
STILL UNTHINKABLE? THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION AND THE
RECEPTION OF MICHEL-ROLPH TROUILLOT'S *SILENCING THE PAST*

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Before his untimely death in July 2012, Michel-Rolph Trouillot was one of the most original and thoughtful voices in academia. His writings influenced scholars worldwide in many fields, from anthropology to history to Caribbean studies. He also wrote profoundly important works in three languages, from his 1977 Kreyòl work *Ti difè boulé sou istoua Ayiti* and his 1986 French classic *Les Racines historiques de l'État duvaliérien* to more recent English-language studies like 2003's *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World*.

Though each of these works made its own seminal contribution to scholarship, Trouillot's *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995) is his most famous work.¹ *Silencing* examines the way history is produced, and how history-writing is connected to power. Trouillot also looked at the gaps between what actually happened in the past, and what is "said to have happened" (what is recorded in history books). Rather than simply repeat the cliché that history is written by the victors, Trouillot called for analyzing how the powerful write history in a given way in particular situations. One of Trouillot's main interests in *Silencing* was to investigate how historical narratives inevitably omit certain portions of the past. He also exposed how the archives where historical truths are preserved frequently silence defeated voices. In addition, Trouillot described the historical practices that suppress subaltern perspectives. Finally, Trouillot looked at particular ways of thinking that have made it difficult for powerful groups to come to terms with history as it actually happened. The examples he covered range from narratives about Columbus to Disney's failed efforts to build a Civil War-themed amusement park in Virginia.

In this essay, I trace the reception history of this remarkable book since its publication in 1995. I note that *Silencing* was not immediately a hit when it appeared. Over time, however, the book has had a remarkable influence on many fields. In the first half of this essay, I examine the book's

influence, using multiple kinds of evidence. Even as I trace the influence of the book as a whole, I pay special attention to its third chapter: “An Unthinkable History: The Haitian Revolution as a Non-Event.” In the essay’s second half, I argue that, despite the influence of *Silencing* in general and of this chapter in particular, the reception of “Unthinkable History” has been uneven. While some of Trouillot’s arguments in the chapter are now widely accepted, others have been neglected, and debate remains on still others. I focus especially on the essay’s influence on scholarship of the Haitian Revolution. My main argument in this section is that although the essay has helped to make the Haitian Revolution more widely known, when non-Haitian scholars write about the Revolution, they often still do so in ways that Trouillot would denounce as “banalizing.” While some of the scholarship I discuss dismisses the Haitian Revolution consciously, I also describe the prevalence of what I call “Me Free Too” scholarship, which writes about the Revolution in unwittingly trivializing ways.

My reception history of *Silencing the Past* concentrates on Anglophone readers, who have been the main audience for the book.² Nevertheless, my analysis of how the “Unthinkable History” chapter has affected Haitian Revolutionary studies examines French and Haitian scholarship as well as Anglophone writings. While *Silencing* itself has not been translated into French, a French version of the “Unthinkable History” chapter was published in Haiti in 1995, so it is more accessible to French and Haitian scholars than other parts of the book. Still, it remains little known and is cited much less frequently than the English version.³

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When Trouillot passed away in 2012, scholars worldwide gathered in cyberspace to share their appreciation of his work. Many spoke specifically of *Silencing* and of its formative influence on the development of their own research. Évelyne Trouillot, Michel-Rolph’s sister as well as a novelist and French professor, described the unique place of this work in her brother’s *oeuvre*. In her travels worldwide, she recounted, she often met people who, upon learning that she was Michel-Rolph’s sister, would say, “Oh! *Silencing the Past!*”⁴

However, when *Silencing* was first published in 1995, its future as a classic of historical theory was not immediately apparent. The book did not receive the wide attention that books recognized as seminal usually do; I have found only seven scholarly reviews of the book, in addition to one in *Foreign Affairs* and the usual reviews in library journals such as *Choice* and *Publishers Weekly*. Though a copy was sent to the *Journal of Haitian Studies*, that journal was in its infancy and did not end up reviewing the book.⁵

A number of the reviews that were published—including those by Caribbean specialists—were sharply critical. David Nicholls, then one of the leading historians of Haiti, scoffed at *Silencing*. In a 1996 review essay that was one of his last writings before he passed away, Nicholls argued that the book's tone was "excruciatingly patronizing and self-consciously didactic." Trouillot's remarks, he added, did not always ring true; Nicholls attributed this to the "limited reading of the author."⁶ Franklin Knight, a leading Caribbeanist and a colleague of Trouillot's at Johns Hopkins University, was even more pointed in his criticism. He argued that *Silencing* was "not . . . coherently argued" but rather a "rambling, intensely personal discussion of a number of seemingly unconnected themes." While general readers might like the book for its claims about the flaws of professional history-writing, professional historians would likely have a different reaction. Knight predicted that they would be "dismayed" by Trouillot's efforts to generalize about the practice of history.⁷

These complaints were echoed in other reviews. Raymond Smith, an emeritus professor in the University of Chicago's Department of Anthropology, felt that Trouillot presented fascinating cases, and that the book was a "significant" discussion of the power of European cultural hegemony. Still, Smith felt that the book sometimes oversimplified its subject matter out of a desire to be accessible. He also objected to Trouillot's numerous references to having been raised in a family of historians; in his view, the power of the book's arguments were undercut "by a recurrent thread of autobiography that comes close to suggesting that the whole enterprise is merely an extension of Trouillot's special upbringing." Smith further protested that Trouillot overgeneralized about academic historians.⁸ The anonymous reviewer in *Kirkus Reviews* made similar charges. He contended that Trouillot overstated his own originality by "retrac[ing] thoroughly trodden ground" and "giv[ing] only nodding mention to the serious scholars who have done better work on the topic." He also criticized Trouillot's use of "a rather strange set of personal meditations apparently aimed at filling the baffling silence that history as objective truth leaves in the minds of his students."⁹

In contrast to these reactions, other reviews hinted at a more positive future for the book. In the *American Historical Review*, Thongchai Winichakul (a historian of Southeast Asia) argued that the book was "written with clarity, wit, and style" and should be read by "everyone interested in historical culture." In *Social History*, Robert Gregg, a specialist in African American history, called the work "beautifully written and engaging." He focused on how Trouillot exposed the process by which historical silences

are made.¹⁰ *Foreign Affairs* called *Silencing* “a beautifully written, superior book.” The book also received positive reviews from *Choice* and *Booklist*.¹¹

Silencing’s “Unthinkable History” chapter received particular praise from reviewers. Even the most critical appraisals of the book conceded Trouillot’s main point in that chapter, that the Haitian Revolution had been neglected by Western scholars. Nicholls noted that “here [Trouillot] is undoubtedly on solid ground. Silence about this revolution has been striking.” Knight called the “Unthinkable” chapter “the strongest, most broadly persuasive and most interesting part of the book. . . . The book points out that the Haitian Revolution has not been widely accepted as one of the most significant revolutions in world history.”¹² Focusing on this chapter, Robert Paquette, a specialist in early American history (including the influence of the Haitian Revolution in Louisiana), offered a critique that would recur among Haitian Revolution specialists discussing the book. He stated that Trouillot had oversimplified how whites had perceived slaves; not all whites had found a slave revolution “unthinkable.” Nevertheless, Paquette found that the chapter was compelling overall.¹³

Despite these mixed reviews, *Silencing* eventually became a staggering success. To illustrate its significance, I will refer to three kinds of data. First, I will present some statistical indications of how often the book is cited, compared to similar studies published at roughly the same time. These are based on Google Scholar, which, while not exhaustive, is one of the most up-to-date citation indexes, offering useful comparative snapshots. Second, I will give a sample of the range of college courses in which the book is assigned at North American universities. Finally, I will examine qualitative reflections on *Silencing* that scholars left online following Trouillot’s death. I will focus particularly on appraisals of the “Unthinkable” chapter.

