Outsourcing History

On the Necessity of Stepping Out of the Archive

The popular image of the historian would be something like this: a solitary figure, the historian plies her craft in dark and dusty archives, rummaging among the documents of people long gone, aiming to discover their secrets. As she leafs through the pages, she is drawn into the world of the past, and emerges triumphant, with a scholarly work to show for her efforts. This, in turn, is read by few people, and matters to less. This is the image that underscores the question I am so often asked about my studies: “What is it good for, anyway?”

It is against this false, simplifying image that I write. In this rebellion I am inspired by the historians with whom this paper will deal, and who prove that history is nothing if not relevant. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Julia Thomas and the contributors to the volume “Recasting Women” all find different ways to break the divide between past and present; one of the ways they succeed in doing this, will be my claim, is by the use of sources which cannot traditionally be found in an archive.

Specifically, I will analyze Trouillot’s interactions with passers-by and tour guides, and his reflections on his own, personal history; the use of proverbs and songs by three writers in the “Recasting Women” volume, and finally, Thomas’ examination of a photography exhibit (the source I refer to here is “the exhibit” itself, and not the photographs that make it up).

By selecting to use these sources, I wish to argue, historians are making two claims. First, that history and the past are very much things of the present. By talking to people, walking around (physically and metaphorically) in the spaces in which the past is interwoven with the present, these authors are willingly giving up the objectivist, detached position. The sources they use exist not simply as artifacts of the past, but in a lived, constantly evolving actuality.

The second claim relates to the production of knowledge: archives are a testimony of power. By deciding what is kept for posterity and what is left behind, archives do not document the past but create it. "Archives assemble. Their assembly work is not limited to a more or less passive act of collecting. Rather, it is an active act of production that prepares facts for historical intelligibility.., they convey authority and set the rules for credibility and interdependence; they help select the stories that matter".[1] Finding a way to access sources that were not archived is an attempt to find cracks in past hegemonies.

Two disclaimers have to be made: First, I am not calling for a privileging of non-archival sources over historical documents, or trying to devalue the role of archival research in the historian's craft. This is not a call for replacement, but for addition. Archived documents must be analyzed – but if we seek a richer, more textured understanding of both past and present, we need to find methodologies that will supply glimpses into moments that did not make the archival cut, as it were. Second, in analyzing these works, I will be looking at one very limited aspect – how and why certain types of sources are used. I will not attempt a critical analysis of the works as a whole.

[1] Ibid, p. 52

History begins with bodies and artifacts: living brains, fossil, texts, buildings[2]

In "Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History", Michel-Rolph Trouillot is immersed in the present as he writes of the past; when he writes of family dinners, of his father and uncle, he is carrying out the following conviction: "The past does not exist independently from the present. Indeed, the past is only past because there is a present, just as I can point to something *over there* only because I am *here*… The past – or, more accurately, pastness – is a position".[3]

Two issues stand at the center of Trouillot's book: the historical process in which history itself is produced, and the ambiguity of being both actor and narrator.[4] For Trouillot, the production of history is in itself historical; all stages of the historian's action (the making of sources, of archives, of narratives and of history) are touched by this historicity, by the human actors who both live in the world and tell stories about it.[5] What Trouillot is trying to bypass are the silences created at these four junctures in the production of history. He acts out what he preaches: there is no glass wall between the past he narrates and the present he is living. His personal commitment to Haiti is not obscured, and his choice of subject matter transparently political and engaged. He puts himself in the field – in Haiti, Portugal, Mexico, thus underscoring his double role as narrator-actor.

Each chapter begins with a personal text, in most of which we meet Trouillot wandering the sites of which he writes. His contemplation of the past is acted out *in situ*. The fact that these personal narratives are located at the beginning of each chapter is also not incidental. This reflects a statement, an admission of the primacy and importance of the narrator in the telling of the past. "*I walked in silence between*

[2] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Silencing the Past, Power and the Production of History, Beacon Press, 1995, p. 29
[3] Ibid, p. 15
[4] Ibid, p. 24
[5] Ibid, p. 26

the old walls, trying to guess at the stories they would never dare tell", he writes at the onset of chapter 2. By these very words, he is also eliciting another, unexpected tale from the walls – the story of the narrator, of Michel-Rolph Trouillot, as he is in the act of simultaneously seeking and creating history. As he stands before the grave of Haiti's King Henry Cristophe, "I *reached further into myself. Relics danced before my eyes in fleeting shapes and colors: the royal star of St. Henry, a medal that my father handled, a monochrome of the royal saber, an old coin I once touched, a carriage I once imagined"*.[6] It is not only the knowledge Trouillot gained in the American university system that makes him an authority, we learn from this passage; it's also his childhood memories, yearnings and imaginings.

