story about those who won.

The proposition that history is another form of fiction is almost as old as history itself, and the arguments used to defend it have varied greatly. As Tzvetan Todorov suggests, there is nothing new even in the claim that everything is an interpretation, except the euphoria that now surrounds the claim.² What I call the constructivist view of history is a particular version of these two

propositions that has gained visibility in academe since the 1970s. It builds upon recent advances in critical theory, in the theory of the narrative and analytic philosophy. In its dominant version, it contends that the historical narrative bypasses the issue of truth by virtue of its form. Narratives are necessarily emplotted in a way that life is not. Thus they necessarily distort life whether or not the evidence upon which they are based could be proved correct. Within that viewpoint, history becomes one among many types of narratives with no particular distinction except for its pretense of truth.³ Whereas the positivist view hides the tropes of power behind a naive epistemology, the constructivist one denies the autonomy of the sociohistorical process. Taken to its logical end point, constructivism views the historical narrative as one fiction among others.

But what makes some narratives rather than others powerful enough to pass as accepted history if not historicity itself? If history is merely the story told by those who won, how did they win in the first place? And why don't all winners tell the same story?

Between Truth and Fiction

Each historical narrative renews a claim to truth.⁴ If I write a story describing how U.S. troops entering a German prison at the end of World War II massacred five hundred Gypsies; if I claim this story is based on documents recently found in Soviet archives and corroborated by German sources, and if I fabricate such sources and publish my story as such, I have not written fiction, I have produced a fake. I have violated the rules that govern claims to historical truth.⁵ That such rules are not the same in all times and all places has led many scholars to suggest that some societies (non-Western, of course) do not differentiate between fiction and history. That assertion reminds us of past debates among some Western observers about the languages of the

peoples they colonized. Because these observers did not find grammar books or dictionaries among the so-called savages, because they could not understand or apply the grammatical rules that governed these languages, they promptly concluded that such rules did not exist.

As befits comparisons between the West and the many subaltern others it created for itself, the field was uneven from the start; the objects contrasted were eminently incomparable. The comparison unfairly juxtaposed a discourse about language and linguistic practice: the metalanguage of grammarians proved the existence of grammar in European languages; spontaneous speech proved its absence elsewhere. Some Europeans and their colonized students saw in this alleged absence of rules the infantile freedom that they came to associate with savagery, while others saw in it one more proof of the inferiority of non-whites. We now know that both sides were wrong; grammar functions in all languages. Could the same be said about history, or is history so infinitely malleable in some societies that it loses its differential claim to truth?

The classification of all non-Westerners as fundamentally non-historical is tied also to the assumption that history requires a linear and cumulative sense of time that allows the observer to isolate the past as a distinct entity. Yet Ibn Khaldún fruitfully applied a cyclical view of time to the study of history. Further, the exclusive adherence to linear time by Western historians themselves, and the ensuing rejection of the people left "without history" both date from the nineteenth century.⁶ Did the West have a history before 1800?

The pernicious belief that epistemic validity matters only to Western-educated populations, either because others lack the proper sense of time or the proper sense of evidence, is belied by the use of *evidentials* in a number of non-European languages.⁷ An English approximation would be a rule forcing historians to

distinguish grammatically between “I heard that it happened,” “I saw it happen,” or “I have obtained evidence that it happened” every time they use the verb “to happen.” English, of course, has no such grammatical rule for assessing evidence. Does the fact that Tucuya has an elaborate system of evidentials predispose its Amazonian speakers to be better historians than most Englishmen?

Arjun Appadurai argues convincingly that rules about what he calls “the debarability of the past” operate in all societies.⁸ Although these rules exhibit substantive variations in time and space, they all aim to guarantee a minimal credibility in history. Appadurai suggests a number of formal constraints that universally enforce that credibility and limit the character of historical debates: authority, continuity, depth, and interdependence. Nowhere is history infinitely susceptible to invention.

The need for a different kind of credibility sets the historical narrative apart from fiction. This need is both contingent and necessary. It is contingent inasmuch as some narratives go back and forth over the line between fiction and history, while others occupy an undefined position that seems to deny the very existence of a line. It is necessary inasmuch as, at some point, historically specific groups of humans must decide if a particular narrative belongs to history or to fiction. In other words, the epistemological break between history and fiction is always expressed concretely through the historically situated evaluation of specific narratives.

Is island cannibalism fact or fiction? Scholars have long tried to confirm or discredit some early Spanish colonizers’ contention that Native Americans of the Antilles committed cannibalism.⁹ Is the semantic association between Caribs, Cannibals, and Caliban based on more than European phantasms? Some scholars claim that the fantasy has reached such significance for the West that it

matters little whether it is based on facts. Does this mean that the line between history and fiction is useless? As long as the conversation involves Europeans talking about dead Indians, the debate is merely academic.