Before turning to *Silencing*’s citation statistics, let me offer some context for understanding them. Books about Haiti in English tend not to have an enormous readership; moreover, most monographs, no matter their field, tend to be read by small groups of specialists. To understand the kind of citation numbers that even a successful book in the humanities or social sciences garners, here are some comparisons. In 1995–96, a number of influential books in Old Regime and revolutionary French history were published. Timothy Tackett’s *Becoming a Revolutionary*, which won the American Historical Association’s Leo Gershoy Award for best book in early modern European history, had received 107 citations on Google Scholar by December 2013. Gary Kates’s *Monsieur d’Eon is a Woman: A Tale of Political Intrigue and Sexual Masquerade*, another acclaimed 1995 book, had received 54 citations.

Moving back to the early 1990s, we can include statistics from some other celebrated books on the French or Haitian Revolution. By the end of 2013, Carolyn Fick's 1990 *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (which had a head start over the books from 1995–96) had received an impressive 350 citations. Robert Darnton's 1995 *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-revolutionary France* had received 386. Lynn Hunt's widely acclaimed 1992 study *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* had received 629. Though Fick's book has been seminal in Haitian revolutionary studies, it has fewer citations than the other two books, likely because of French history's preeminence in the historical profession and because Hunt and Darnton are so renowned that they later served as presidents of the American Historical Association. Still, the numbers for *Making of Haiti* make it one of the most successful books on Haitian history in recent decades. The citations for it exceed those for other leading English-language books on Haitian history published in the 1990s. For instance, Colin [Joan] Dayan's *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (1995) had 310 citations; Paul Farmer's *The Uses of Haiti* (1994) had 288; and Patrick Bellegarde-Smith's *Haiti: The Breached Citadel* (1990) had 114.

Silencing's astonishing influence can be better understood against these numbers. Since its modest debut, the book has gone on to become an undisputed classic of historical theory. As of December 2013, Google Scholar listed 1691 citations for the book. This number dwarfed the indisputable success of Trouillot's other books (such as *Haiti: State against Nation*, cited 355 times, and *Peasants and Capital*, cited 151 times). Its citation numbers rival that of C. L. R. James's celebrated 1938 study *The Black Jacobins*, which has had many more decades in which to garner fame. Though Google Scholar is not exhaustive, *Silencing* now exceeds *The Black Jacobins* (1674) in citations there.¹⁴ *Silencing* is fast becoming the most-cited study ever on Haitian history; it is also one of the most cited books in the humanities and social sciences of recent decades.

What kinds of studies have benefitted from and built upon Trouillot's insights? Some sample titles indicate the range of his influence: Thomas Bender's *A Nation among Nations: America's Place in World History* (2006); Stephan Palmié's *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition* (2002); Anne Brower Stahl's *Making History in Banda: Anthropological Visions of Africa's Past* (2001); and Miriam Peskowitz's *Spinning Fantasies: Rabbis, Gender, and History* (1997). Because *Silencing* is such a multifaceted book, the book is not famous only for one concept. Scholars often invoke it when mentioning how the Haitian Revolution has been forgotten, but they also use it for more general points. These include highlighting other historical processes as "unthinkable"; underscoring how power affects the

production of history and of archives; pointing to silences in historical narratives; or applying postcolonial theory to history.¹⁵

In addition to being invoked frequently in scholarly works, *Silencing* is often assigned in university courses (both graduate and undergraduate). It is commonly assigned in Caribbean or Latin American courses in North American universities.¹⁶ It has also been used in courses on US history, whether on memory in the American South or on African American history.¹⁷ The book also appears on more diverse syllabi. These include a course at Berkeley on the “Politics of Memory in the Contemporary Middle East”; one at Brown called “Decolonizing Minds: Towards a People’s History of the World”; and another at Wisconsin–Madison on “Media History and Historiography in the Digital Age.”¹⁸ In addition, the book is frequently assigned in courses on history and theory (whether in History, Anthropology or other departments). Some of the questions it raises for discussion in such classes are: What is history and how does it work? How is history produced in archives? What is the relationship between memory and history?¹⁹ The book is used so often that when Claudine Michel put *Silencing* on the syllabus for her 2012 course on Haiti at the University of California, Santa Barbara, her teaching assistant (Brian Wiley) reported that he himself had been required to read Trouillot in every theory/methodology course he had ever taken as an undergraduate and graduate student, in three departments and at two universities.²⁰

Scholars who assign the book report having had tremendous success with it. As Steven Lubar, a professor of American Studies and History at Brown University, explained:

Silencing the Past is the only book that has been on my syllabus every time I have taught an introduction to public history or public humanities. . . . *Silencing the Past* [is] almost always the favorite book in evaluations and the one that students are most likely to refer to in other classes. Trouillot’s terms of historical analysis become a code for understanding history, a shorthand for discussing other books.²¹

Similarly, Marie Cruz Soto, a historian of Puerto Rico, uses the book each time she teaches her “Narrating Memory, History, and Place” course at New York University. She notes that “*Silencing the Past* is my favorite book on the politics of history. . . . The book works well in my class because it conveys complex and challenging ideas about the relationship between the past, memory and history. And it does so in a way that can be readily understood by undergraduate students.” Yuko Miki, a historian of Latin

America, calls *Silencing* “one of my favorite texts to use in seminar-type courses.” She praises it not only for its ideas but also for Trouillot having written “elegantly in a prose that students can grasp.” She explains: “Much more than [for] its references to Haitian history, I employ it to have students think about constructions of narratives, facts, the power of the narrator, etc.”²²

Those who assign *Silencing* in undergraduate classes on history and theory have also found it extraordinarily useful. Andrew Ross of Kenyon College notes that *Silencing* is in many ways “the key text of the course.” Because it is so theoretical, he has found, “students committed to notions of objectivity find it particularly daunting.” Nevertheless, once they worked through the whole book, many students seemed transformed by reading it. One student later told him “how much it reshaped the lens she [brought] to reading almost anything.”²³ Instructors do not always assign the whole book, but each seems to have a favorite part to assign. John Ott, a medieval European historian, uses the “Good Day, Columbus” chapter in the Introduction to Historiography course that he teaches at Portland State University to all history majors and minors. Ott praises the book for its ability to raise powerful questions in the minds of students, as well as for introducing postcolonial theory to them in an accessible manner. “Good Day, Columbus,” he notes,

powerfully suggests to students just how very arbitrary many of our “certainties” about the past in fact really are, [and] how much myth influences historical narratives and plays a role in shaping national narratives and stories, while noting that myth is not mere discourse but attached to concrete decisions and power agendas.²⁴

