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And then came culture

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Abstract

Both a tribute and ritual of remembrance, “And then came culture” elaborates the intensely political critique that Trouillot commanded throughout his life. Whether writing about Haiti, the silences of history, neocolonialism, or the relations between state and nation, he fought hard against the academic generalities and benign consensus that hid the realities of racism and erasure. One of the words that most haunted him—its uses and abuses—was the word “culture.” I trace that compelling concern throughout his work, most especially in a piece called “Adieu, Culture: A New Duty Arises,” a necessary warning about and corrective to the limits of liberal discourse.

Keywords

Anthropology, culture, hybridity, liberal consensus, nomadism, race, racism

A sort of preamble: When I arrived at the Graduate Center after a year in Jamaica and Haiti on a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), I first met Michael Dash in the Senior Common Room at Mona—the realities of class, the atrocities of imperial power, and the ugly reach of neocolonial austerity measures, what I had lived in regular sight of daily on the streets of and the hills above Kingston, were no longer words much appreciated in the postmodern classroom, where the enhancements of indeterminacy reigned supreme. To speak politics, to talk suffering was to be naïve, or worse. There was, I thought then, a paralysis of style that shimmered before me, a call to theoretical sophistication that left little room for the kind of background necessary to teach my graduate students what was at stake in a seminar called “Caribbean Prose, Poetry, and Politics.” I met Aisha Khan then, and she along with others that autumn of 1987 worked with me to know again “the pain of history that words contain,” to take up Walcott’s words as he meditates on the naming of a tree variously called—depending who you

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are—“Canadian cedars, cedars, cypresses, or casuarinas” in *Schooner Flight*. I am honored to be here.

Why “culture”? With all that Trouillot wrote, why focus on this word? In part, because he was haunted by what he saw as its uses, replacing the experience of racism with what he called “the conjure of culture.” And in part, because it marked his experience as a scholar (in the 1980s and 1990s) when to be a “cultural critic” meant that you could, if you chose, leave your coat of color and the question of inequality at the door. You could, if you chose, be freed from the dual traps of the archive and the streets, the dilemma of history and politics. Why does Trouillot’s critique matter now?

We are living in a time of extinctions: a systematic disposal of creatures deemed threatening or unfit. How easy it is for fear and dogma to allow us to demonize others, to deny them a common humanity, to do unspeakable things to them. In a disenchanted world, daily cruelty and casual violence accompany the call for order, the need for security. The management of what is deemed refuse draws distinctions, as I have argued, between the free and the bound, the familiar and the strange, the privileged and the stigmatized. And this ongoing cultivation of human waste materials—so much material exposed to violence—asks us to recast interpretation itself.

How can we shed the mantle of civility, reasonable consensus, and rationality just long enough to question the claims of liberal humanism? Does academic caution defang thought, reducing it—no matter how, or especially if, expertly rendered—to a privileged experience that nullifies what remains alive and unsettling outside our conventions and characterizations?

Trouillot demanded answers to these questions. He distrusted the sanctified sphere of academic theorizing. He saw the experience of racism concealed by the remedy of culture. He knew the danger of liberal versions of pluralism that evaded history. How, he pressed us to ask, should we address the rationales and rituals of dehumanization that thrive under cover of necessity in this our 21st century? What are the choices offered us as scholars, writers, and teachers? A cure for all kinds of threats, reasonableness has long been a presupposition for extending enslavement, disability, and torture. But this rationality—like the theory that accompanies it—is tied to figurative power; and, at any moment, its metaphors can become more insistent and literal. There was no more lethal metaphoric terrain for Trouillot than the project of *culture* and the contextualization it disallowed.

As we have heard today in these fascinating, heartening talks, Trouillot was a transformative presence in multiple fields—anthropology, history, political economy, philosophy, even literature. He redefined the meaning of scholarship and questioned the long arm of power. I recall his sustained assault on the celebrated uniqueness of Haiti; his hope long ago that the future of Haiti would be decided in the countryside; and the words, more true today than ever, that described Haiti as “the earliest testing ground for neo-colonialism.”