Of his visit to the province of Chichén Trouillot writes: "I coughed nervously, sweeping the water with my binoculars. I was in search of evidence. I was eager to see a corpse, a skull, some bones, any gruesome trace of history".[7] The message is clear: historical evidence can and should be found outside the archive, in the field.

In writing the story of Sans Souci and Haitian history, Trouillot's method includes reflections of the role of tour guides. He writes of the peasant guides who force themselves on tourists, telling stories of the rule of Christophe, but never mentioning that the name Sans Souci was the name of one of the King's rivals, slain by Christophe when he proved a threat. However, Trouillot does not tell the story of the village guide as a spot of necessary local color, an appetizer before the scholarly main course. Rather, his encounters with tour guides contribute to the argument he is making – that a silence was created in regards to the role of San Souci the man in Haitian history. In a footnote he adds: "I have not done fieldwork on the oral history of Sans Souci. I suspect there is much more in the oral archives than this summary,

[6] Ibid, p. 32
[7] Ibid, p. 141-142

which encapsulates only "popular" knowledge in the area as filtered through the routine performance of the guides".[8] Here, Trouillot's anthropological training comes through, as he terms present-day memories as being "oral archives", and as such worthy of research, sources of historical authority. Academic historians are not the only participants in the production of historical knowledge.[9]

Trouillot is also concerned with the spatiality of the present as indicative of the processes of the past. For instance, he compares the present day condition on the palace of Sans Souci in Potsdam with Sans Souci in Milot. "Sans Souci-Potsdam is knowable in ways that Sans Souci-Milot will never be. The Potsdam palace is still standing. Its mass of stone and mortar has retained most of its shape and weight, and it is still furnished with what passes for the best of rococo elegance… In contrast to Potsdam, the Milot palace is a wreck. Its walls were breached by civil war, neglect, and natural disasters".[10] The difference between the two palaces today tells a story of the historical past leading up to the present, and of the power accorded to each location. It is not simply an accident of architectural restoration.

In the epilogue, Trouillot wanders the streets of Port-au-Prince, looking for a statue of Christopher Columbus. He turns to an artist peddling his wares, and what follows is a description of the exchange between the two men.[11] The painter identifies a statue of Harry Truman as that of Haiti's nationalist army leader, Charlemagne Péralte. This encounter demonstrates the importance Trouillot accords to contemporary perceptions of the past and historical agency. "I stood there for another half hour, asking each passerby if they knew what had happened to the Columbus statue. I knew the story: I was in Port-au-Prince when Columbus disappeared. I just

[8] Ibid, note 1 to page 35
[9] Ibid, p. 25
[10] Ibid, p. 45
[11] Ibid, p. 155

wanted confirmation, a test of how public memory works and how history takes shape".[12] For Trouillot, public memory – no less than academic intervention – is what gives shape to the past.

The four articles I turn to now – written by Sumanta Banerjee, Nirmala Banerjee, Prem Chowdhry and Julia Thomas – differ from Trouillot's book in a crucial way; he narrates in a personal voice, introducing us to a character named "Michel-Rolph Trouillot". The following authors chose the seemingly transparent voice, without formally acknowledging their own existence, let alone agency and agenda. However, like Trouillot, they turn to under-utilized sources.

This is especially true of the writers who contributed to the volume "Recasting Women", who use songs and proverbs in their analysis of colonial India.[13] However, an important qualifier must be made: the authors draw most of these from collections compiled in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Such acts of compilation – as Trouillot reminds us – are never innocent, but influenced by presuppositions and often by prejudices.

Proverbs have long been a popular source of information about the past; in fact, one of the first bestsellers in the history of print was Erasmus' book *Adages*, a collection of ancient Greek and Roman proverbs compiled by the famous sixteenth century humanist. But proverbs and songs are usually included for their folkloristic, "colorful" value. One of the conventions of historical writing is that a few lines of poetry, meant to illustrate the argument made, will often preface a scholarly text. However, Sumanta Banerjee, Nirmala Banerjee and Prem Chowdhry utilize songs and

[12] Ibid, ibid
[13] Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History, eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, Rutgers University Press, 1990

proverbs in a very different way. They are not external to the text, but incorporated within it and granted the authoritative status of "historical source".