Such reports parallel my own experience teaching *Silencing*. When I taught a graduate seminar in Haitian history for the first time at California State University–San Marcos, “Unthinkable History” turned out to be the ideal way to begin the class. Students responded very enthusiastically to Trouillot’s ideas about how power shapes not just the writing of history but also the process of creating archives. The essay also helped them understand why they had not heard much about the Haitian Revolution. In addition, they were fascinated by Trouillot’s discussion of how eighteenth-century ways of thinking made a slave revolt seem “unthinkable.” (I have never heard the word “ontology” uttered so many times and with such passion in any class session.) When I decided to publish a reader on Haitian historiography,²⁵ I knew that “Unthinkable” must be the first chapter. Users of that anthology have also reported that “Unthinkable” was an

ideal way to introduce students to Haitian history. Naomi Andrews, a French historian at Santa Clara University who taught Haitian history in Fall 2012 using the reader, reported:

I wouldn't start the class with any other text, as it really set the agenda for students' learning. . . . [Trouillot's] reading of both contemporaneous and historical accounts, particularly his emphasis on the banalization of the events that characterizes most of the white accounts (our main primary sources), really helped them read those sources critically.²⁶

Citation data and the widespread adoption of *Silencing* as a textbook are two measures of the book's influence. We can gain further insight into *Silencing's* seminal status by examining tributes to Trouillot that were posted in cyberspace after his death. Scholars who had done their graduate work in the 1990s or 2000s reported having been especially influenced by the book. Régine Jean-Charles, writing on the *Tande* blog, noted: "Reading *Silencing the Past* forever impacted me as a writer, scholar and thinker. Through thoughtful arguments that cut to the core of power, politics & knowledge production, Trouillot taught me that it is possible to write with your head and your heart." Nadège Clitandre added that "Trouillot's work, [in] particular *Silencing the Past*, made us keenly aware of the ways in which Haiti in the era of revolution is very much ingrained in history . . . regardless of how history is rewritten to silence this fact. . . . As a young Haitian scholar, I like to think that I honor him everyday." Laurent Dubois similarly recalled *Silencing's* deep impact on him:

In the Spring of 1994 I was in my second year of graduate school at the University of Michigan when Michel-Rolph Trouillot visited. He presented a draft of what was to become the amazing Chapter 3 of *Silencing the Past*—"The Three Faces of Sans-Souci." . . . It became a kind of charter, or map, for me during the next years, helping me to understand how History and Anthropology (which I was jointly pursuing in my Ph.D. program) could work together. . . . At that time Haiti was still rather "silenced" in much of the academic world. . . . His influence on a generation of scholars was tremendous.²⁷

Claudy Delné and Celucien Joseph also wrote of how *Silencing the Past* had been seminal in shaping the direction of their doctoral research (respectively, on the silencing of the Haitian Revolution in nineteenth- and

twentieth-century European and American novels, and on the emergence of Black Internationalism in the twentieth century).²⁸

In addition to these Haiti specialists, young scholars in other fields spoke of the influence Trouillot's work had on them. Fiona Ross, an anthropologist specializing in issues of truth and reconciliation in South Africa, posted that "*Silencing the Past* remains one of my favorite books ever." She further explained to me that "his ideas about the production of silences in the archive form the basis from which my book *Bearing Witness: Women and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission* [London: Pluto Press, 2002] steps off." Similarly, John Roby, an anthropologist of the African Diaspora, noted that when he first encountered *Silencing* during his graduate work, he could not stop reading it. He reported: "It remains, to me, the single most influential book I have read about the way history is produced."²⁹ More established scholars also sang *Silencing's* praises. Colin Dayan argued that Trouillot had "redefined the meaning of scholarship"; she called *Silencing* a "field-defining, discipline-expanding" work. David Scott stated that *Silencing* had done the most, of all of Trouillot's works, to cement his reputation.³⁰

Haitians who wrote eulogies to Trouillot generally invoked *Ti difè boulé* or *Les Racines historiques* rather than *Silencing* (whether in English or the French version of "Unthinkable").³¹ This parallels the greater importance of his Kreyòl and French-language books in Haiti, even though *Silencing* is occasionally cited in works by Haitian scholars.³² Still, a number of the Haitians writing about Trouillot's death acknowledged the importance of *Silencing* in making foreigners more aware of Haitian history. Radio Kiskeya noted that *Silencing* had "*devenu un livre culte dans certaines universités américaines*" (become a cult classic in certain American universities).³³

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Given how influential *Silencing* has been, one might expect that its critique of the field eighteen years ago would no longer be relevant. Since so many scholars have read and treasured it, one might surmise that its critiques must have already changed the field. To some extent, this is true. Nevertheless, as the rest of this essay will seek to demonstrate, the impact of the "Unthinkable" chapter on the study of the Haitian Revolution has been uneven. Though parts of Trouillot's arguments have already changed the field, others have been challenged recently, and still other parts have been disregarded. I wish to highlight some of these latter points, since some of Trouillot's warnings about the failings of foreign writings on the Haitian Revolution remain acutely relevant today.

To compare the impact of different parts of “Unthinkable,” I want to lay out the different arguments that I see Trouillot making in the chapter. In addition to the overall points about power and history that recur throughout *Silencing*, Trouillot made three main claims that were particular to “Unthinkable History.” First, he argued, the Haitian Revolution was unthinkable at the time it occurred, and was therefore silenced and ignored. Second, he contended, what made it unthinkable was entrenched racism in eighteenth-century Europe and the Americas (even among Enlightenment thinkers). Finally, Trouillot pointed out, even in the modern West (where racism is less overt), the Revolution has remained unthinkable to this day. Trouillot characterized foreign writing about Haiti as falling into two categories: tropes of erasure and tropes of banalization. Where the former omitted the Haitian Revolution from history books, the second acknowledged the Revolution but dismissed its significance.

