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What is This?
Remembering the songwriter: The life and legacies of Michel-Rolph Trouillot

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Abstract
This article provides an intellectual biography of the late anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot. Using the metaphor of Trouillot as a songwriter, it foregrounds the unique constellation of themes, approaches, and preoccupations that defined Trouillot’s life and work, regardless of genre.

Keywords
Caribbean studies, Haitian studies, historiography, history of anthropology, Michel-Rolph Trouillot

As a young graduate student, frustrated with the “Indiana Jones” image evoked by the label “anthropologist,” I once asked my adviser, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, how he defined himself. For example, if he met a stranger on a plane, would he say he was an anthropologist, a historian, a college professor, a writer, or … what? The question seemed relevant given Trouillot’s disciplinary promiscuity: he was an anthropologist by training and by professional appointment, but had written both academic and popular books about Haiti, a book about historiography, and (according to his own claims) kept an unfinished novel stashed away in his desk drawer. When I posed the question, he smirked, took a puff of his cigarette, and replied, “I’d tell them I’m a songwriter.” He then crushed out his cigarette, smiled mischievously, and dashed away before I could say anything else, leaving me to ponder (for over a decade) what exactly he meant.

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Knowing Rolph, I was sure that this was no mere joke, but given my other preoccupations at the time, I filed away the unsolved riddle in the recesses of my mind along with the many other cryptic aphorisms he offered as an adviser. It was not until the week of his passing that this playful exchange came flooding back. It happened as I came upon a Facebook post by the Haitian writer and artist Michelle Voltaire Marcelin describing her reaction to the news of Rolph’s death.¹ She wrote,

My brother Buyu Ambroise called me today to commiserate the passing of Haitian anthropologist, historian, and political scientist Michel-Rolph Trouillot who died last night in Chicago. We did not know the eminent scholar who is mourned today. However we both knew Roro Trouillot, the artist, quite well. It was the early 70s. We were young with very little money. We lived in a basement and slept on the floor. The only furnishings were a white mirrored piano, a stereo, and a few hundred LP albums … Most of our friends were struggling artists or musicians … There was music aficionado Sansan Etienne, Joe Charles and his electric bass, Dernst Emile and his guitar, Buyu Ambroise, who was skinny then with a huge afro and carried his tenor sax wherever he went and there was Michel-Rolph Trouillot who started Tanbou Libète rehearsals in that basement. Convinced that theater could be used to instigate social change and alter the course of politics, Roro as he was then affectionately called, founded Tanbou Libète with other activists based in New York in 1971. For the next few years, it would perform, often in non-traditional venues, the texts Roro wrote in Kreyòl to promote resistance. Many vocalists interpreted his songs—the most renowned being “Alyenkat” about undocumented immigrants who lived in the constant fear of harassment, detention and deportation that their precarious status imposed on them. The song questioned the ethics of the USA’s immigration policy and the required Alien Registration Card. Popularized by Manno Charlemagne, it became a hymn to the undocumented in Haiti and the diaspora.

Stumbling upon this anecdote about Rolph’s time in Brooklyn (poignantly enough as I myself began to make Brooklyn my home) brought a rush of memories of the scattered references Rolph had made about this period in his life—memories that I had never been able to string together into a coherent narrative. Much like Michelle, who said she only knew Roro, the artist, I felt like I only knew Trouillot, the scholar. I could easily call forth the memory of him laughing irreverently as he tormented his students at the University of Chicago or picture him pensively touring the ruins of Sans Souci, as he described in the pages of Silencing the Past. It was a bit harder, however, to imagine “Roro” the exile, activist, cab driver, and student at Brooklyn College writing Creole songs and plays in Michelle’s sparsely furnished basement. It seems easy to dismiss this period in his life as simply a youthful era of heady politics—much like the oft-drawn divide between the young and old Marx. Yet Trouillot himself had taught us to question those spurious divides, often arguing that one could not understand the teachings of Capital without a close reading of The Eighteenth Brumaire.