Yet even dead Indians can return to haunt professional and amateur historians. The Inter-Tribal council of American Indians affirms that the remains of more than a thousand individuals, mostly Native American Catholics, are buried in grounds adjacent to the Alamo, in an old cemetery once linked to the Franciscan mission, but of which the most visible traces have disappeared. The council’s efforts to have the sacredness of the grounds recognized by the state of Texas and the city of San Antonio have met only partial success. Still, they are impressive enough to threaten the control the organization that has custody of the Alamo, the Daughters of the Republic of Texas, holds over a historical site entrusted to them by the state since 1905.

The debate over the grounds fits within a larger war that some observers have dubbed “the second battle of the Alamo.” That larger controversy surrounds the 1836 siege of the compound by Santa Anna’s forces. Is that battle a moment of glory during which freedom-loving Anglos, outnumbered but undaunted, spontaneously chose to fight until death rather than surrender to a corrupt Mexican dictator? Or is it a brutal example of U.S. expansionism, the story of a few white predators taking over what was sacred territory and half-willingly providing, with their death, the alibi for a well-planned annexation? So phrased the debate evokes issues that have divided a few historians and inhabitants of Texas over the last twenty years. But with San Antonio’s population now composed of 56 percent nominal Hispanics, many of whom also acknowledge some Native American ancestry, “the second battle of the Alamo” has literally reached the streets. Demonstrations, parades, editorials, and demands for

various municipal or court orders—including one blocking the streets now leading to the Alamo—punctuate the debate between increasingly angry parties.

In the heated context of this debate, advocates on both sides are questioning factual statements, the accuracy of which mattered to few half a century ago. “Facts,” both trivial or prominent in relative isolation, are questioned or heralded by each camp.

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Historians had long questioned the veracity of some of the events in Alamo narratives, most notably the story of the line on the ground. According to that story, when it became clear that the choice for the 189 Alamo occupants was between escape and certain death at the Mexicans’ hands, commandant William Barret Travis drew a line on the ground. He then asked all those willing to fight to the death to cross it. Supposedly, everyone crossed—except of course the man who conveniently escaped to tell the story. Texas historians, and especially Texas-based authors of textbooks and popular history, long concurred that this particular narrative was only “a good story,” and that “it doesn’t really matter whether it is true or not.”¹⁰ Such remarks were made before the current constructivist wave by people who otherwise believed that facts are facts and nothing but facts. But in a context where the courage of the men who stayed at the Alamo is openly questioned, the line on the ground is suddenly among the many “facts” now submitted to a test of credibility.

The list is endless.¹¹ Where exactly was the cemetery, and are the remains still there? Are tourist visits to the Alamo violating the religious rights of the dead and should the state of Texas intervene? Did the state itself ever pay the Roman Catholic Church the agreed-upon price for the chapel of the Alamo and, if not, are not the custodians usurpers of a historical landmark? Did James

Bowie, one of the white American leaders, bury a stolen treasure in the site? If so, is that the real reason why the occupants chose to fight or, conversely, did Bowie try to negotiate in order to save both his life and the treasure? In short, how much was greed, rather than patriotism, central to the Alamo battle? Did the besieged mistakenly believe that reinforcement was on its way and, if so, how much can we believe in their courage? Did Davy Crockett die during the battle or after the battle? Did he try to surrender? Did he really wear a coonskin cap?

That last question may sound the most trivial of a rather bizarre list; but it appears less trifling and not at all bizarre when we note that the Alamo shrine is Texas’s main tourist attraction, drawing some three million visitors a year. Now that local voices have become loud enough to question the innocence of a little *gringo* wearing a Davy cap, mom and dad may think twice about buying one, and the custodians of history shiver, afraid that the past is catching up too fast with the present. In the context of that controversy, it suddenly matters how real Davy was.

The lesson of the debate is clear. At some stage, for reasons that are themselves historical, most often spurred by controversy, collectivities experience the need to impose a test of credibility on certain events and narratives because it matters *to them* whether these events are true or false, whether these stories are fact or fiction.

That it matters to them does not necessarily mean that it matters to us. But how far can we carry our isolationism? Does it really not matter whether or not the dominant narrative of the Jewish Holocaust is true or false? Does it really not make a difference whether or not the leaders of Nazi Germany actually planned and supervised the death of six million Jews?