As part of this argument, Trouillot further distinguished between how Haitian and foreign historians have tended to write about the Haitian Revolution. Haitian writers have often treated the Revolution more heroically (“most of the literature produced in Haiti remains respectful—too respectful, I would say—of the revolutionary leaders”). Foreign scholarship is generally based on more precise archival detail. Yet foreigners writing about Haiti, Trouillot argued, still tend to dismiss the Revolution’s significance, in a way eerily reminiscent of Saint Domingue’s colonists: “The history produced outside of Haiti is increasingly sophisticated and rich empirically. Yet its vocabulary and often its entire discursive framework recall frighteningly those of the eighteenth century. Papers and monographs take the tone of plantation records.” Trouillot further contended that even if foreign historians do not intend to be racist, they often cannot help themselves, for “the narrative structures of Western historiography have not broken with the ontological order of the renaissance.” While acknowledging that there are a few historians who do not fit this neat categorization (for instance, Carolyn Fick on the foreign side and Marcel and Claude Auguste on the Haitian side), Trouillot called for a new way of writing about Haitian revolutionary history that would embrace the best of each side. “The solution may be for the two historiographic traditions—that of Haiti and that of the ‘foreign’ specialists—to merge or to generate a new perspective that encompasses the best of each. There are indications of a move in this direction.”³⁴

In many ways, the field of Haitian Revolution studies (and the larger place of the Haitian Revolution in North American academia) looks quite different than in 1995. North American scholars routinely point to the impact of the Haitian Revolution, even if it is not yet widely known among

the general public. The topic is often invoked in world history surveys and in French Revolution classes.³⁵

For this reason, scholars who have taught the “Unthinkable” chapter in recent years have told me that this aspect of the chapter is now its least important. Yvonne Fabella, a scholar of colonial Saint Domingue who assigns *Silencing* in her course at the University of Pennsylvania on “Race and Slavery in the French Atlantic World,” discovered that history students found this part dated when they read it in 2010. Though they found other portions of the book helpful,

the students reacted curiously [to the argument about the Revolution being silenced]. Many of these majors claimed that the methodological discussion was ‘old news,’ and that the Haitian Revolution is not silenced anymore. These kids had at least had some exposure to it in their high school history classes and a course or two at Penn.

While Naomi Andrews’s students at Santa Clara had not encountered the Revolution much in their previous coursework, they quickly realized as they read other scholarship from the last fifteen years that the “argument about the revolution being unthinkable had done its work and was no longer relevant.”³⁶

It is of course true that Trouillot’s points have been heeded more in North America and in England than in France. The Haitian Revolution is still largely ignored in French academia, where Trouillot’s book has had a much more limited reception. Very few of Trouillot’s books are owned by French libraries,³⁷ and *Silencing* is not cited at all in some major French-produced works on Haitian history in the late 1990s and 2000s.³⁸ Dominique Rogers, a historian of Saint Domingue at the Université des Antilles et de la Guyane in Martinique, reported to me that in general “*Silencing the Past* est effectivement peu connu en France” (“*Silencing the Past* is in fact little known in France”) even though she has heard it discussed often among her closest colleagues.³⁹ The neglect of Trouillot stems certainly from general French disinterest in the history of Haiti and of slavery (what I have called “Atlantic Amnesia”).⁴⁰ Still, even when they discuss the idea that the history of the Haitian Revolution has been ignored, French scholars tend to cite not Trouillot but Yves Benot, who wrote on the subject before *Silencing* and whose work Trouillot also referenced. Still, *Silencing* is starting to get more attention in France (as are slavery and the Haitian Revolution in general). The book has begun appearing on bibliographies of texts on slavery written by leading French scholars, and it has started to appear on at least some French course syllabi.⁴¹

As to whether the Revolution was “unthinkable” while it was happening, this point has attracted more controversy. Like Robert Paquette, David Geggus has been skeptical of Trouillot’s idea that the Revolution was “unthinkable” to all whites. He has noted that whites in the 1780s seemed only too aware that slaves might revolt. Referring to reports that slaveowners “walked on barrels of gunpowder,” and expected a revolt “sooner or later,” Geggus notes that “such premonitions raise some doubt about categorizing the Haitian Revolution as an ‘unthinkable event,’ as Rolph Trouillot memorably called it.” Nick Nesbitt has argued that “the Haitian Revolution was in no sense unthinkable as its events unfolded”; “adequate instruments” of thought,” such as revolutionary universalism, “were readily available” for making sense of the slave revolt.⁴²

Similarly, Ada Ferrer, while agreeing with many of Trouillot’s points, has sought to nuance the idea that fearful whites silenced the Revolution completely. She writes:

If Trouillot has provided a much-needed and powerful condemnation of the relative silence that has surrounded the Haitian Revolution to the present, other authors have shown that at the time . . . everyone seemed to be talking and thinking about events in Saint-Domingue. . . . If this was silence, it was a thunderous one indeed.

Ferrer has also sought to “move beyond” the idea of silencing, in order to see how the archive can contain “the traces of the operation of its own power.” To her, careful reading of archives can show how processes of silencing were attempted, but also how they could fail.⁴³

Sibylle Fischer has been especially critical of the “unthinkable” framework. She has argued that the notion that the Haitian Revolution was unthinkable paradoxically serves to make it easier to ignore. Like Ferrer, she questions the idea that the Revolution was successfully silenced. Secondly, she maintains, it is inaccurate to talk about a single “framework of Western thought” which could not accommodate the details of the Haitian Revolution. Fischer notes that ideas were hotly contested in the age of the Atlantic Revolutions, rather than unified and fixed: “Instead of assuming that the Haitian Revolution is best accounted for as ‘not fitting’ certain always-already established Western paradigms, it would seem more plausible to think that the paradigms themselves developed, at least partially, in response to those events in the Caribbean.”⁴⁴ This framework, which imagines the Revolution as being very thinkable—but silenced because of fear—parallels how Yves Benot, Christopher Miller,

and I have discussed foreigners' reactions to the Revolution. (Miller and Benot have spoken of "forgetting" Haiti, while I have used the idea of a willful "amnesia.")⁴⁵ Finally, Fischer challenges the very idea of "silencing," suggesting that it is incompatible with something that is unthinkable: "Would we bother to impose silence if we found the proposition in question 'unthinkable'?" She argues that unless we can figure out how the effort to deny reality works, "we will continue to reproduce the silences" that Trouillot chronicled.⁴⁶

Despite these disagreements, it is uncontested that Trouillot did much to reverse the exclusion of the Haitian Revolution from modern historiography, at least in the Anglophone world. No longer do scholars omit Haiti when thinking about the age of Atlantic Revolutions. Only a few years after Franklin Knight's review of *Silencing* (in which he conceded that the book's strongest part was its argument about the Revolution's importance), Knight was invited to write a milestone, synthesizing essay on the Revolution for the *American Historical Review*. He argued there that the Haitian Revolution was "the most thorough case study of revolutionary change anywhere in the history of the modern world." Laurent Dubois (who attributed so much of his inspiration to Trouillot) has similarly contributed to making foreigners more aware of the Haitian Revolution's significance. His 2004 book *Avengers of the New World* won multiple prizes and was reviewed in newspapers like the *New York Times*.⁴⁷ Other recent works also engage seriously with *Silencing*. It is hard today not to recognize the Revolution's impact, as well as Trouillot's role in making foreigners aware of it.