I met Trouillot in March 1987, at the Woodrow Wilson Center of the Smithsonian. I had just returned from a year’s sabbatical in Jamaica and Haiti where I had gone to write a book called “History and Poetic Language in the Caribbean.” With his distinctive irony and warmth, Rolph repeated the *big* words—history and language—and asked whether I thought the terms of the project might not be a bit “too

fashionable” to do justice to the complexities of the region. He was everything that I did not yet have words for.

It was a time of raging generalities in the academy, when folks of all colors, backgrounds, and tastes could safely jump on the bandwagon of “multiculturalism” and “diversity.” As national and racist borders became harsher in daily life, the multicultural rhetoric of the academy (like the multinational corporations that were refueled and consolidated during these years) became ever more penetrating. As Trouillot (1995) famously put it nearly 10 years later in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, “all hyphens are not equal in the pot that does not melt.” By the time I met him again just over a year later at the Abington Friends School in Jenkinstown, Pennsylvania, I recognized how acute was his concern with terminology, the dangerous intoxication with generalities that allowed us to forget the history and politics that such words masked.

We were asked to speak about the Caribbean. As I heard him speak that first time in Pennsylvania, I understood how grave were the effects of such well-meaning abstractions, how such benign theoretical maneuvers appropriated or even displaced the subjects represented. Academics from the metropolitan center were busy re-inventing a cultural narrative that subsumed the very places and peoples they claimed to be speaking about. And all the while, as what Trouillot called “the explanatory power of culture” increased, the actual dichotomies remained. The context for inequality became even harsher because hidden by the fake call for a common ground.

Under the pretext of diasporic movement, the need for local knowledge is circumvented. Although certain terminologies promise an alternative theorizing, they belie the facts of social and racial stratification. What, Trouillot asked, is the underside of transnational cultural hybridity, or to put it another way, the ghost that trails behind the display of fashionable icons? Certain kinds of language, and the persons attached to that language, are effectively disappeared in theories that appear to privilege difference but work even more effectively to expel. As local realities were increasingly subsumed in the global market in the 1990s, Trouillot was the keen, acerbic witness to the deceptive “free-play” of celebratory nomadism.

We saw “black studies” or “ethnic studies” programs and departments disappear in the wake of cosmopolitanism; we watched as our theoretical discussions abetted the extraterritoriality of capital. And while we in the academy discussed the problems with terms such as *creolity*, *mestizaje*, *hybridization*, or *nomadism*, the mainstream media defined who minorities are—how they were to be recognized and what they should be called. We watched as a new academic Manifest Destiny appeared, masked by what Edouard Glissant (1992) in *Caribbean Discourse* called “the ideal of transparent universality, imposed by the West, with secretive and multiple manifestations of Diversity.” It was not too far-fetched to claim that the terminological evacuation of difference in the multicultural academy worked hardily with the global push to construct receptacles for peoples of a certain race, color, and class—the wastes not of Empire, but of free-market capitalism.

The hermeneutics of de-centered identities, once put alongside another kind of rhetorical practice outside the academy, helps us to understand—as Trouillot argued—how culture and politics operate in tandem with each other. As our theorizing became more rarified and exclusive in one direction, conjuring the image of migrant intellectuals or, in

Edward Said's wonderful description, "cultural amphibians," another kind of theorizing summoned the wrong kinds of migrants, necessary deportees, or unregenerate criminals. In this language of incarceration, stigma, and control, the margins of these groups do not shift, though they too are the products of histories of displacement. Against the fashionable cartography of celebratory journeys, Trouillot opposed the lives, the histories of those whose lives do not span borders, like those "hundreds of Haitian refugees who continue to dive," he wrote in the late 1990s, "both literally and figuratively—in the Florida seas, betting that they will beat the sharks, the waves, and the U.S. Coast Guard."

