

Obituary

Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1949–2012)

Michel-Rolph Trouillot, who died in Chicago during the night of July 4, 2012, was a luminous and influential thinker whose work transformed the fields of anthropology and history and spurred a wide range of intellectual work on the Caribbean. As a theorist of the relationship between power and the production of history and as an incisive historian and anthropologist of Haiti, he left a profound mark on the fields of Haitian and Caribbean studies. As a mentor for students at Johns Hopkins University and the University of Chicago, Trouillot trained a remarkable group of young Caribbeanists who have now become leading voices in the field. He was exemplary not only for his passionate intellectual interventions but also for his convivial, generous, and inspiring presence at scholarly gatherings. Though a powerful force within the academic community, he also was always pushing those within it to think carefully about their institutional and political positions and the responsibilities that came with them.¹

Trouillot was born on November 26, 1949, in Haiti. His father Ernest was a lawyer, teacher, and historian who had a television show about important events in Haiti's history. His uncle Hénock was a leading historian who served as director of the National Archives of Haiti during Trouillot's youth. He was part of a remarkable group of siblings: his brother Lyonel Trouillot is one of Haiti's most important contemporary novelists as well as a prominent radio personality, and his sister Évelyne Trouillot is an equally prominent novelist and cultural figure.²

1. For an excellent biographical and intellectual overview, see Drexel G. Woodson, "Trouillot, Michel-Rolph," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 2008, Encyclopedia.com, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3045302814.html>.

2. Trouillot's uncle and father cowrote a historiography of Haiti together with a third author: Catts Pressoir, Hénock Trouillot, and Ernest Trouillot, *Historiographie d'Haiti* (Mexico: Instituto Panamericano de Geografía e Historia, 1953). Two of his uncle's important works are Hénock Trouillot, *Le gouvernement du roi Henri Christophe* (Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie Centrale, 1972); Hénock Trouillot, *Dessalines; ou, Le sang du Pont-Rouge; Théâtre* (Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie des Antilles, 1967).

In the preface to his best-known and widely read book, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995), Trouillot wrote that his knowledge of and theoretical approach to Haiti's history owed a great deal to the discussions in the "custom-made intellectual community" constituted by his family and their social milieu.³ His father and uncle, along with other guests, frequently discussed history in their home. "They argued about long-dead figures, Haitian and foreign, the way one chats about neighbors—with the concerned distance that comes from knowing intimate details of the lives of people who are not family."⁴ Growing up in the midst of the dictatorship of François Duvalier, who frequently mobilized historical symbols in justifying his regime, Trouillot also learned firsthand the relationship between the writing of history, politics, and power. Much of his intellectual work was devoted to exploring these connections. "The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility," he wrote in *Silencing the Past*, "the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots."⁵ In 1990, he published what remains one of the most important histories of Haiti, which focused in particular on explaining the historical roots and the broad political and social impact of the Duvalier regime.⁶

Trouillot's work was, from the beginning, also energized by the idea that no one has the monopoly on historical knowledge. He elucidated and defended this theoretical stance eloquently over the decades. But he also tried, from the very beginning of his intellectual career, to concretize it. Trouillot's first book, 1977's *Ti difè boulé sou istoua Ayiti*, was a profound challenge, both in form and content, to traditional ways of interpreting Haitian history. It is perhaps his most radical and provocative work and also, at once sadly and appropriately, his least read one. Written in Haitian Creole, it was published by a small independent diaspora press in New York; it is today difficult to find even in the best of university libraries. (There are, at my last count, 11 copies available in US libraries—and it is not in the Library of Congress.)⁷

The difficulty of translating the title—it's at once very simply "A Story about Haiti's History" and something much more complex—gives you a sense of the intellectual challenge posed by the text. Writing in New York in the late

3. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), xi.

4. *Ibid.*, xviii.

5. *Ibid.*, xix.

6. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Haiti, State against Nation: The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990).

7. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Ti difè boulé sou istoua Ayiti* (Brooklyn, NY: Kóleksion Lakensiel, 1977).