What has been the impact of Trouillot's second point, that the Revolution was unthinkable because eighteenth-century Europeans thought in ontologically racist ways? As Fischer's argument indicates, it is debatable whether one can generalize about European ideas at any one time. (I am particularly sympathetic to this point as someone who was trained as a European intellectual historian and who remains interested in competing discourses.) Nevertheless, I would suggest, it is incontrovertible that Trouillot awakened many readers to the racism that existed among European thinkers in this "enlightened" age. Certainly, Trouillot was not alone in noting that Enlightenment thinkers could have racist thoughts. A number of scholars focused on this issue before *Silencing* was published, and Trouillot built upon and cited their works in "Unthinkable History."⁴⁸ While this part of the article still startles students, the idea that the *philosophes* could be racist is now fairly well established among specialists, and not necessarily on account of *Silencing*. The case made in this part of

the essay, it seems to me, no longer seems as pressing as in 1995, though it continues to undergird Trouillot's larger points in the essay.

The last part of the essay seems to have had the most limited impact. I am speaking of Trouillot's idea that in the 1980s and 1990s scholars were continuing to reproduce older ways of talking about Haiti, even if they did not imagine themselves as racist. In my view, this is the part of the essay that most begs for rereading today. Trouillot wrote: "The revolution that was thought impossible by its contemporaries has also been silenced by historians. Amazing in this story is the extent to which historians have treated the events of Saint-Domingue in ways similar to the reactions of its Western contemporaries" (*SP* 96). Trouillot complained both of the "tropes of erasure" that wiped the Haitian Revolution from the historical record, and the "tropes of banalization" that dismissed the Revolution's significance. He argued that banalizers tend to "empty a number of singular events of their revolutionary content so that the entire string of facts . . . becomes trivialized." He said that these modern scholars' writings "recall the explanations of the . . . overseers and administrators in Saint-Domingue" (*SP* 96). When the Revolution is acknowledged, it is dismissed as not having been a real "revolution" like others of the era. Either the slaves themselves did not lead it ("The uprising must have been 'prompted,' 'provoked,' or 'suggested' by some higher being than the slaves themselves: royalists, mulattoes, or other external agents" [*SP* 103]), or else scholars refuse to accept that slaves could have had independent ideas about freedom, believing that they were savage, rather than progressive.

The tropes of erasure about which Trouillot spoke have largely disappeared since 1995. The Haitian Revolution has received so much attention in recent years from historians that it is no longer acceptable for scholars to omit it from larger narratives of Atlantic Revolutions or world history. Moreover, a new generation of foreign scholars has arisen, scholars who write about it with archival precision and do not banalize it. These scholars are doing the kind of work that Trouillot called for in "Unthinkable": they avoid overly heroic and respectful treatments of revolutionary leaders, while still recognizing the extraordinary achievements of the only successful slave rebellion in the Americas.⁴⁹ As a result of the work of these scholars, Haitian studies increasingly has an important place in the historical profession, even if the Revolution is still largely unknown to foreigners outside academia.

Even while the trope of erasure has largely disappeared from English-speaking academia, there are still a few scholars who use tropes of banalization when discussing the Haitian Revolution. Even as these

scholars recognize that the Haitian Revolution was too important to be left out of scholarly analyses, they still dismiss its character as barbaric. In 2009, Wim Klooster published his comparative study *Revolutions in the Atlantic World*, which had the virtue of including Haiti's revolution alongside those of the United States, France and Latin America. In this way, Klooster's work departed sharply from the earlier treatments of the Atlantic Revolutions such as R. R. Palmer's. And yet, Klooster could not accept that Haiti's revolution was equally democratic to those of the United States and France, let alone more so. Whereas Laurent Dubois has written that the Haitian Revolution was more democratic than its counterparts because it was the only one to "creat[e] a society in which all people, of all colors, were granted freedom and citizenship," Klooster had a darker view. He wrote that Haiti's leaders "had an aversion to *any* form of democracy. Authoritarianism was the rule there." To him, the Haitian case was "extreme." Klooster also omitted any discussion of slave resistance in Haiti before the revolution began in 1791. In contrast to scholars like Carolyn Fick and Dubois who have stressed the agency of slaves in freeing themselves, Klooster presented the abolition of slavery as a metropolitan-driven process divorced from any ongoing resistance by slaves themselves.⁵⁰

Philippe Girard has also treated Haiti in a way that recalls Trouillot's critiques of foreign writing about Haiti. In his 2011 book *The Slaves Who Overthrew Napoleon*, Girard criticized those scholars who have seen the white colonists as evil and the revolutionaries as heroic; he portrayed Haitian revolutionaries as motivated more by greed than ideology. In his study, the Haitian Revolution appears not as a great struggle for freedom, but as a power grab by one group of leaders against another.⁵¹ And yet, as Girard has sought to show that the Haitian Revolution was really about greed rather than race or slavery, he has selectively invoked Trouillot to support his arguments. In a 2012 article in the venerable *William and Mary Quarterly* that was sharply critical of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Girard lambasted the work of Haitian historians. To him, their work had been "polluted by racial politics." Where Haitians venerated Dessalines as the father of national independence, Girard argued that they had a distorted and partial view of the emperor. To support his argument, Girard quoted this passage from *Silencing*:

Books on Dessalines can be highly polemical and unscholarly. "Most of the literature produced in Haiti remains respectful—too respectful, I would say—of the revolutionary leaders," wrote Michel-Rolph Trouillot. "They

excel at putting facts into perspective, but their facts are weak, sometimes wrong, especially since the Duvalier regime explicitly politicized historical discourse.”

Girard then proceeded to describe the multiple US, British and French archives based on which he would show that Haitian writing on Dessalines was erroneous. In another essay, Girard and a French colleague named Jean-Louis Donnadieu invoked Trouillot’s idea of “silencing” as they discussed how Toussaint had manipulatively “silenced” unflattering parts of his past such as being a slaveowner or having fathered multiple children with different women.⁵²

Girard’s work did correspond to one aspect of Trouillot’s argument in the last section of “Unthinkable”: that Haitian scholars’ work often suffers from having little access to archives and can be overly heroic. However, Girard and Donnadieu ignored the part of Trouillot’s argument that applied to foreign scholars like themselves: that their research may be “rich empirically,” but that their interpretive framework often mirrored too much that of white colonists in the eighteenth century (*SP* 105–106). Their reading of *Silencing* was a partial one, divorced from the work’s larger post-colonial perspective. Trouillot had for instance noted the power relations that provided Western scholars with easier access to archival information as well as to the tools of historical analysis. “The writing and reading of Haitian historiography,” he wrote in *Silencing*’s Sans Souci chapter, “implies literacy and formal access to a Western—primarily French—language and culture, two prerequisites that already exclude the majority of Haitians from direct participation” (55). Few Haitians had the money or leisure to write history, he noted, and those who did (whether businessmen, physicians, or lawyers) often lacked professional training in the (Western) historical “guild’s” standards. Thus, he noted, it was easy for Westerners to be dismissive of the histories produced by Haitian writers, even if the latter offered better interpretive perspectives than Western scholars with easier archival access.⁵³

Foreign scholars who are not specialists in Haitian history also sometimes speak of Haiti in banalizing ways. At a conference in the early 2000s, I heard a famous scholar compare the world’s declarations of independence, while mocking the Haitian one as a barbarous exception. He cited Boisrond-Tonnerre’s assertion that a declaration of independence for Haiti could not be written without using the blood of white men for ink. This comment was used as a laugh line rendering Haiti as an outlier in the age of revolutions. The scholar provided no context for this polemical remark, which grew out of the extreme violence of slavery and the rage

felt by former slaves; a logical observer would have to allow that Haitian revolutionaries were angrier than a Virginia patrician like Thomas Jefferson, since he had never encountered the brutality of actual slavery, only a metaphorical “slavery” to the British. And yet, in this paper Haiti served only to provide a shocking moment of comic relief, set against the more high-minded manifestos of the time by whites.