The associates of the Institute for Historical Review maintain that the Holocaust narrative matters, but they also maintain that it is false. They generally agree that Jews were victimized during

World War II, and some even accept that the Holocaust was a tragedy. However, most profess to set the record straight on three main issues: the reported number of six million Jews killed by the Nazis; the systematic Nazi plan for the extermination of Jews; the existence of "gas chambers" for mass murders.¹² Revisionists claim there is no irrefutable evidence to back any of these central "facts" of the dominant Holocaust narrative which serves only to perpetuate various state policies in the United States, Europe, and Israel.

Revisionist theses on the Holocaust have been refuted by a number of authors. Historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet, whose own mother died at Auschwitz, has used his repeated rebuttals of revisionist theses to raise powerful questions on the relation between scholarship and political responsibility. Jean-Pierre Pressac, himself a former revisionist, documents better than any other historian the German death machinery. Deborah Lipstadt's most recent book on the subject examines the political motivations of the revisionists in order to launch an ideological critique of revisionism. To that latter kind of critique, the revisionists reply that they are historians: why should their motives matter if they follow "the customary methods of historical criticism"? We can't dismiss heliocentric theory just because Copernicus apparently hated the Catholic Church.¹³

The revisionists' claimed adherence to empiricist procedures provides a perfect case to test the limits of historical constructionism.¹⁴ The immediate political and moral stakes of Holocaust narratives for a number of constituencies worldwide, and the competing strength and loudness of these constituencies in the United States and in Europe leave the constructivists both politically and theoretically naked. For the only logical constructivist position on the Holocaust debate is to deny that there is matter to debate. Constructivists must claim that it does not really matter

whether or not there were gas chambers, whether the death toll was one or six million, or whether the genocide was planned. And indeed, constructivist Hayden White came dangerously close to suggesting that the main relevance of the dominant Holocaust narrative is that it serves to legitimate the policies of the state of Israel.¹⁵ White later qualified his extreme constructivist stance and now espouses a much more modest relativism.¹⁶

But how much can we reduce what happened to what is said to have happened? If six million do not really matter, would two million be enough, or would some of us settle for three hundred thousand? If meaning is totally severed from a referent "out there," if there is no cognitive purpose, nothing to be proved or disproved, what then is the point of the story? White's answer is clear: to establish moral authority. But why bother with the Holocaust or plantation slavery, Pol Pot, or the French Revolution, when we already have Little Red Riding Hood?

Constructivism's dilemma is that *while it can point to hundreds of stories that illustrate its general claim that narratives are produced, it cannot give a full account of the production of any single narrative*. For either we would all share the same stories of legitimation, or the reasons why a specific story matters to a specific population are themselves historical. To state that a particular narrative legitimates particular policies is to refer implicitly to a "true" account of these policies through time, an account which itself can take the form of another narrative. But to admit the possibility of this second narrative is, in turn, to admit that the historical process has some autonomy vis-à-vis the narrative. It is to admit that as ambiguous and contingent as it is, the boundary between what happened and that which is said to have happened is necessary.

It is not that some societies distinguish between fiction and history and others do not. Rather, the difference is in the range of

narratives that specific collectivities must put to their own tests of historical credibility because of the stakes involved in these narratives.

Single-site Historicity

We would be wrong to think that such states proceed naturally from the importance of the original event. The widespread notion of history as reminiscence of important past experiences is misleading. The model itself is well known: history is to a collectivity as remembrance is to an individual, the more or less conscious retrieval of past experiences stored in memory. Its numerous variations aside, we can call it, for short, the storage model of memory-history.

The first problem with the storage model is its age, the antiquated science upon which it rests. The model assumes a view of knowledge as recollection, which goes back to Plato, a view now disputed by philosophers and cognitive scientists. Further, the vision of individual memory on which it draws has been strongly questioned by researchers of various stripes since at least the end of the nineteenth century. Within that vision, memories are discrete representations stored in a cabinet, the contents of which are generally accurate and accessible at will. Recent research has questioned all these assumptions. Remembering is not always a process of summoning representations of what happened. Tying a shoe involves memory, but few of us engage in an explicit recall of images every time we routinely tie our shoes. Whether or not the distinction between implicit and explicit memory involves different memory systems, the fact that such systems are inextricably linked in practice may be one more reason why explicit memories change. At any rate, there is evidence that the contents of our cabinet are neither fixed nor accessible at will.¹⁷

Further, were such contents complete, they would not form a

history. Consider a monologue describing in sequence all of an individual's recollections. It would sound as a meaningless cacophony even to the narrator. Further, it is at least possible that events otherwise significant to the life trajectory were not known to the individual at the time of occurrence and cannot be told as remembered experiences. The individual can only remember the revelation, not the event itself. I may remember that I went to Japan without remembering what it felt like to be in Japan. I may remember being told that my parents took me to Japan when I was six months old. But then, is it only the revelation that belongs to my life history? Can we confidently exclude from one's history all events not experienced or not yet revealed, including, for instance, an adoption at the time of birth? An adoption might provide a crucial perspective on episodes that actually occurred before its revelation. The revelation itself may affect the narrator's future memory of events that happened *before*.