Unlike Trouillot and Thomas, these writers don't directly address the issue of methodology and the principles which guide the use of non-traditional sources. But interestingly, the layout of the text reflects the fact that these are not "conventional" sources: the songs and proverbs are not embedded in the "regular" running text, but stand out on the page, occupying their own (physical and conceptual) space.

In "Marginalization of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal", Sumanta Banerjee writes of the way this culture was devalued and female performers "eliminated".[14] By incorporating the songs sung by these women, he is retroactively resisting the silencing of their voices, allowing them to sing again.

This popular culture originated among the lower social classes. "Many of these forms – doggerels and poems, songs and theatrical performances – were fashioned by women who remained outside the framework of the formal education introduced by English missionaries and scholars".[15] The text in which this statement is made, Sumanta Banerjee's article in "Recasting Women", that is, is itself an offspring of this colonial system; an article written by a Bengali about Bengali culture – and yet is written in English. In this context, the decision to insert songs in the article is a political one, a reminder of the fact that India existed before the British Empire.

Women's popular culture is portrayed as an alternative sort of archive: "the literary creations of the lower economic groups, particularly those fashioned by the women of these groups, retained particular traditional features and used specific dialects and idioms, which were common to women of almost all classes of

[14] Sumanta Banerjee, "Marginalization of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal", in Recasting Women, pp.127-179, p. 132
[15] Ibid, p. 128

households in nineteenth century Bengal".[16] This shared culture was replaced when the ties that bound together women from different social classes were broken.[17] However, while it lasted, these songs "expressed certain concerns, experiences and aspirations which appealed to most or all contemporary women".[18]

Sumanta Banerjee employs proverbs as well as songs. For instance, the following proverb – "When the hut collapses, even the goat tramples on it. When one becomes a widow, everyone comes to arrange a sanga with her" – is presented as proof of Sanga being a recognized form of marriage among the lower classes.[19]

Songs are also used as a source in Nirmala Banerjee's "Working Women in Colonial Bengal: Modernization and Marginilization".[20] Banerjee juxtaposes two sources that traditionally have very different status: snippets from songs on the one hand, and detailed numerical charts on the other. However, she uses the songs in a different way from Sumanta Banerjee. In the article about popular culture, the songs are used to demonstrate both women's ideas and concerns about their lives, and the social reality of their times. That is, the songs were invested with ontological credibility and viewed as repository of "hard" information. Nirmala Banerjee, however, sets up a divide: the article is devoted to the economical and social changes that affected women's labor in Bengal, and is accompanied by elaborate tables (for example, "Male and female workers as percentage of population and percentage distribution of workers by broad occupational categories: Bengal Presidency).[21] The songs, however, are used to show what women's perceptions were. "In their own perceptions, women saw these tasks not only as part of their daily drudgery but also as

[16] Ibid, p. 130
[17] Ibid, ibid
[18] Ibid, p. 131
[19] Ibid, p. 146
[20] Nirmala Banerjee, "Working Women in Colonial Bengal: Modernization and Marginalization", in Recasting Women, pp. 267-301
[21] Ibid, p. 279

a backdrop to their life cycle, their longings and their celebrations. Their traditional songs, a few of which are quoted here from the original Bengali, reflect this constant interweaving of tasks and moods".[22] I have no doubt that the songs do indeed reflect women's perceptions – but by designating a different domain for these sources, Banerjee is partly holding on, perhaps inadvertently, to the hierarchy between "scientific knowledge" and "folklore".

Proverbs are used by Prem Chowdhry in "Customs in a Peasant Economy: Women in Colonial Haryana"[23]. Here, they are considered as reflecting social and environmental situations. For example, the imperative to have male children is proven by the citation of the proverbs: "Just as a one-eyed man can hardly be called lucky, so also a man with only one son"; "The son of an unfortunate dies, the daughter of a fortunate dies".[24] This second proverb is directly linked in the article to female infanticide rates, and proverbs are said to "reflect the dominant social ethos".[25] Unfortunately, Chowdhry does not consider another intriguing possibility – that is, that proverbs such as this one not only reflect reality, but actively influence it.