With these thoughts in mind, I tracked down the song referenced in Michelle’s post and began to think about how it might fit within Trouillot’s intellectual biography.² Comforted by the beauty of its simple melody and charmed by its wry lyrics, I began to see past Trouillot’s ruse. I realized that what I felt as I listened to the grainy recording from the 1970s was not a feeling of estrangement but of familiarity. For, indeed, Trouillot the scholar and Roro the songwriter were one and the same: they shared a common voice,
a common set of concerns, and a driving set of, in Trouillot’s words, “burning questions”
to which he would return time and again in various forms and genres.\(^3\)

In what follows, I parse various pieces by Trouillot for what they reveal about his
intellectual catalog. Although I trace a somewhat chronological path through his career,
my focus is on the connective threads that tie together his numerous works. For, although
each of his pieces stands alone as a powerful “single,” when viewed as a collection, they
reveal the unique constellation of themes, approaches, and preoccupations that defined
this particular songwriter’s life and work.

**Communities of interest**

Trouillot’s intellectual genealogy is often traced back to his family roots in Haiti. As he
himself states in *Silencing the Past*, for the Trouillot family, “history sat at the dinner
table.” History was both the preferred profession and the favored pastime of many of his
relatives. His father, Ernest Trouillot, was a lawyer and professor at a prestigious lycée
and also hosted a television show about Haitian history. His uncle, Hénock Trouillot, was
the director of the Haitian national archives, besides being a prolific writer and public
historian. All his siblings (Evelyne, Jocelyne, and Lyonel) have become important novel-
ists, essayists, scholars, and educators who blur intellectual traditions and genres, sug-
gest- ing that it was not only history that sat at the family dinner table but also literature,
music, art, and politics (Danticat, 2005).

This legacy alone might explain Trouillot’s academic career. But his life was also
profoundly marked by the personal experience of migration and exile. In 1968, Trouillot
left Haiti as part of the large wave of student activists fleeing the repression of the
Duvalier dictatorship. He joined his aunt in Park Slope, Brooklyn, and completed a bach-
elor’s degree in Caribbean history and culture in 1978 at Brooklyn College, while work-
ing as a taxi driver and participating in the flourishing political and cultural activism of
the Haitian diaspora.

It was during this time that Trouillot, along with other activists, helped found the
theater group Tanbou Libète (Drum of Freedom), an outgrowth of the kilti libète (free-
dom culture) movement of the 1970s, which sought to build political consciousness
among the Haitian diaspora. The mizik angaje (politically engaged music) produced by
these groups was shuttled across state borders on inexpensive cassette tapes along with
news, speeches, and calls for resistance. At the time, Duvalier had successfully co-opted
numerous cultural institutions (including Vodou temples, rara bands, and peasant secret
societies) into his state apparatus; he had also laid claim to the figure of the Neg mawon,
erecting the statue of the Unknown Maroon in front of the presidential palace. The cul-
tural activists of the 1970s sought to give a new valorization to peasant forms and to the
politics of marronage in order to demonstrate that, contrary to what anti-Duvalier elites
might suspect, peasant traditions were not intrinsically linked to the Duvalierist project
and could serve as both a site and a vehicle for political reform.

The song that Michelle Voltaire Marcelin mentioned in her post was one of the
best known pieces created by Tanbou Libète, later recorded by the popular Haitian
singer Manno Charlemagne on his 1984 album *Konviksyon*. The lyrics make refer-
cence to the Alien Registration Card (*alyenkat*) that Haitians were required to carry in
the United States under threat of deportation and posed several provocative questions: When Christopher Columbus arrived in the Americas, did the indigenous people ask him for his alien card? Did Sonthonax (a French civil commissioner during the Haitian Revolution) have an alien card? Were the US troops who murdered the Haitian nationalist hero Charlemagne Peralte during the US occupation moun alyenkat (alyenkat people)? In this text, Trouillot historicizes, with his usual audacious wit, the politics of surveillance and exclusion faced by contemporary Haitian migrants by embedding these within a longer history of colonial and imperial intervention.

Trouillot (1996) referred to his time among the Haitian diaspora as a kind of “apprenticeship” through which he acquired a new appreciation for the lessons acquired amid his extraordinarily learned family in Haiti:

The Haitian exile community in New York provided a sanctuary where I combined artistic and intellectual pursuits with political activism. That apprenticeship reinforced earlier propensities: a desire to reach an audience not defined by academic membership; a conviction that an intellectual is so much more than a mere academic and the member of multiple overlapping communities. I had absorbed these beliefs growing up within the so-called intellectual elite so closely tied to the state in Haiti. Political activism in New York turned this heredity into conscious choices.