Another example of the persistence of banalizing tropes comes from a 2013 article on the *History News Network* (an otherwise wonderful website run by George Mason University’s Center for History and New Media). When I came across an essay there on Thomas Jefferson and Haiti, I expected it to be a sign of how US historians increasingly recognize the importance of early US–Haitian relations. Yet the article, by a historian named Thomas Fleming, praised Thomas Jefferson while describing Dessalines as a “very angry black man” who “marched his army across the island . . . , killed every French white man, woman and child, and declared himself leader of a new country.” Here also, one revolution was “not like the others”: Haitian slaves were savage barbarians, while slaveowners’ crimes remained shrouded in silence.⁵⁴

Certainly, such overtly hostile dismissals of the Haitian Revolution are rare among professional scholars in a post-Trouillot world. However, there is a way of treating Haiti that is well intentioned but perhaps even more pernicious, precisely because it is more widespread. I call this approach the “Me Free Too” interpretation of the Haitian Revolution (based on a famous set of famous French revolutionary images which depict an African man and woman each declaring “Moi Libre Aussi,” or “Me Free Too”).⁵⁵ “Me Free Too” scholarship on the Haitian Revolution implies that slaves in Saint Domingue would not have imagined revolting until they overheard talk from white Frenchmen about “liberty, equality, and fraternity.” This mode of thought overlooks the history of pre-1789 slave resistance on the island. It also reflects certain assumptions of Eurocentric thinking more generally; it portrays non-Westerners as passive objects who act in history only when awakened by Western ideas.

Such scholarship already existed before Trouillot wrote in 1995. In “Unthinkable,” Trouillot wrote: “Many historians are more willing to accept the idea that slaves could have been influenced by whites or free mulattoes, with whom we know they had limited contacts, than they are willing to accept the idea that slaves could have convinced other slaves that they had the right to revolt” (*SP* 103). He maintained that slaves were not simply borrowing French ideals:

The leaders of the rebellion did not ask for an abstractly couched “freedom.” Rather, their most sweeping demands included three days a week to work on their own gardens and the elimination of the whip. These were not Jacobinist demands adapted to the tropics. . . . These were slave demands with the strong peasant touch that would characterize independent Haiti. But such evidence of an internal drive . . . is simply ignored, and this ignorance produces a silence of trivialization. (*SP* 103–104)

Trouillot explained further that making the French Revolution a necessary precursor to the Haitian one “trivializes the slaves’ independent sense of their right to freedom and the right to achieve this by force of arms” (*SP* 104).

Even C. L. R. James, author of the pioneering book *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938), fell into the same pattern, Trouillot contended. Though James did much to convince others that the Haitian Revolution was a “real” revolution, Trouillot argued that James’s title (*The Black Jacobins*) turned the Haitian revolutionaries into derivatives of the French ones. In the *Sans Souci* chapter, Trouillot argued that even Haitian historians fell into this trap. Given that many of the books on this era that Haitian scholars read came from foreigners, he argued, Haitians have also tended to overemphasize the French intellectual origins of the Haitian Revolution while ignoring its African ones. The roots of this stemmed not only from few Haitians being knowledgeable about African history, but also “because Haitian historians (like everyone else) long assumed that victorious strategies could come only from the Europeans or the most Europeanized slaves.”⁵⁶

This is one area, I would argue, in which Trouillot’s words have been largely ignored, especially by those outside of Haitian Revolutionary studies. Indeed, French scholars of the revolutionary era often ignore Haiti altogether. But even when they turn to the events in Haiti, they often describe them as an imitation of the French Revolution or a mere portion of that revolution (“la Révolution française à Saint-Domingue” [“the French Revolution in Saint Domingue”]).⁵⁷ World history textbooks published in the United States include the Haitian Revolution with more regularity. However, the way they include it, no matter how well intended, often leaves something to be desired. Generally, slaves are described as getting the idea to revolt from hearing about French revolutionary ideas. That slaves came to Saint Domingue with their own worldviews from Africa, which may have prompted their revolt rather than European ideas,

is almost never discussed.⁵⁸ Foreign films on the Revolution have also tended to assume that Haitian slaves did not originate the idea for their own revolution, but were either manipulated by whites into revolting or copied ideas from French thinkers. This is true not only of older classics like Gillo Pontecorvo's *Burn!* (1969), but also of newer movies like Philippe Niang's French miniseries *Toussaint Louverture* (2012).⁵⁹ In many ways, the Haitian Revolution remains as "unthinkable" as it has always been to foreigners.

* * *

In this essay, I have noted the tremendous impact that Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past* has had on students and scholars in diverse fields. The book is one of the most important books ever published on Haitian history or on historical theory. The "Unthinkable History" chapter has been particularly famous. However, as I also have noted, one should not assume that the battle launched by Trouillot in the essay has been won. Certain points of his argument remain contested, and other parts have been disregarded. Foreigners still need to grapple with Trouillot's critique of the discourse of banalization. Moreover, more work can be done to unite the skills of Haitian and foreign scholars: deep knowledge of Haitian history over the long term on the one hand, and archival access and historiographical training on the other.⁶⁰ Trouillot's nuanced, powerful diagnosis of existing historiography on the Haitian Revolution—and his prescription for how it could improve—is still strongly applicable. At the risk of Trouillot's legacy being distorted, "Unthinkable" needs rereading; despite the wide audience for his book, certain silences persist.

Notes

I am grateful to Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, Claudine Michel, and Nadève Ménard for their encouragement as I pursued this topic; and to all of them as well as Jennifer Heuer, Matthew J. Smith, and Kate Ramsey for their extremely helpful comments on earlier drafts. I also want to express deep thanks to the scholars named within the article for having shared with me via e-mail their reflections on *Silencing* or on its history.

¹ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past* [referred to throughout the article as "*Silencing*" and in parenthetical notes as *SP*].

² Interestingly, *Silencing* has had less impact in the Anglophone Caribbean than elsewhere in the Anglophone world. Matthew J. Smith notes that in the

British West Indies and elsewhere, other works by Trouillot (particularly his anthropological writings and *State against Nation*) have had a greater impact than *Silencing* (personal communication, August 7, 2013).