To speak about Rolph Trouillot now, after the long years of his illness and death, is a way of walking slowly into the past—a means of remembering what matters most in what we do, whether in our everyday life as scholars or in those special, favored moments of discovery that come to us in our writing. Trouillot was not just a scholar, as we have heard today, but a passionate thinker and exemplar of what the political and spiritual life demands. His writings illuminated everything they touched. He was rigorous, but the discipline he asked for—intellectual and ethical—came with a light touch. And that is what I remember most: his smile, his warmth, his distinctive irony. I learned more from him than anyone I have ever encountered in my career. In these days of disaster, oppression, and dread, we need to remember his message—the words he used, the craft he practiced.

I turn here to the power of words. That is what matters most about Trouillot's (2003) work, from *Ti Dife Boule sou Istwa Ayiti* (Small fire burning on the history of Haiti, 1977) —a history of the Haitian Revolution and the first non-fiction book written in Haitian—to *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World*, published shortly before a ruptured aneurysm tragically cut short his career. He knew how a word like "culture" could screen the facts of history and experience. He began, before anyone else, to combat, in wonderfully original and always passionate ways, the academic turn to something vague called "post-colonial culture," which separated scholarly analysis from the specificities of local history, politics, and vision. The absorption of history and politics into such a privileged textualized universe, he warned, expurgated the discriminations of race and racism—the particulars of daily struggle and commonplace prejudice that must be brought to bear on any concept or metaphor.

What, he asked, are the implications of privileging culture over experience and hermeneutics over history? How do we represent historical and political realities without being imprisoned in their instrumentality? Matters of terminology, he knew, delimit privilege, just as they dispossess the disenfranchised—the invisible ones. In his remarkable essay "The Anthropology of the State in the Age of Globalization: Close Encounters of the Deceptive Kind" (Trouillot, 2001), he looked beyond governmental or national institutions. "Behind the banality of these millions of encounters between individuals or groups and governments," he turned to those who live in the *shadow of the state*. As a working strategy of domination and control, racial prejudice always relied on a set of fictions in order to sustain such precepts as disability and privilege. The fact of color stood forth in society as a threat and a curse, a moral essence or transmissible evil; and it called for a new story, a resurrection of history with a vengeance.

Every text, Trouillot said, has a context. And for him, language mattered. Generalities were costly. And they were strategic. He understood the implications of what *Time*

magazine would celebrate in the mid-1990s as the “World’s First Multicultural Society” or “The New Face of America” with a computer-generated photographic series of faces that told the triumphant story: no more black or white but a synthesis of color and phenotype. A strange but significant shift had occurred in the metaphysics of racism. Under cover of this idealized assimilation, there yet remained those of a less-disguisable class or color. They were redefined as “threats,” “criminals,” or visualized in media representations of boatloads of Haitian refugees in the early 1990s: first, they were called “economic” not “political” refugees, then re-termed “migrants,” and then, as AIDS emerged, classified as “carriers of tainted blood.”

To begin with Trouillot’s “Motion in the System: Coffee, Color, and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Saint-Domingue” (published in 1982) is to know his life-long battle against the quest for essences that were not only false but deviously strategic. As he put it so beautifully,

There is no stateness to states, no essence to culture, not even a fixed content to specific cultures, let alone a fixed content to the West. We gain greater knowledge of the nation, the state, the tribe, modernity, or globalization itself when we approach them as sets of relations and processes rather than ahistorical essences.

An arduous demonstration of how the colonial space is also always an encounter with modern civility, “Motion in the System” changed how we envision the encounter between the West and the Rest. Colonial and other peripheries played a greater theoretical role in the constitution of imperial centers than previously thought. And contradicting the received wisdom in marginality studies, the relation between imperial centers and colonial peripheries was a two-way process. If we need to understand the debates on nationhood and citizenship in metropolitan France on the eve of revolution, we have to understand how terms such as “nation” and “citizen” were relayed in Haiti, Martinique, and Guadeloupe.