Trouillot describes this period as both a sanctuary and an apprenticeship: a space in which to develop nascent skills, convictions, and proclivities. In fact, it was from this space that in 1977, as a 28-year-old activist and undergraduate, he published the first nonfiction book ever written in Haitian Creole, Ti Dife Boule Sou Istwa Ayiti [A small fire burning on Haitian history] (Trouillot, 1977). The book’s title suggests an attempt at shedding new light on, and igniting new interpretations of, Haitian history.

Trouillot (1996) described Ti Difé as a synthesis of the intellectual traditions he inherited from his family in Haiti and the cultural politics he practiced among the Haitian community in Brooklyn:

This was a natural evolution: my father and my uncle both wrote history. In a deeper sense, it was going against class origins and attitudes. Ti difé questions the “great men” tradition of Haitian historiography. More important, it is also the first non-fiction book written in Haitian.

Ti Difé set the tone for what would become Trouillot’s lifelong tasks: to question dominant sources and paradigms of history and the interests they serve, to produce scholarly work that self-reflectively engages with its own conditions of production, and to write in forms and venues that are accessible and compelling to various publics. The book challenged hero-driven narratives of the Haitian Revolution by exploring lesser known figures who had been buried under the weight of historical silences. Its narrative form defies the conventions of professional history by using the structure of Haitian storytelling, with a raconteur narrator identified as Grinn Prominnin. The bibliography contains over 50 references, but none are cited in the text. Instead, the pages are filled with Creole proverbs, wordplay, musical lyrics, and references to Vodou cosmology (Past, 2004).
Trouillot exhibited even in this first book an interest in the distinction between history and historicity, and an awareness of the weak monopoly that professional historians held over the latter. In a later essay on historiography, he writes that

the field of Haitian historical discourse is not limited to writings explicitly and exclusively deemed historical, nor even to written texts alone. Rather, history enters into any discourse that speaks of and to the society at large. The past is often explicitly present in talk about culture, society or politics ... Haitian historical consciousness is also expressed through various activities not specifically constructed as narratives, from religious rituals, to art, to the naming of children. (Trouillot, 1999: 452)

The linguistic and stylistic choices that Trouillot made in Ti Difé evidence the careful attention he paid to questions of form, and how he carefully tailored his pieces in relation to his audience. Each of his texts was produced with a particular public in mind, according to which he would carefully calibrate language, style, and “venue.” It is telling that he never sought to translate Ti Difé for non-Creolophone readers. Some of his later reflections on the politics of translation hint at his concerns in this regard. In the preface to Haiti: State against Nation, he explains that the original French version, Les racines historiques de l’état duvalérien, “drew from a common pool of images, of historical, social, and political references easily decoded by Haitian urbanites”; the book therefore required more than a mere “linguistic transcription” to become intelligible to an international audience (Trouillot, 1990: 10).

Trouillot described the process of creating the English version as an act of “cultural translation for which the shift from French to English was but a metaphor.” He stressed that the original book arose from a particular conversation among a specific “community of interest,” and as such it “said as much about its author as it did about its audience.” In other words, Trouillot was acutely aware that all texts are produced in dialogue with multiple linguistic—but also political and intellectual—communities. Some might gloss this as simple attention to intertextuality, but for Trouillot, these relationships spanned beyond the text—hence his reference to communities of “interest,” rather than simply communities of readers. For Trouillot, the process of translation required not just linguistic skill but also the social grace of “filling in historical and cultural blanks” and creating “multiple points of entry into the discussion” (Trouillot, 1990: 10). Only then could newly arrived interlocutors, unfamiliar with the terms, context, and stakes of an ongoing conversation, possibly enter the dialogue.5

Peasants and concepts

In 1978, Trouillot left his apprenticeship in Brooklyn and entered the anthropology doctoral program at Johns Hopkins University. His choice of disciplinary home was not an obvious one. As he once reflected, had he stayed in Haiti or gone on to France, he would have likely studied philosophy or history, given his “penchant—almost esthetic—for theoretical reflection grounded in historical concreteness, regardless of discipline or persuasion” (Trouillot, 1996). However, when Richard Price and Sidney Mintz recruited him for their newly formed program, its “special character”—with close attention to
historical process and focus on the Atlantic world as a site of global connection—“tipped the balance towards anthropology.”