Proverbs and narrative sources are not separated by Chowdhry; a section from a government report from 1880 and the proverb "If weeding be not done when there are but two leaves, then what will you earn worthless woman", are shown side by side as examples of the necessity for women's labor.[26] The information that the Jat woman was praised by British officials as an "economic treasure" is augmented by the proverb "Good kind Jatni, how in hand, weeds the field in company with her

[22] Ibid, p. 284-285
[23] Prem Chowdhry, "Customs in a Peasant Economy: Women in Colonial Haryana, in Recasting Women, pp. 302-336
[24] Ibid, p. 305
[25] Ibid, ibid
[26] Ibid, p. 307

husband".[27] In fact, proverbs are even held up not only as positive proof (upholding information already known), but have enough authority to rule out interpretations that are not in keeping with the spirit of the proverb. Writing about the control exercised over women and their remarriage, Chowdrhy concludes: "Any assertion to the contrary would be difficult to believe in a region which advocated: 'Land and wife can only be held through the use of force, when they fail they become another's".[28]

The link Chowdhry establishes between facts and proverbs is not to be taken for granted, for different kinds of relationships between the two could be envisioned (for instance, the proverb could be said to refer to a utopian world, to offer social critique, etc).

Trouillot and the contributors to "Recasting Women" use material which is often not considered to be "historical sources", and bestow this status upon them. Julia Thomas' move is a different one. In "Photography, National Identity and the "Cataract of Times: Wartimes images and the Case of Japan", she critically analyses the photography exhibit mounted by the Yokohama Museum of Art in 1995.[29] "This analysis begins by treating the exhibition as a 'text' worthy of consideration in its own right".[30] The exhibit is trying to claim secondary source status for itself, but Thomas is transforming it into a primary source.[31] This "text", though dealing with the past, is one created and actualized in the present; this is why "any interpretation must rest on a broad reading of Japan's current circumstances".[32] Furthermore, "as with any

[27] Ibid, p. 308
[28] Ibid, pp. 314-315
[29] Julia Thomas, "Photography, National Identity, and the 'Cataract of Times': Wartime Images and the Case of Japan", in The American Historical Review, Vol. 103, No. 5 (Dec. 1998), pp. 1475-1501
[30] Ibid, p. 1476
[31] I thank Barbara Metcalf for pointing this out to me.
[32] Thomas, p. 1476

retrospective exhibition, *Photography in the 1940s* is an artifact of contemporary possibilities for historical practice as well as a repository of history".[33]

Thomas' work intersects with Trouillot's observation about the second stage in historical production – the creation of archives. Essentially, what the exhibit is trying to do is set itself up as an alternative kind of archive of Japan's past. Thomas shows how the exhibit acts as a historical voice, telling two different narratives – one about "the West" and one about Japan.[34] As such, this is a fascinating case study, a contemporary example of the process Trouillot identifies. Choices, seemingly innocent, are pregnant with meaning. Such, for example, is the choice made by the curator to term the exhibition as one dealing with "the forties". "In choosing the temporal frame of 'the forties', the curator used time as an interpretive device, ensuring that war was balanced with peace and 'the West' was balanced with Japan".[35] Thomas is catching the curator "in the act", as it were, and holding him accountable for the choices he made. The realization that specific human beings, and not vague, deterministic "processes" partake in the present recreation of history is a point worth remembering.

Like Trouillot, Thomas points to family histories as participating in a shared remembrance. "Some grandparents who never brought themselves to speak of the war with the younger members of their families now relate their experiences on a web site".[36] She is aware of present-day influences on attitudes toward history and the past; in the Japanese context, ultra-nationalists threateningly insist on historical narratives that fit their political agenda. As an archive, the exhibition wasn't free to compile freely. "At best, the exhibition was a modest act of historical representation,

[33] Ibid, p. 1488
[34] Ibid, p. 1480
[35] Ibid, pp. 1484-1485
[36] Ibid, p. 1487

compelling principally in its precise calibration of the limits of historical consensus in Japan at the moment of its production".[37]

It isn't only through brute force (as in the case of nationalist hooligans) that the present is brought into contact with the past. The exhibition creates "interactions between specific images from Japan's past and present-day viewers".[38] It does so by its very invitation to the public: come look at the past. In different ways, all of the authors I cite are concerned with a public type of history, meant for popular consumption. "A tourist guide, a museum tour, an archeological expedition, or an auction at Sotheby's [and I would add, a proverb or popular song] can perform as much an archival role as the Library of Congress".[39] Since it is a process, history is never truly created by a single individual. "As is evident from my treatment of this fine art photography exhibition as a contribution to historical recollection, I think of history not as the exclusive enterprise of professional historians but as a shared social activity where many kinds of documentation are brought to bear".[40]