Trouillot begins the article with what he calls “a very basic fact.” In slightly more than two decades, the amount of coffee exports from Saint-Domingue quadrupled, overtaking the amount of sugar exports. I still feel the thrill of the question he asked— one of the questions that remain “unanswered.” He was writing for those, as he put it gingerly, “whose interest leans more toward historical particulars.” And here is the question: “To what extent do ‘local initiative and local response’ account for motion in the system?” This insistence on the *local*—what he elaborated as “the particulars of social, economic, and cultural history”—set the bar for everything I wrote, not only my writing about Haitian historiography and literature, but also my engagement with the practical quandaries of the rapprochement of anthropology and literary criticism, what I later called “literary fieldwork.”

What he referred to as a “*methodology for the study of particulars as sources of change* in their own right,” was for him an enduring bulwark against oversimplification. To insist on the “moving and contradictory relations” between things and persons, to “determine the complex relations which led particular people at particular times to feel the way they felt and act the way they did” was to engage with details that led to nothing short of revelation: the economic strength of *gens de couleur*, “a strength” that was, as he

wrote, “ironically related to their social marginality.” Nothing short of a masterpiece of analysis by a writer turned sleuth, this article moves from the ground up, from the little facts or minute incidents that are most often overlooked in favor of sweeping claims or familiar assumptions, to arrive at “new cultural patterns” that yet preserve the ambiguity and nuance—and, ultimately, the power—of lives lived on the periphery but not outside of what Albert Memmi once dubbed “the game of history.”

Trouillot never lost his concern for groups ignored by scholars, for what “situated individuals with rights to historicity” might contribute to academic disciplines. In *Peasants and Capital: Dominica in the World Economy* (Trouillot, 1988), he asked what the so-called “margins”—the contemporary peasantry—might mean when “marginality” is imagined, indeed hyperbolized, by the capitalist countries at the center. The conclusions of the book, Trouillot knew, extended far beyond Dominica, and he dared to reformulate the stakes of “the peasant labor process” (a process not a posture).

And how prescient Trouillot was. He knew that the continued treatment of peasants as “liabilities” in development schemes is not only wrongheaded but also destructive: it resulted in severe unemployment, a tremendous rise in the cost of food, systematic exploitation, and brute force. Instead of treating peasants as “liabilities,” he urged that we think of them as “potential resources.” And without mincing words, he concluded,

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.

Two years later in *Haiti: State against Nation* (Trouillot, 1990), reflecting on the long history of export taxes on peasant products, he argued, “It is not too much to suggest that the peasantry, almost alone, was subsidizing the Haitian state.” If only the US Agency for International Development (US AID) and the World Bank had taken Trouillot’s analyses seriously. Their projects in the 1980s displaced farmers from the countryside and created a captive labor force in the capital: development Taiwan-style. Living in the shantytowns on the hillsides, they become victims first of the multinational sweatshops there and, later, of the earthquake on 12 January 2010.

Born in Port-au-Prince in 1949, Trouillot witnessed during his first 18 years not only the end of the American Occupation but the ongoing denigration of the peasantry by both Haitian elites and foreign observers. They blamed Haiti’s “underdevelopment” on vodou, what David Brooks alluded to in a *New York Times* op-ed right after the earthquake as “a complex web of progress-resistant cultural influences.” Yet Trouillot did not tire of reminding his readers and listeners of the sinister mystique of Haitian exceptionalism, a celebration of uniqueness that connived in hiding what he identified as “the longest neocolonial experiment in the history of the West.”

Trouillot recognized the endless cycle of political instability as yoked to an elite dedicated to preserving its wealth and to foreign interests, led by the United States, determined to compel Haiti to be nothing more than a supplier of cheap labor for factories and sweatshops. Quite apart from huge and predicted environmental degradation caused by economic development plans, the “aid” they brought benefited not those who actually needed it but the home-grown elites and two other sectors: foreign companies and the

globe-trotting international aid workers themselves, who move from one crisis to the next armed as always with their sport utility vehicles (SUVs), bottled water, and luxury local accommodations. But he would never put it like this.