- ³ See Trouillot, “Penser l’impensable” in the bibliography. I have found a comparatively small number of references to this essay (none on Google Scholar, and seven via a general Google search). An earlier version of “Unthinkable” appeared as “From Planters’ Journals to Academia: The Haitian Revolution as Unthinkable History,” *Journal of Caribbean History* 25, no. 1/2 (1991): 81–99.
- ⁴ See July 5, 2012 entry and comments section on the *Tande* blog, run by Évelyne Trouillot’s daughter Nadève Ménard and by Régine Jean-Charles.
- ⁵ A review copy was received by the *Journal of Haitian Studies* [henceforth “*JOHS*”]; see “Books Received,” 194. A citation for *Silencing* was also used as the model for the bibliographic style that the *JOHS* would use in book reviews (“Guide for Contributors,” inside back cover). Alex Dupuy (the *JOHS*’s first book review editor) does not recall if *Silencing* was sent out to a potential reviewer and simply not returned. Patrick Bellegarde-Smith (then a *JOHS* associate editor) and Claudine Michel (later the journal’s editor-in-chief) add that when *Silencing* was published, the journal had just published its first issue, so the process of commissioning reviews was only being established. All three confirm that the book was not ignored intentionally (personal communications from Dupuy, July 15, 2013; Michel, July 16, 2013; and Bellegarde-Smith, July 16, 2013). Certainly, the book’s import in Haitian studies was clear enough by 2004 that it was listed that year among the classics of the field (Editorial Staff of the *JOHS*, “Classical Books on Haiti,” 192).
- ⁶ Nicholls, review, 724. Nicholls’s harshness toward *Silencing* does not appear to have been personal. In the same review essay, while reviewing a different edited collection, he singled out for praise Trouillot’s chapter in it.
- ⁷ Franklin W. Knight, review, 483–84.
- ⁸ Smith, review, 118–20. Trouillot was in fact hired by the Chicago Anthropology Department a few years after Smith’s retirement, and a year after this review appeared (Smith had become an emeritus professor in 1995). By the time Trouillot joined the faculty, the two had developed an abiding respect for each other (personal communication from Anne Ch’ien, Administrator of the Graduate Program, University of Chicago Department of Anthropology, July 24, 2013).
- ⁹ *Kirkus Reviews*, unsigned review.
- ¹⁰ Winichakul, review, 426–27; Gregg, review, 223–25. See also the positive appraisal of *Silencing* by Roseberry, “*Review Essay*,” 926–31; and the review in *American Studies International*, which called it an “accessible book filled with wisdom and humanity” (Mergen, “Book Notes,” 73).
- ¹¹ *Foreign Affairs*, review, 152; T. J. Knight, review; Freeman, review.

- ¹² Nicholls, review, 724; Franklin W. Knight, review, 484.
- ¹³ Paquette, review, 189–90.
- ¹⁴ When I began this research in early 2013, *The Black Jacobins* had more Google Scholar citations than *Silencing*, but *Silencing* had steadily overtaken it by the year's end.
- ¹⁵ This list, which is not exhaustive, is based on reviewing a sample of the books that Google Scholar shows as citing *Silencing*, and on an informal content analysis of how Trouillot is invoked in them.
- ¹⁶ Sample syllabi featuring *Silencing the Past* may be found at the following university websites: http://www.history.ucsb.edu/courses/course.php?course_id=1269 (University of California, Santa Barbara); <http://www.sfu.ca/content/dam/sfu/history/Course%20Outlines/2012/fall%202012/History%20208%20Fall%202012.pdf> (Simon Fraser University); <http://faculty.vassar.edu/tavarez/courses/ANTH%20261%20syllabus.pdf> (Vassar College); and <http://userwww.sfsu.edu/onate/Hist830.htm> (San Francisco State University). The syllabi listed here and in subsequent footnotes constitute only a sample of the many on which *Silencing* is assigned.
- ¹⁷ http://www.unc.edu/~brundage/History_006I_syllabus.htm (University of North Carolina); <http://en.convdocs.org/docs/index-67709.html> (University of British Columbia).
- ¹⁸ <http://history.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/courses/103%20Syllabus%20T%20W%20Hill.pdf> (University of California, Berkeley); <http://www.brown.edu/Courses/uploads/AMST%3A1904V%3A2012-Fall%3AS01.pdf> (Brown University); and <http://courses.commart.wisc.edu/955> (University of Wisconsin, Madison).
- ¹⁹ <http://blogs.swarthmore.edu/burke/2006/11/17/prod-hist-draft/> (Swarthmore College); http://www.anthropology.hawaii.edu/people/faculty/White/syllabi/Anth_408_syll_S08.pdf (University of Hawai'i); <http://wp.stockton.edu/mcdonald/files/2007/08/Hist-4655-ASH-Power-Syllabus-Fall-2010.pdf> (Stockton College); and <http://history.ucsd.edu/Syllabi/Fall%202012/HIGR%20200-FA12-Biess.pdf> (University of California, San Diego).
- ²⁰ Personal communications from Claudine Michel, July 16, 2013, and Brian Wiley, August 2, 2013.
- ²¹ Lubar, "Reflecting on Texts"; Marie Cruz Soto, personal communication, July 18, 2013 (syllabus at <http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/courses/detail.SP2013.IDSEM-UG1535.001.html> [New York University]).
- ²² Yuko Miki, personal communication, July 24, 2013; syllabus at <http://artsci.wustl.edu/~ymiki/49YM/syllabus.html> (Washington University in St. Louis; URL discontinued).
- ²³ Andrew Israel Ross, personal communication, July 19, 2013; syllabus at <http://www.andrewisraelross.com/fl2pt/course-syllabus/> (Kenyon College).

- ²⁴ John Ott, personal communication, August 6, 2013; syllabus at <http://web.pdx.edu/~ott/hst300/> (Portland State University).
- ²⁵ Sepinwall, *Haitian History*.
- ²⁶ Naomi Andrews, personal communication, July 18, 2013. I have heard such reports from many other scholars who teach “Unthinkable,” including Kate Ramsey, who notes that the chapter “enables students who have little to no knowledge of the Haitian Revolution to reflect on why that might be so, and also . . . gets them to think immediately about how power operates in the archives and shapes historical writing” (personal communication, August 8, 2013).
- ²⁷ Comment on Ménard and Jean-Charles, “Michel-Rolph Trouillot,” *Tande*. For further indications of Trouillot’s influence, see other comments on the *Tande* post (which include my own reflections); the memorial appreciation of *Silencing* by Antrosio, Williams, and Woodson, “In Memoriam,” which refers to it as Trouillot’s “most influential book”; “Dr. Michel-Rolph Trouillot,” *Voices from Haiti*; Bonilla, “Burning Questions.” I am grateful to Jason Antrosio for compiling a web bibliography of reactions to Trouillot’s death, which facilitated analyzing such reactions (“In Memoriam”).
- ²⁸ Comments on Ménard and Jean-Charles, “Michel-Rolph Trouillot,” *Tande*; Delné, “Le Bâilonnement de la Révolution”; Joseph, “The Haitian Turn.”
- ²⁹ Ross, comment on “Passing of Esteemed Anthropologist”; Roby, “In Memoriam.”
- ³⁰ Dayan, “Remembering Trouillot”; Scott, “The Futures of Michel-Rolph Trouillot,” vii–x.
- ³¹ See posts by Haitians on the *Tande* blog, which tended to focus on other parts of Trouillot’s oeuvre; as well as the links by Haitians in Antrosio, “In Memoriam.”
- ³² A recent collection by Haitian scholars (Hector and Hurbon, *Genèse de l'état haïtien*) includes a number of references to *Silencing* (in the essays by Laënnec Hurbon, Jean Casimir and Franklin Midy), while discussing it less than *Les Racines historiques de l'État dualiéren*. Michèle Oriol references *Silencing* in her *Histoire et dictionnaire de la révolution*.
- ³³ See for instance “Vibrant hommage.” Josué Pr. Dahomey also invoked *Silencing* briefly (“Michel-Rolph Trouillot”).
- ³⁴ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 96, 105–106.
- ³⁵ For more on the increased attention to the Haitian Revolution in recent years, see Sepinwall, *Haitian History*, 2–3 and passim.
- ³⁶ Yvonne Fabella, personal communication, July 23, 2013; Andrews, personal communication, July 18, 2013.
- ³⁷ The Catalogue Collectif de France shows seven copies of *Silencing* in French libraries. More French libraries own works by his siblings Lyonel and Évelyne, who write in French. The issue is not just one of language; Trouillot’s French-language work *Les Racines historiques* is owned by even fewer French libraries