If memories as individual history are constructed, even in this minimal sense, how can the past they retrieve be fixed? The storage model has no answer to that problem. Both its popular and scholarly versions assume the independent existence of a fixed past and posit memory as the retrieval of that content. But the past does not exist independently from the present. Indeed, the past is only past because there is a present, just as I can point to something *over there* only because I am *here*. But nothing is inherently over there or here. In that sense, the past has no content. The past—or, more accurately, pastness—is a position. Thus, in no way can we identify the past *as past*. Leaving aside for now the fact that my knowledge that I once went to Japan, however derived, may not be of the same nature as remembering what it was like to be in Japan, the model assumes that both kinds of information exist *as past* prior to my retrieval. But how do I retrieve them as past without prior knowledge or memory of what constitutes pastness?

The problems of determining what belongs to the past multiply tenfold when that past is said to be collective. Indeed, when the memory-history equation is transferred to a collectivity, methodological individualism adds its weight to the inherent difficulties of the storage model. We may want to assume for purposes of description that the life history of an individual starts with birth. But when does the life of a collectivity start? At what point do we set the beginning of the past to be retrieved? How do we decide—and how does the collectivity decide—which events to include and which to exclude? The storage model assumes not only the past to be remembered but the collective subject that does the remembering. The problem with this dual assumption is that the constructed past itself is constitutive of the collectivity.

Do Europeans and white Americans remember discovering the New World? Neither Europe as we now know it, nor whiteness as we now experience it, existed as such in 1492. Both are constitutive of this retrospective entity we now call the West, without which the “discovery” is unthinkable in its present form. Can the citizens of Quebec, whose license plates proudly state “I remember,” actually retrieve memories of the French colonial state? Can Macedonians, whoever they may be, recall the early conflicts and promises of panhellenism? Can anybody anywhere actually remember the first mass conversions of Serbians to Christianity? In these cases, as in many others, the collective subjects who supposedly remember did not exist as such at the time of the events they claim to remember. Rather, their constitution as subjects goes hand in hand with the continuous creation of the past. As such, they do not succeed such a past: they are its contemporaries.

Even when the historical continuities are unquestionable, in no way can we assume a simple correlation between the magnitude of events as they happened and their relevance for the generations that inherit them through history. The comparative study of slavery in the Americas provides an engaging example

that what we often call the “legacy of the past” may not be anything bequeathed by the past itself.

At first glance, it would seem obvious that the historical relevance of slavery in the United States proceeds from the horrors of the past. That past is constantly evoked as the starting point of an ongoing traumatism and as a necessary explanation to current inequalities suffered by blacks. I would be the last to deny that plantation slavery was a traumatic experience that left strong scars throughout the Americas. But the experience of African-Americans outside of the United States challenges the direct correlation between past traumas and historical relevance.

In the context of the hemisphere, the United States imported a relatively small number of enslaved Africans both before and after its independence. During four centuries, the slave trade delivered at least ten million slaves to the New World. Enslaved Africans worked and died in the Caribbean a century before the settlement of Jamestown, Virginia. Brazil, the territory where slavery lasted longest, received the lion's share of the African slaves, nearly four million. The Caribbean region as a whole imported even more slaves than Brazil, spread among the colonies of various European powers. Still, imports were high among individual Caribbean territories, especially the sugar islands. Thus the French Caribbean island of Martinique, a tiny territory less than one-fourth the size of Long Island, imported more slaves than all the U.S. states combined.¹⁸ To be sure, by the early nineteenth century, the United States had more Creole slaves than any other American country, but this number was due to natural increase. Still, both in terms of its duration and in terms of the number of individuals involved, in no way can we say that the magnitude of U.S. slavery outdid that of Brazil or the Caribbean.

Second, slavery was at least as significant to the daily life of Brazilian and Caribbean societies as to U.S. society as a whole. The British and French sugar islands in particular, from seventeenth-

century Barbados and Jamaica to eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue and Martinique, were not simply societies that had slaves: they were *slave societies*. Slavery defined their economic, social, and cultural organization: it was their *raison d'être*. The people who lived there, free or not, lived there because there were slaves. The northern equivalent would be for the whole continental United States to look like the state of Alabama at the peak of its cotton career.