His doctoral dissertation, later published as *Peasants and Capital*, reflects the combination of those interests and the particular intellectual moment when Trouillot entered anthropology. *Peasants and Capital* bears the marks of the methodological experimentation of the time: the move toward multi-sited ethnography, the increased interest in global processes, the dismantling of bounded notions of culture, the concern with the role of the native voice in the text, and the search for disciplinary relevance in a world where the fictions of remote natives and “pure cultures” no longer held sway. The result is a methodologically innovative text that sought to examine the peasant economy in Dominica through the prism of world-systems theory, historical anthropology, and critical ethnography.6

*Peasants and Capital* thus speaks to a particular problem-space in anthropology, but it also reflects Trouillot’s distinctive approach to Caribbean studies. Building on the work of his teacher, Sidney Mintz, Trouillot consistently foregrounded how Caribbean societies troubled dominant theories of culture, modernity, globalization, and capitalism. Early on he was concerned with the provincial and prescriptive nature of these categories, which he would later describe as “North Atlantic Universals” (Trouillot, 2002b).

In *Peasants and Capital*, Trouillot deploys this method by decentering the category of “the peasant.” He argues that “within the dominant historical perception of the West, the word peasant evokes a being of another age—indeed, one most typical of the Middle Ages … who inexplicably survived the coming of civilization” (Trouillot, 1988: 1). He argues that in the Caribbean, however, “tradition” succeeded modernity, and what could be called a “peasant way of life” blossomed on the ruins of industrial sugar production (Trouillot, 1988: 21). Thus, he concludes, we must question whether the word *peasant* “is anything but a descriptive category within a Euro-American folk view” (Trouillot, 1988: 2).

For Trouillot, the implications were both analytical and political. He insisted that Caribbean peasants needed to be reimagined not as obstacles to progress, but as the richest source of wealth for Caribbean societies:

> Not only should we stop thinking of peasants as inherent liabilities, but we should start thinking of them as potential resources … Given their proven resilience, given the fact that they have been able to support the lives and wealth of so many others, local and foreign, for so long, it is time to start developing policies that take that contribution and the potential it reveals into account. (Trouillot, 1988: 293–294)

The lessons that Trouillot drew from *Peasants and Capital* were not confined to the borders of Dominica. He later argued that the fundamental problem of Haitian society was precisely the alienation of the peasantry, the construction of peasants as *moun andeyò* (people outside of the nation), and the expropriation of their wealth by urban elites, government institutions, and foreign interests (Trouillot, 1990).

**The power in the story**

As I have argued elsewhere, Trouillot firmly believed that Caribbean studies required a regional perspective and repeatedly advocated placing Haiti within a comparative frame
Bonilla (2013c). Always attentive to the politics of “the guild,” he was also concerned with the construction of minority anthropologists as “native” anthropologists, frequently encouraging his students to study societies other than their own. He likened the experience of doing comparative research to that of learning a new dance, insisting that acquiring new moves brought greater appreciation of one’s more familiar steps. However, Trouillot’s emphasis on the value of the estranging perspective of ethnographic research should not be seen as an uncritical celebration of disciplinary traditions. For, in fact, his signature move was to turn disciplinary methods against themselves.

In Global Transformations, Trouillot called upon anthropologists to turn their gaze inward in order to examine their discipline as both the product and the main purveyor of what he termed “the savage slot.” He challenged anthropologists to pay greater attention to their folk concepts, carefully unpacking many of the discipline’s master categories, including globalization, culture, the field, and “the native.” Turning an oft-cited dictum by Clifford Geertz on its head, Trouillot described his project as an effort to examine the silences (rather than the stories) in “the history the West tells itself about itself” (Trouillot, 2003: 1).