1970s as part of the diaspora opposition to the Jean-Claude Duvalier regime, Trouillot was intent on mobilizing history in order to urge forward political resistance in the present. In order to do so, he needed to wrest the narrative of the Haitian Revolution away from the Duvalier regime, which had expertly shaped and appropriated that narrative in justifying its own power. The goal was to tell a different, popular history of the revolution, a project later pushed forward in crucial ways by Carolyn Fick in her *The Making of Haiti* (1990) and also pursued by Trouillot himself in *Silencing the Past*.⁸ But Trouillot pursued that historiographical goal through a radical experiment in form, writing the history as if spoken orally to a gathering of contemporary rural Haitians.⁹

Trouillot's use of Haitian Creole was part of a broader move underway at the time, in both Haiti and the diaspora, to produce literature in the language. Frankétienne's *Dézafi*, that most celebrated novel written in Creole, was published in Port-au-Prince in 1975. Trouillot, however, was the first to write a history in Creole. His goal with *Ti difé boulé* was to bridge the gap between the French-language historiography written by Haitian intellectuals and the historical knowledge vehicled in various vernacular forms. It was a powerful political gesture, for bridging that gap was part of a larger attempt to bridge the chasm between elite and popular Haiti, to seek out the foundations for political alliances that could help generate a truly participatory democracy in Haiti.¹⁰

Condensed in *Ti Difé boulé* were many themes that Trouillot took up in subsequent work. His intellectual production was wide-ranging. His second book, a careful ethnographic study of the contemporary peasantry in Dominica in a shifting global economy, was a major contribution to Caribbeanist anthropology.¹¹ He also produced a series of influential essays about Haitian and Caribbean studies. In one important but lesser-known essay, published in the short-lived Caribbeanist journal *Cimarrón*, he took on the idea of "Haitian exceptionalism," which he argued guided (or misguided) much academic

8. Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1990).

9. For an excellent analysis of the text, see Mariana Past, "Toussaint on Trial in *Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti*, or the People's Role in the Haitian Revolution," *Journal of Haitian Studies* 10, no. 1 (2004): 87–102; Mariana Past, "Reclaiming the Haitian Revolution: Race, Politics and History in Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature" (PhD diss., Duke University, 2006).

10. Frankétienne, *Dézafi* (Port-au-Prince: Edision Fardin, 1975); Kaiama L. Glover, *Haiti Unbound: A Spiralist Challenge to the Postcolonial Canon* (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 2010).

11. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Peasants and Capital: Dominica in the World Economy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1988).

discourse and “permeates both the academic and popular literature on Haiti under different guises and with different degrees of candidness.” “How does one explain Haiti? What is Haiti?” the article begins. “It is a place of beauty, romance, mystery, kindness, humor, selfishness, betrayal, cruelty, bloodshed, hunger and poverty. It is a closed and withdrawn society whose apartness, unlike any other in the New World, rejects its European roots.” And then Trouillot continues: “Nice passage, isn’t it? Well, those of you who know my work may have guessed that I am trying to trick you. These words are not mine.” The quote, in fact, is the first paragraph of the book *Written in Blood* (1978), which Trouillot describes as “a sensationalist account of Haitian history” and a book that in fact dominated writing about the country for much of the past decades.¹²

The essay explores the various sources for these ideas, notably the profusion of writings about Haiti during and after the US occupation, which he shows profoundly shaped North American visions of the country then and since. He notes of one writer, Blair Niles: “No one can accuse of him of disliking Haitians. Quite the opposite: he is attracted to them. But he is attracted to them the way one can be attracted to a sexual fetish or a taboo.” Trouillot shows the devastating political consequences of certain brands of exceptionalism in the era of Jean-Claude Duvalier, for it ultimately led to the conclusion that “we can rule this country in ways that seem to defy the imagination of most foreigners and quite a few Haitians.” In one particularly potent passage, Trouillot blasts: “The majority of Haitians live quite ordinary lives. They eat what is for them—and for many others—quite ordinary food. They die quite ordinary deaths from quite ordinary accidents, quite ordinary tortures, quite ordinary diseases. Accidents so ordinary they could have been prevented. Tortures so ordinary that the international press does not even mention them. Diseases so ordinary that they are easily treated almost anywhere else. Exceptional, is it?”¹³

With this essay and others he wrote in the next years, Trouillot insisted on the need for a robust, complex, and rigorous approach to thinking about Haiti historically and anthropologically. At the same time, both through his work on Dominica and a set of essays about the Caribbean region more broadly, he

12. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “The Odd and the Ordinary: Haiti, the Caribbean and the World,” *Cimarrón: New Perspectives on the Caribbean* 2, no. 3 (1990): 3; Robert Debs Heintz, Nancy Gordon Heintz, and Michael Heintz, *Written in Blood: The Story of the Haitian People, 1492–1995*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Univ. Press of America, 1996), 1.