Third, we need not assume that human suffering can be measured to affirm that the slaves' material conditions were no better outside the United States than within its borders. Allegations of paternalism notwithstanding, we know that U.S. masters were no more humane than their Brazilian or Caribbean counterparts. But we know also that the human toll of slavery, both physical and cultural, was intimately tied to the exigencies of production, notably the work regimen. Working conditions generally imposed lower life expectancy, higher death rates, and much lower birth rates among Caribbean and Brazilian slaves than among their U.S. counterparts.¹⁹ From that viewpoint, sugarcane was the slaves' most sadistic tormentor.

In short, there is a mass of evidence big enough to uphold a modest empirical claim: The impact of slavery as what actually happened cannot in any way be said to have been stronger in the United States than in Brazil and the Caribbean. But then, why is both the symbolic relevance of slavery as trauma and the analytical relevance of slavery as sociohistorical explanation so much more prevalent today in the United States than in Brazil or the Caribbean?

Part of the answer may be the way U.S. slavery ended: a Civil War for which more whites seem to blame the slaves than Abraham Lincoln—whose own motives in the enterprise remain otherwise contested. Part of the answer may be the fate of the slaves' descendants, but that itself is not an issue of "the past." The per-

petuation of U.S. racism is less a legacy of slavery than a modern phenomenon renewed by generations of white immigrants whose own ancestors were likely engaged in forced labor, at one time or another, in the hinterlands of Europe.

Indeed, not all blacks who witnessed slavery believed that it was a legacy of which they and their children would forever carry the burden.²⁰ Half a century after Emancipation, slavery was not a major theme among white historians either, albeit for different reasons. U.S. historiography, for reasons perhaps not too different from its Brazilian counterpart, produced its own silences on African-American slavery. Earlier in this century, there were blacks and whites in North America who argued over both the symbolic and analytical relevance of slavery for the present they were living.²¹ Such debates suggest that historical relevance does not proceed directly from the original impact of an event, or its mode of inscription, or even the continuity of that inscription.

Debates about the Alamo, the Holocaust, or the significance of U.S. slavery involve not only professional historians but ethnic and religious leaders, political appointees, journalists, and various associations within civil society as well as independent citizens, not all of whom are activists. This variety of narrators is one of many indications that theories of history have a rather limited view of the field of historical production. They grossly underestimate the size, the relevance, and the complexity of the overlapping sites where history is produced, notably outside of academia.²²

The strength of the historical guild varies from one society to the next. Even in highly complex societies where the weight of the guild is significant, never does the historians' production constitute a closed corpus. Rather, that production interacts not only with the work of other academics, but importantly also with the history produced outside of the universities. Thus, the thematic awareness of history is not activated only by recognized academ-

ics. We are all amateur historians with various degrees of awareness about our production. We also learn history from similar amateurs. Universities and university presses are not the only loci of production of the historical narrative. Books sell even better than coonskin caps at the Alamo gift shop, to which half a dozen titles by amateur historians bring more than \$400,000 a year. As Marc Ferro argues, history has many hearths and academics are not the sole history teachers in the land.²³

Most Europeans and North Americans learn their first history lessons through media that have not been subjected to the standards set by peer reviews, university presses, or doctoral committees. Long before average citizens read the historians who set the standards of the day for colleagues and students, they access history through celebrations, site and museum visits, movies, national holidays, and primary school books. To be sure, the views they learn there are, in turn, sustained, modified, or challenged by scholars involved in primary research. As history continues to solidify professionally, as historians become increasingly quick at modifying their targets and refining their tools for investigation, the impact of academic history increases, even if indirectly.

But let us not forget how fragile, how limited, and how recent that apparent hegemony may be. Let us not forget that, quite recently, in many parts of the United States national and world history prolonged a providential narrative with strong religious undertones. The history of the world then started with Creation, for which the date was supposedly well known, and continued with Manifest Destiny, as befits a country privileged by Divine Providence. American social science has yet to discard the belief in U.S. exceptionalism that permeated its birth and its evolution.²⁴ Likewise, academic professionalism has not yet silenced creationist history, which is still alive in enclaves within the school system.

That school system may not have the last word on any issue, but

its limited efficiency cuts both ways. From the mid 1950s to the late 1960s, Americans learned more about the history of colonial America and the American West from movies and television than from scholarly books. Remember the Alamo? That was a history lesson delivered by John Wayne on the screen. Davy Crockett was a television character who became a significant historical figure rather than the obverse.²⁵ Before and after Hollywood's long commitment to the history of cowboys and pioneers, comic books rather than textbooks, country songs rather than chronological tables filled the gaps left by the westerns. Then as now, American children and quite a few young males elsewhere learned to thematize parts of that history by playing cowboys and Indians.

