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Silence, Power, and the Archive: Reading Marisa J. Fuentes and Michel Rolph Trouillot

Book Review

[1] Yahaya HALIDU

Marisa J. Fuentes's *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (2016) and Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995) offer two of the most incisive meditations on power, history, and epistemic violence in recent decades. Both authors interrogate how historical narratives emerge from systems of domination that dictate what can be remembered, who may speak, and what constitutes the historical itself. Read together, they illuminate how silences—far from being accidental gaps—are the constitutive conditions of modern historiography.

In *Dispossessed Lives*, Fuentes turns to eighteenth-century Bridgetown, Barbados, to examine the lives of enslaved and free women of color whose traces appear only in fragments scattered across colonial archives. Through figures such as Jane, Rachael Pringle Polgreen, Joanna, Agatha, Molly, and Venus, Fuentes reconstructs microhistories that reveal how archives are not neutral repositories but "technologies of violence" that perpetuate the dehumanization of Black women. As she writes, "the violent systems and structures of white supremacy produced devastating images of enslaved female personhood, and how these pervade the archive and govern what can be known about them" (Fuentes 2016, 5). Her method—reading against the grain of the colonial record—foregrounds the epistemological and affective limits of historical recovery while insisting on the necessity of engaging those very limits as sites of critique.

Trouillot's *Silencing the Past* provides a theoretical scaffolding for understanding these dynamics. He contends that history is not a transparent record of events but an ongoing process shaped by power. "Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments," he writes, "the moment of fact creation, fact assembly, fact retrieval, and the moment of retrospective significance" (Trouillot 1995, 26). Through analyses of the Haitian Revolution and the "discovery" of the Americas, Trouillot demonstrates how silences are produced through the very mechanisms

[1] Halidu, Y. Graduate Teaching and Research Assistant, United States. Email: greatsymbo@yahoo.com. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5290-6379

of historical narration. The Haitian Revolution—an event that fundamentally challenged the racial and political logics of modernity—was rendered "unthinkable" within Western historiography precisely because it destabilized the epistemological foundations of the colonial order.

Fuentes's work extends Trouillot's theoretical insights into the intimate and gendered registers of archival violence. Her chapters move through complex economies of domination and agency: from Jane's fugitive existence to Polgreen's role as a free woman of color who owned and exploited enslaved women, to Molly's execution for allegedly attempting to poison a white man. Each case illustrates how Black women's lives were mediated through regimes of racialized surveillance and juridical silencing. Venus's appearance in British abolitionist discourse—her suffering transformed into a symbol of humanitarian sympathy—underscores how the commodification of Black pain underwrote both colonial order and liberal sentiment.

While Trouillot theorizes the macro-structures of historical silencing, Fuentes inhabits its microtextures—the bodily marks, juridical absences, and partial archives through which Black women's subjectivities were both erased and inscribed. For Trouillot, the historian's task is to confront the power relations that produce "silences"; for Fuentes, it is to engage those silences without re-enacting the violence that produced them. Both works thus articulate an ethics of historical practice attuned to the politics of knowledge production.

Taken together, *Silencing the Past* and *Dispossessed Lives* reveal that the archive and the historical narrative are not simply reflections of reality but active participants in its construction. The violence that pervades the archive is continuous with the violence of the world it documents. To read these texts in concert is to recognize that the struggle over the past is also a struggle over the boundaries of humanity, over who may be rendered legible within history's frame. Trouillot and Fuentes both insist that the task of the historian—or the reader— is not to fill in the gaps of the record but to theorize the conditions of its silence.

These two works together constitute an urgent call for a reimagining of historical knowledge. They compel us to treat the archive as a site of both domination and possibility, to attend to the politics of absence, and to confront the ongoing colonial grammars that shape what counts as history. As Fuentes and Trouillot remind us, history is not merely what happened—it is what power has allowed to appear, and what critical engagement might yet make visible.

References

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