Trouillot's writing never lapsed into polemic. He practiced the discipline of tact. His ethical sense depended on hard-won detachment. That ethics and discrimination made him our best guide for over two decades. During this period, what he once warned about as "the illusion of a liberal space of enlightenment" became handmaid to unprecedented political guile, the transnational drive of global capital, political terror, disciplinary containment, and extermination. Yet throughout his writing, speaking, and teaching, Trouillot asked more of us than just intellect. He invited us to set our imagination and sensibility and intelligence to work. Nowhere did he do this so powerfully as in the field-defining, discipline-expanding *Silencing the Past*. If some histories, as he tells us, are "unthinkable" and therefore forgotten or submerged or silenced, how can scholars approach the "silences" of history? Can "a history of the impossible" be written? Trouillot confronts the making of history, the use and abuse of the archive, the all-too-human appropriation of "the past as *past*," and the intimate collusion between historical and fictional narratives.

Silencing the Past excavates the events and persons that disappeared in the search for historical relevance. A delineation of historical quarantine, suppression, and silencing, it brings together his life-long concerns with terminology, the limits of textual analysis, and the easy consumption of conquest, oppression, and enslavement in theme parks built for tourists. Writing with beauty, precision, and wit, he recovers the buried story of Sans Souci. Not just the palace of Frederick the Great in Potsdam or the palace of Henry Christophe in Haiti, but the man Sans Souci, the African-born slave and revolutionary, who, along with Ti-Noel, Macaya, Cacapoule—and other unnamed insurgents of the hills who formed armed bands of nearly a thousand men—refused to surrender to the French, as did Christophe and Jean-Jacques Dessalines after the removal of Toussaint in 1802. This is the "face" lost to history, Colonel Sans Souci who was no marginal rebel, but "a high-ranking officer of Louverture's army turned dissident." So the Colonel was killed twice by Henry Christophe. First, actually, during their last meeting; and then, "symbolically, by naming his most famous palace Sans Souci."

More wide ranging even than this project of recovery—his desire, as he put it, to "make the silences speak for themselves—is Trouillot's analysis of the Haitian revolution as a "non-event," something so disturbing to white assumptions about black inferiority and cherished taxonomies of scientific racism that the story of the only successful revolution of slaves in the New World could not be told. The freedom gained by black slaves themselves was simply unspeakable. Or rather, and more perniciously still, the story was recast and disfigured, or simply disappeared. I remember how the Haitian revolution was silenced in conferences and exhibits celebrating the 200th anniversary of the French revolution in New York in 1989. Trouillot asks how this happens, and why. In the process, he exhumes the reciprocal dependencies, the uncanny resemblances that no ideology of difference or supremacy can remove.

It is easy to forget that before Trouillot's work few historians dared to suggest, as did Aimé Césaire (1981) in *Toussaint Louverture: La Révolution française et le problème colonial*, how central was what happened in St Domingue to the French revolution, how

such terms as “nation” and “citizen” were first played out on the ground in Haiti. What would it mean to standard history making if we jostled our ideas of cause and effect, if we reread events in France through the quizzing glass of Haiti? In his study of the Haitian Revolution, Trouillot demonstrates how the revolution was “thought in action,” with the result that “discourse always lagged behind practice.”

I recognize again the force of his argument in *Silencing the Past*: “The Past—or, more accurately, pastness—is a position. Thus, in no way can we identify the past as *past*.” It is too easy, perhaps, to acquiesce in the comforting claim that the facts of degradation no longer exist. How, then, do words act as revenants, certifying that cycles of terror can be perpetually reinvented in ever new landscapes of unfreedom?

Through stereotypes and sensationalism, the media have created an image of Haiti that suits powerful outside states and their financial interests. Generalizations about criminality and barbarism have always been a good way to avoid the particulars of history. Whenever the repression of the peasantry becomes more violent than usual, due to the necessities of export, the appropriation of lands, or the use of captive wage labor in multinational assembly industries, Vodou practices are described as superstition and black magic. A mythologized Haiti of zombies, sorcery, and witchdoctors screens the ongoing economic greed, color prejudice, political guile, and sheer weight of military force.