Finally, the guild understandably reflects the social and political divisions of American society. Yet, by virtue of its professional claims, the guild cannot express political opinions as such—quite contrary, of course, to activists and lobbyists. Thus, ironically, the more important an issue for specific segments of civil society, the more subdued the interpretations of the facts offered by most professional historians. To a majority of the individuals involved in the controversies surrounding the Columbian quincentennial, the “Last Fact” exhibit at the Smithsonian on the *Enola Gay* and Hiroshima, the excavation of slave cemeteries, or the building of the Vietnam Memorial, the statements produced by most historians seemed often bland or irrelevant. In these cases, as in many others, those to whom history mattered most looked for historical interpretations on the fringes of academia when not altogether outside it.

Yet the fact that history is also produced outside of academia has largely been ignored in theories of history. Beyond a broad—and relatively recent—agreement on the situatedness of the professional historian, there is little concrete exploration of activities that occur elsewhere but impact significantly on the object of

study. To be sure, such an impact does not lend itself easily to general formulas, a predicament that rebukes most theorists. I have noted that while most theorists acknowledge at the outset that history involves both the social process and narratives about that process, theories of history actually privilege one side as if the other did not matter.

This one-sidedness is possible because theories of history rarely examine in detail the concrete production of specific narratives. Narratives are occasionally evoked as illustrations or, at best, deciphered as texts, but the process of their production rarely constitutes the object of study.²⁶ Similarly, most scholars would readily admit that historical production occurs in many sites. But the relative weight of these sites varies with context and these variations impose on the theorist the burden of the concrete. Thus, an examination of French palaces as sites of historical production can provide illustrative lessons for an understanding of Hollywood's role in U.S. historical consciousness, but no abstract theory can set, *a priori*, the rules that govern the relative impact of French castles and of U.S. movies on the academic history produced in these two countries.

The heavier the burden of the concrete, the more likely it is to be bypassed by theory. Thus even the best treatments of academic history proceed as if what happened in the other sites was largely inconsequential. Yet is it really inconsequential that the history of America is being written in the same world where few little boys want to be Indians?

Theorizing Ambiguity and Tracking Power

History is always produced in a specific historical context. Historical actors are also narrators, and vice versa.

The affirmation that narratives are always produced in history

leads me to propose two choices. First, I contend that a theory of the historical narrative must acknowledge both the distinction and the overlap between process and narrative. Thus, although this book is primarily about history as knowledge and narrative,²⁷ it fully embraces the ambiguity inherent in the two sides of historicity.

History, as social process, involves peoples in three distinct capacities: 1) as *agents*, or occupants of structural positions; 2) as *actors* in constant interface with a context; and 3) as *subjects*, that is, as voices aware of their vocality. Classical examples of what I call agents are the strata and sets to which people belong, such as class and status, or the roles associated with these. Workers, slaves, mothers are agents.²⁸ An analysis of slavery can explore the sociocultural, political, economic, and ideological structures that define such positions as slaves and masters.

By actors, I mean the bundle of capacities that are specific in time and space in ways that both their existence and their understanding rest fundamentally on historical particulars. A comparison of African-American slavery in Brazil and the United States that goes beyond a statistical table must deal with the historical particulars that define the situations being compared. Historical narratives address particular situations and, in that sense, they must deal with human beings as actors.²⁹

But peoples are also the subjects of history the way workers are subjects of a strike: they define the very terms under which some situations can be described. Consider a strike as a historical event from a strictly narrative viewpoint, that is, without the interventions that we usually put under such labels as interpretation or explanation. There is no way we can describe a strike without making the subjective capacities of the workers a central part of the description.³⁰ Stating their absence from the workplace is certainly not enough. We need to state that they collectively reached

the decision to stay at home on what was supposed to be a regular working day. We need to add that they collectively acted upon that decision. But even such a description, which takes into account the workers' position as actors, is not a competent description of a strike. Indeed, there are a few other contexts in which such a description could account for something else. Workers could have decided: if the snowfall exceeds ten inches tonight, none of us will come to work tomorrow. If we accept scenarios of manipulation or errors of interpretation among the actors, the possibilities become limitless. Thus, beyond dealing with the workers as actors, a competent narrative of a strike needs to claim access to the workers as purposeful subjects aware of their own voices. It needs their voice(s) in the first person or, at least, it needs to paraphrase that first person. The narrative must give us a hint of both the reasons why the workers refuse to work and the objective they think they are pursuing—even if that objective is limited to the voicing of protest. To put it most simply, a strike is a strike only if the workers think that they are striking. Their subjectivity is an integral part of the event and of any satisfactory description of that event.