13. Trouillot, “Odd and the Ordinary,” 5, 9. For a brilliant recent analysis of the impact of the US occupation on visions of Haiti (a book with a deep intellectual debt to Trouillot), see Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2011).

crucially shaped an expanding field. In an early review essay published in the *New West Indian Guide* in 1983, he discussed the works of the brilliant Haitian geographer Georges Anglade, including his pivotal *Atlas Critique d'Haïti* (1982), to argue for the vitality of approaches linking geography, environment, politics, and economy in studying the Caribbean.¹⁴ In 1992, he published an essay that offered a dynamic challenge and invitation to the field of anthropology, describing the Caribbean as “An Open Frontier in Anthropological Theory.” It is a difficult article, a massive review of literature that is also a sweeping analysis of the ways in which the Caribbean, because of its deep colonial history and position within the broader Atlantic world, had troubled anthropological categories. “When E. B. Tylor published the first general anthropology textbook in the English language in 1881, Barbados had been ‘British’ for two and a half centuries, Cuba had been ‘Spanish’ for almost four, and Haiti had been an independent state for three generations. . . . These were hardly places to look for primitives. Their very existence questioned the West/non-West dichotomy and the category of the native, upon both of which anthropology was premised.”¹⁵ Trouillot described Caribbean societies as “inescapably historical” and “inherently colonial.” They were “the oldest colonies of the West” and centrally constitutive of “the material and symbolic process that gave rise to the West as we know it.” To study them anthropologically, then, also required a historical critique of the categories at the heart of anthropology itself.¹⁶

Through such interventions, as well as through the broadly influential *Silencing the Past*, Trouillot had a profound effect on thinking about the nature of the discipline of anthropology and on the dialogues between this discipline and that of history. In this sense he was part of a larger tradition, through which Caribbean scholars including Sidney Mintz and Richard Price had insisted on the centrality of historical approaches to contemporary culture while also highlighting the many ways in which historical narratives were made present within that culture. Trouillot’s work, by elegantly raising broad theoretical issues about the construction of history, also placed the Caribbean itself at the center of larger debates. In the process, he opened up critical space for Caribbeanist scholars in a range of disciplines. The current boom and expansion in Haitian studies can in many ways be traced back to his widespread and inspiring influ-

14. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “The Production of Spatial Configurations: A Caribbean Case,” *New West Indian Guide* 57, no. 3/4 (1983): 215–29.

15. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “The Caribbean Region: An Open Frontier in Anthropological Theory,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21 (1992): 20–21.

16. *Ibid.*, 21–22.

ence during the 1990s. By energetically situating Haiti and the Caribbean at the center of theoretical debates within history and anthropology, he challenged the marginalization of these regions within both fields and created vital openings for new generations of scholars.

He also left a deep mark on many students and colleagues because of his commitment to challenging the structures of power, including those within the academic establishment, and to mapping out different ways of living as a scholar and thinker. For instance, one of Trouillot's students at the University of Chicago, Yarimar Bonilla, wrote recently and movingly about the "deep personal inspiration" provided by her mentor. He was, she writes, "bold, charismatic, unabashed, unapologetic, and fully engaged with life's pleasures and ironies. He offered a model of an academic who never compromised on life, love or laughter. I don't think this was coincidental to the power of his work. His writing does not just inform—it inspires and transforms. He always encouraged his students to find their 'burning questions' to follow their passions as this was what would truly sustain them and feed not just their careers but their souls."¹⁷

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17. Bonilla, quoted in William Harms, "Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Scholar of Caribbean History, 1949–2012," *UChicagoNews*, 10 July 2012, <http://news.uchicago.edu/article/2012/07/10/michel-rolph-trouillot-scholar-caribbean-history-1949-2012>.