than *Silencing* (3), and one French specialist on the Caribbean reported to me never having heard of it.

- ³⁸ Important French books on Haiti from this era that do not cite *Silencing* include Benot and Dorigny, *Rétablissement de l'esclavage*; Dorigny, *Haïti: Première république noire*; de Cauna, *Toussaint Louverture*; and Dorigny, *Révoltes et révolutions*. Interestingly, a 2006 bibliography on the history of slavery from France's Bibliothèque nationale includes Evelyne Trouillot's novel about slavery (*Rosalie l'infâme*, 2003) but nothing by Michel-Rolph Trouillot ("Journée de commémoration").
- ³⁹ Dominique Rogers, personal communication, July 19, 2013.
- ⁴⁰ See Sepinwall, "Atlantic Amnesia," 300–314.
- ⁴¹ See Martin, "Violence et révolution"; Frédéric Régent cites the earlier English version of "Unthinkable" in a bibliography on colonial revolutions; see also the syllabus for a course on "Représentations et usages du passé dans les sociétés arabes contemporaines" at http://www.univ-paris1.fr/fileadmin/UFR09/bernard_documents/BROCHURE_M1_-_M2_2012-2013_20sept_01.pdf.
- ⁴² Geggus, "Saint-Domingue," 72–73; Nesbitt, *Caribbean Critique*, 29–30.
- ⁴³ Ferrer, "Talk about Haiti," 140–41 and 150–51.
- ⁴⁴ Fischer, "Unthinkable History?," 360–76, esp. 364–66.
- ⁴⁵ Benot, *La Révolution française*, ch. 10; Miller, "Forget Haiti," 39–69; Sepinwall, "Atlantic Amnesia"; and Sepinwall, "The Specter of Saint-Domingue."
- ⁴⁶ Fischer, "Unthinkable History?," 374.
- ⁴⁷ Knight, "The Haitian Revolution," 103–15; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 7.
- ⁴⁸ Duchet, *Anthropologie et Histoire*; Boule, "In Defense of Slavery," 219–46; Benot, *La Révolution française*; Benot, *La Démence coloniale*; and Sala-Molins, *Les Misères des Lumières*. These works are cited throughout the article's Enlightenment section (Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, footnotes for ch. 3, 168–72). See also Pluchon, *Nègres et juifs*, which Trouillot does not appear to have drawn upon. Other scholars were engaged in parallel work at the time on racism among Enlightenment thinkers; see for instance Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment*.
- ⁴⁹ These include Carolyn Fick, John Garrigus, Laurent Dubois, and Madison Smartt Bell (though Bell is a novelist, Trouillot was one of the many historians who admired his historical work on Haiti; see Trouillot, "Bodies and Souls," 184–97). I would also place my own scholarship here, as I have sought to build on the interpretive contributions of Haiti's historians in combination with the archival discoveries of foreign ones. David Geggus and Jeremy Popkin also differ from the older foreign historiography on Haiti, though they tend to be more skeptical about what the revolution meant than are scholars in the first group. Trouillot critiqued Fick for falling too far on the "heroic" side, but I agree with Sibylle Fischer that on this point Trouillot did not give Fick enough credit:

Michel-Rolph Trouillot charges Fick with being “overly ideological” and too much in awe of the “heroism” of the revolutionary slaves, thus failing to transcend the limitations of what he calls the “epic tradition” in the historiography of the Haitian Revolution. . . . Although there may be some truth in that, it should not distract us from the novelty and interest of the materials she adduces, largely due to her subalternist approach. (Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed*, 297–98; cf. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 175n65)

⁵⁰ Klooster, *Revolutions in the Atlantic World*, 166, 84–116; cf. Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 7.

⁵¹ See Girard, *The Slaves Who Defeated Napoleon*, and my review, “Slaves Who Vanquished Napoleon.”

⁵² Girard, “Jean-Jacques Dessalines,” 549 and passim; Girard and Donnadieu, “Toussaint before Louverture,” 76 and passim.

⁵³ Trouillot, *Silencing*, 55–56. Were Trouillot able to comment on this use of his work, he would likely characterize it in a way even stronger than what he said in *Silencing* about David Geggus’s work (which treats Haitian revolutionaries more favorably than Girard’s): “[This] work remains empirically impeccable. One wishes that it would continue to move further away from the discourse of banalization and would spell out explicitly, one day, some of its hidden assumptions” (*Silencing the Past*, 175).

⁵⁴ Fleming, “Thomas Jefferson’s Nightmare.”

⁵⁵ See *Wikimedia*, “Moi libre aussi (woman)” and “Moi libre aussi (man).”

⁵⁶ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 104, 67.

⁵⁷ See Sepinwall, “Atlantic Amnesia,” which also discusses a few exceptions (French scholars such as Marcel Dorigny, Bernard Gainot, and Anne Jollet).

⁵⁸ See Sepinwall, “Teaching about Haiti,” section on “Haitian Revolution.” On slave resistance before 1789 and on ideals that captured Africans brought to Saint-Domingue, see Fick, *The Making of Haiti*; Thornton, “I am the Subject,” 181–214; and Thornton, “African Soldiers,” 59–80. On creolized African culture and Vodou in the roots of the Revolution, see also Bellegarde-Smith, *Haiti: The Breached Citadel* ch. 2; and Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law*, ch. 1.

⁵⁹ See Sepinwall, “Classroom Classics,” and Sepinwall, “Happy as a Slave.”

⁶⁰ Haitian-born scholars who work in North American universities are an especially good bridge between these traditional groupings (see Sepinwall, *Haitian History*, 219).

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