Workers work much more often than they strike, but the capacity to strike is never fully removed from the condition of workers. In other words, peoples are not always subjects constantly confronting history as some academics would wish, but the capacity upon which they act to become subjects is always part of their condition. This subjective capacity ensures confusion because it makes human beings doubly historical or, more properly, fully historical. It engages them simultaneously in the sociohistorical process and in narrative constructions about that process. The embracing of this ambiguity, which is inherent in what I call the two sides of historicity, is the first choice of this book.

The second choice of this book is a concrete focus on the process of historical production rather than an abstract concern for the

nature of history. The search for the nature of history has led us to deny ambiguity and either to demarcate precisely and at all times the dividing line between historical process and historical knowledge or to conflate at all times historical process and historical narrative. Thus between the mechanically "realist" and naively "constructivist" extremes, there is the more serious task of determining not what history is—a hopeless goal if phrased in essentialist terms—but how history works. For what history is changes with time and place or, better said, history reveals itself only through the production of specific narratives. What matters most are the process and conditions of production of such narratives. Only a focus on that process can uncover the ways in which the two sides of historicity intertwine in a particular context. Only through that overlap can we discover the differential exercise of power that makes some narratives possible and silences others.

Tracking power requires a richer view of historical production than most theorists acknowledge. We cannot exclude in advance any of the actors who participate in the production of history or any of the sites where that production may occur. Next to professional historians we discover artisans of different kinds, unpaid or unrecognized field laborers who augment, deflect, or reorganize the work of the professionals as politicians, students, fiction writers, filmmakers, and participating members of the public. In so doing, we gain a more complex view of academic history itself, since we do not consider professional historians the sole participants in its production.

This more comprehensive view expands the chronological boundaries of the production process. We can see that process as both starting earlier and going on later than most theorists admit. The process does not stop with the last sentence of a professional historian since the public is quite likely to contribute to history if only by adding its own readings to—and about—the scholarly

productions. More important, perhaps, since the overlap between history as social process and history as knowledge is fluid, participants in any event may enter into the production of a narrative about that event before the historian as such reaches the scene. In fact, the historical narrative within which an actual event fits could precede that event itself, at least in theory, but perhaps also in practice. Marshall Sahlins suggests that the Hawaiians read their encounter with Captain Cook as the chronicle of a death foretold. But such exercises are not limited to the peoples without historians. How much do narratives of the end of the cold war fit into a prepackaged history of capitalism in knightly armor? William Lewis suggests that one of Ronald Reagan's political strengths was his capacity to inscribe his presidency into a prepackaged narrative about the United States. And an overall sketch of world historical production through time suggests that professional historians alone do not set the narrative framework into which their stories fit. Most often, someone else has already entered the scene and set the cycle of silences.³¹

Does this expanded view still allow pertinent generalizations about the production of the historical narrative? The answer to this question is an unqualified yes, if we agree that such generalizations enhance our understanding of specific practices but do not provide blueprints that practice will supposedly follow or illustrate.

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).

These moments are conceptual tools, second-level abstractions of processes that feed on each other. As such, they are not meant to provide a realistic description of the making of any individual

narrative. Rather, they help us understand why not all silences are equal and why they cannot be addressed—or redressed—in the same manner. To put it differently, any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly.

The strategies deployed in this book reflect these variations. Each of the narratives treated in the next three chapters combines diverse types of silences. In each case, these silences crisscross or accumulate over time to produce a unique mixture. In each case I use a different approach to reveal the conventions and the tensions within that mixture.

In chapter 2, I sketch the image of a former slave turned colonel, now a forgotten figure of the Haitian Revolution. The evidence required to tell his story was available in the corpus I studied, in spite of the poverty of the sources. I only reposition that evidence to generate a new narrative. My alternative narrative, as it develops, reveals the silences that buried, until now, the story of the colonel.

The general silencing of the Haitian Revolution by Western historiography is the subject of chapter 3. That silencing also is due to uneven power in the production of sources, archives, and narratives. But if I am correct that this revolution was unthinkable as it happened, the insignificance of the story is already inscribed in the sources, regardless of what else they reveal. There are no new facts here; not even neglected ones. Here, I have to make the silences speak for themselves. I do so by juxtaposing the climate of the times, the writings of historians on the revolution itself, and narratives of world history where the effectiveness of the original silence becomes fully visible.