Thus far, I've been concerned mainly with historical production's relation to the past and the present; Thomas draws the future into the equation: "This exhibition, however tentatively and inadequately, participated in that struggle for the future by trying to provide Japan with a usable past".[41] The metaphor of the "cataracts of time", developed by Siegfried Kracauer and cited by Thomas, proves helpful here.[42] Past, present and future can't be divvied up into neat, discrete parcels. Both photographs and histories "never represent[s] a simple beat in the even, universal temporal flow… Instead, the practice of photography – and of history – must grapple precariously with

[37] Ibid, p. 1497
[38] Ibid, p. 1494
[39] Trouillot, p. 52
[40] Thomas, note 5 to p. 1476
[41] Ibid, p. 1501
[42] Ibid, pp. 1499-1500

heterogeneous forms of time.[43] Trouillot also is attempting to denaturalize our conception of time: "Time … is not a mere chronological continuity. It is the range of disjointed moments, practices, and symbols that thread the historical relations between events and narratives".[44]

"The crux of the matter is the here and now, the relations between the events described and their public representation in a specific historical context. These relations debunk the myth of The Past as a fixed reality and the related view of knowledge as a fixed content".[45]

Trouillot's insights about the creation of silences in historical production seem to have led him to a pessimistic stance about the historical profession and its products. "We all need histories that no history book can tell, but they are not in the classroom – not in the history classrooms, anyway. They are in the lessons we learn at home, in poetry and childhood games, in what is left of history when we close the history books".[46] I disagree. While I do think that history is in all the places Trouillot names (as well as other places, most interestingly for me, in kitchens), this should not lead us to give up on the history taught in books and classrooms. The task, it seems to me, should be to bring the two together, not privilege one over the other. The writers who incorporate songs and proverbs in their scholarly work demonstrate one way in which this can be done. Using a different, critical perspective, Julia Thomas shines a light on what is missing in one attempt to create historical narrative. And Trouillot himself, as I've shown, incorporates his own childhood and present-day personal encounters into

[43] Ibid, p. 1500
[44] Troillot, p. 146
[45] Ibid, p. 147
[46] Ibid, p. 66

the historical narrative, pointing to a history that will include formerly neglected narratives.

At the outset of this paper, I claimed that a political stand underlies these writers' use of non-traditional sources; this is, first, that the present should not be divorced from historiography, and second, that the power which goes into the creation of archives and narratives should at a minimum be acknowledged, and if possible, partially reversed.

These positions, combined, lead Trouillot to a direct call for activism – it is not enough to write about the Holocaust if one does not march against skinheads in contemporary Europe.[47] "We move closer to the era when professional historians will have to position themselves more clearly within the present, less politicians, magnates or ethnic leaders alone write history for them".[48] This is why "historical representations… cannot be conceived only as vehicles for the transmission of knowledge. They must establish some relation to that knowledge".[49] He goes on to demand that this relation be an authentic one – an authenticity that reflects what the present is, what its injustices and practices are.

The work of Banerjee, Banerjee, Chowdhry and Thomas could also be seen as a kind of activism. These writers are united in their endeavor to unearth silences – be they the voices of those silenced (as in "Recasting Women"), or the untold narrative (suppressed by the curator of the photography exhibit). The methodology of using non-archival sources (and I use this definition very loosely, for lack of a better one) has far-reaching theoretical implications. By using these sources, historians can simultaneously question authority and bestow it where it has formerly been denied. To borrow from Habermas, they are rethinking and reworking the public sphere.

[47] Ibid, p. 150
[48] Ibid. p. 152
[49] Ibid, p. 149

However, an important point to remember is that power doesn't comes into play only at more institutionalized, traditional sources of authority. When a tour guide decides what to say and what to leave out, he or she is performing much the same function, and this is something the historian should be wary of. That is, the use of non-traditional sources, oral or otherwise, should not be accompanied by a romanticized vision of how these sources are produced and compiled.

In historiographical tradition, food has held the same uneasy place as songs, proverbs, personal reminisces, present-day encounters, etc. – colorful, but not really serious. While work has been done on the history of specific foodstuffs, the way people eat – both then and now – is rarely used as source material; that is, to uncover social or cultural narratives, for example. My interest in food as a historical source has led me to consider how historians benefit from stepping out of traditional archives. The theoretical underpinnings that I wrote of are relevant for the work I hope to accomplish; First, I'm curious about how contemporary practices – of cooking and eating, as well as *claims* made about cooking and eating – are related to narratives of the past; that is, what kind of relationship between past and present is constituted by performative acts related to food. Second, using taste and food as sources is an attempt to employ a vastly underutilized archive.

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