In his most celebrated book, Silencing the Past, Trouillot carried out a similar move, arguing for the need to historicize the conditions of possibility and epistemic limits of historical production. Silencing the Past dismantles the positivist claim to history as an objective account of “what happened” by demonstrating that the raw materials of history itself—factual evidence—are inherently conditioned by the epistemic constraints of their time. Taking the example of the Haitian Revolution, Trouillot examines how events that are unthinkable at the moment they occur become silenced and trivialized in the historical record. How then, he asks, can these events be rendered into history? In his words, “How does one write a history of the impossible?” (Trouillot, 1995: 74)

The problem, as Trouillot saw it, was not empirical but ontological. The fact of slave resistance was widely recognized at the time, for indeed slave rebellions were both a constant threat and a feverish preoccupation for the planter class. However, although slaves were recognized as having the capacity to resist the whip, they were not imagined as having the ability—or the right—to establish their own forms of governance. Thus, even if the fact of the Haitian Revolution was recognized, its political implications could not be entertained because they brought into question the guiding principles of the prevailing social order. To recognize the Haitian Revolution as a modern national revolution would have required acknowledging that enslaved populations had both the capacity and the right to self-determination. Accepting such a principle was unthinkable.

Trouillot’s argument pushes us to critically examine the narrative frames we impose upon emerging forms of struggle as well as the interpretive frames we cast in hindsight. For example, he decried the fact that scholars continued to inscribe the Haitian Revolution within the framework of the French Revolution, rather than examining the novel political forms forged through its internal processes. This, he insisted, speaks to how the Haitian Revolution remains buried under the history of the West:

The silencing of the Haitian Revolution is only a chapter within a narrative of global domination. It is part of the history of the West and it is likely to persist, even in attenuated form, as long as
the history of the West is not retold in ways that bring forward the perspective of the world. (Trouillot, 1995: 107)

Trouillot (2002a) leaves us with this challenge or, in his words, this “duty.” Ever critical of political naïveté, he urges us not to underestimate, or take lightly, the power embedded in the stories we tell. In fact, he presses us to recast our most well-trodden stories—particularly, the master narratives that have propelled and sustained our global order. He calls upon us to take seriously our own “double-sided historicity.” And become aware of our dual roles as both historical actors and historical narrators. This is what Trouillot means when he asks us to examine the “conditions of possibility” of our own intellectual production. He does not expect us to step out of our time and place (to stand outside of history, so to speak), but he dares us to think critically about how our own biographies inform the questions we ask and the answers we find comfort in. In other words, he encourages us to come to terms with our own “burning questions,” to develop our own authorial voice, and to be mindful of the various publics to which we sing and write.

It is for this reason that I have come to terms with Trouillot’s playful riddle and chosen to remember him as a songwriter. Not because it encapsulates everything he was, for indeed nothing can, but rather because in his songwriting we can see how the different elements that defined him came together into a powerful sum. After all, few others could so artfully combine a strident critique of US anti-immigration practices with a charming melody, an incisive Haitian proverb, and a well-timed joke about Christopher Columbus. In his song, we can clearly distinguish the guiding principles that defined his life and work: the attention to history, the concern with the political stakes of the present, the commitment to both home and the world, and the belief that scholarship, art, and politics are all best carried out with a touch of humor, an eye for beauty, and a catchy beat.

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Notes
2. A portion of the song is available on this website: http://www.lameca.org/LamecaInfo/reper- toire/disco/pages/discographie_haiti.htm
3. For more on Trouillot’s “voice,” see Scott (2012). For more on the importance of Trouillot’s “burning questions,” see Bonilla (2013a).
4. I am paraphrasing rather than translating. For the original text, see Averill (1997).
5. It appears that Trouillot’s careful attention to translation centered mostly on the languages that he himself was fluent in, and the communities of interest to which he himself belonged. He authorized several translations of his works into Spanish and German, entrusting the translators with the burden of properly introducing his texts to their linguistic communities (see Bonilla, 2013b). Translations to and from French and English were, however, more carefully attended to. Indeed, this is one of the reasons why the French translation of Silencing the Past is yet to be completed.
6. For more on the methodological contributions of this text, see Agard-Jones (2013).
7. For more, see the essay by Mayanthi Fernando in this issue.
8. Trouillot’s approach in many ways anticipates the call by David Scott for greater attention to the “problem-space” of intellectual production (see Scott, 1999).

References

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Yarimar Bonilla is Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Caribbean Studies at Rutgers University where she teaches and writes about social movements, colonial legacies, political sovereignty, and historical memory in the contemporary Caribbean.