The discovery of America, the theme of chapter 4, provided me with yet another combination, thus compelling yet a third strategy. Here was an abundance of both sources and narratives. Until

1992, there was even a sense—although forged and recent—of global agreement on the significance of Columbus's first trip. The main tenets of historical writings were inflected and bolstered through public celebrations that seemed to reinforce this significance. Within this wide-open corpus, silences are produced not so much by an absence of facts or interpretations as through conflicting appropriations of Columbus's persona. Here, I do not suggest a new reading of the same story, as I do in chapter 2, or even alternative interpretations, as in chapter 3. Rather, I show how the alleged agreement about Columbus actually masks a history of conflicts. The methodological exercise culminates in a narrative about the competing appropriations of the discovery. Silences appear in the interstices of the conflicts between previous interpreters.

The production of a historical narrative cannot be studied, therefore, through a mere chronology of its silences. The moments I distinguish here overlap in real time. As heuristic devices, they only crystallize aspects of historical production that best expose when and where power gets into the story.

But even this phrasing is misleading if it suggests that power exists outside the story and can therefore be blocked or excised. Power is constitutive of the story. Tracking power through various "moments" simply helps emphasize the fundamentally processual character of historical production, to insist that what history is matters less than how history works; that power itself works together with history; and that the historians' claimed political preferences have little influence on most of the actual practices of power. A warning from Foucault is helpful: "I don't believe that the question of 'who exercises power?' can be resolved unless that other question '*how does it happen?*' is resolved at the same time."³²

Power does not enter the story once and for all, but at different

times and from different angles. It precedes the narrative proper, contributes to its creation and to its interpretation. Thus, it remains pertinent even if we can imagine a totally scientific history, even if we relegate the historians' preferences and stakes to a separate, post-descriptive phase. In history, power begins at the source.

The play of power in the production of alternative narratives begins with the joint creation of facts and sources for at least two reasons. First, facts are never meaningless: indeed, they become facts only because they matter in some sense, however minimal. Second, facts are not created equal: the production of traces is always also the creation of silences. Some occurrences are noted from the start; others are not. Some are engraved in individual or collective bodies; others are not. Some leave physical markers; others do not. What happened leaves traces, some of which are quite concrete—buildings, dead bodies, censuses, monuments, diaries, political boundaries—that limit the range and significance of any historical narrative. This is one of many reasons why not any fiction can pass for history: the materiality of the socio-historical process (historicity 1) sets the stage for future historical narratives (historicity 2).

The materiality of this first moment is so obvious that some of us take it for granted. It does not imply that facts are meaningless objects waiting to be discovered under some timeless seal but rather, more modestly, that history begins with bodies and artifacts: living brains, fossils, texts, buildings.³³

The bigger the material mass, the more easily it entraps us: mass graves and pyramids bring history closer while they make us feel small. A castle, a fort, a battlefield, a church, all these things bigger than we that we infuse with the reality of past lives, seem to speak of an immensity of which we know little except that we are part of it. Too solid to be unmarked, too conspicuous to be can-

did, they embody the ambiguities of history. They give us the power to touch it, but not that to hold it firmly in our hands—hence the mystery of their battered walls. We suspect that their concreteness hides secrets so deep that no revelation may fully dissipate their silences. We imagine the lives under the mortar, but how do we recognize the end of a bottomless silence?

The Three Faces of Sans Souci

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Glory and
Silences in
the Haitian
Revolution



2

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: : : : :
: **I** walked in silence between the old walls, trying to guess at
: the stories they would never dare tell. I had been in the fort
: since daybreak. I had lost my companions on purpose: I
: wanted to tiptoe alone through the remains of history. Here and
there, I touched a stone, a piece of iron hanging from the mortar,
overlooked or left by unknown hands for unknown reasons. I almost
tripped over a rail track, a deep cut on the concrete floor, which led
to a piece of artillery lost in a darkened corner.

At the end of the alley, the sunlight caught me by surprise. I saw the grave at once, an indifferent piece of cement lying in the middle of the open courtyard. Crossing the Place d'Armes, I imagined the royal cavalry, black-skinned men and women one and all on their black horses, swearing to fight until the death rather than to let go of this fort and return to slavery.

I stepped across my dreams up to the pile of concrete. As I moved closer, the letters on the stone became more visible. I did not need to read the inscription to know the man who was lying under the concrete. This was his fort, his kingdom, the most daring of his build-ings—The Citadel, his legacy of stone and arrogance. I bent over, letting my fingers run across the marble plaque, then closed my eyes to