Every text about Haiti has a context, as well as a subtext and a pretext. With Haiti, it has always been about representation: how Haiti is perceived and written about has shaped the destiny of the nation, “Black France” for Jules Michelet, “a tropical dog-kennel” for Thomas Carlyle. For V.S. Naipaul, a later connoisseur of caricature, the “desert of Haiti” is the source of the “nothing” that he claims as a peculiarly West Indian legacy. Representations of Haiti are largely negative; they entail violation of the integrity of the thing represented. Trouillot was fascinated by the way historical fact disappeared in fantasies of the unspeakable: the unthinkable revolution of slaves and the threatening spectacle of Vodou, most often used by outsiders to signal the backwardness and indolence that they feel best describe Haitian history.

Let me turn now to the “adieu” that conceptually—of all his work—most compelled him: “Adieu, Culture: A New Duty arises.” As he wrote in his acknowledgments to *Global Transformations*, “It took a long time to say”: “My uneasiness with the race-culture complex in North American anthropology dates back to graduate school. I first put it into words at the presidential session on race at the 1991 American Anthropology Association meetings in San Francisco.” Trouillot’s “Anthropology and the Savage Slot: The Poetics and Politics of Otherness, published that year demonstrates with his usual sympathy and humor how instrumental “the postmodernist critique of anthropology” became from 1982 to the 1990s. His arguments, he continues, “were revived for the paper ‘Exploring the limits of Liberal Discourse: American Anthropology and U.S. Racism’” at the symposium “Anthropologists of Color Speak Out” at American University, on October 25, 1997. What was it that so vexed Trouillot about the word “culture”? The essay is a brief but devastating analysis of the anthropological project.

And much of what he says has become unsayable nowadays in the polite society of contemporary academe. Not only does the term “culture” promote a totalizing function that menaces the specificity and suppleness of thought, but it actually perpetuates what he deemed “North American anthropology’s theoretical disregard for the very

context of inequality—and specifically ... racism.” He did not mince words: “Culture is race repellent—not only what race is not, but what prevents race from occupying the defining place in anthropological discourse that it occupies in the larger American society.”

A means by which anthropology universalized itself—as if it is real, natural, spontaneous, and all-encompassing—culture in Trouillot’s recounting is also reactionary, the faithful accompanying trope “in conservative agendas or in late liberal versions of the civilizing project.” T.S. Eliot’s (1948) *Notes toward a Definition of Culture* is particularly significant in this regard. He defines “culture” in words that resonate with Mayor Rudolph Guiliani’s “quality of life” on the streets of New York: “Culture may even be described simply as that which makes life worth living.” But “living” and “worth” — what is to be valued and what disregarded, or worse—are terms that undergo unusual permutations. When you deal with persons labeled as anomalous and extraneous, these words no longer mean what they usually do. And they have lethal effects on those whose lives as “neighbors” are, as Ruthie Gilmore (2007) puts it in *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, “recast as strangers in a thoroughly racialized and income-stratified political economy.”

Much as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro described the project behind Pierre Clastres’s (1980) *Archaeology of Violence*, Trouillot’s insistence on the trinity of race, class, and history aimed “to transform ‘social’ or ‘cultural’ anthropology into a *political anthropology*.” The deadly magic of culture, moderated, legitimized, even reproduced by the humanitarian concern that is analogous to it, is closed to criticism. And the illusionists who engineer subjection and terror rely on the claims of culture to guarantee malignancy and predation. Culture’s claims shield theory from politics even as it advances a political context: in Trouillot’s words, “the history of power that the concept itself was used to silence. Central to that context is race and racism.”

What does it mean to live, to write in a cultural climate acquiescent in multiple genocides? That is a question before us as drone strikes, mass incarceration, and black sites—still—make us complicit in a novel reign of terror under the sign of “democracy.” Trouillot was aware that the most innocent and benign of academic trends carried with it—though hidden in plain sight—the logic of extermination that targets people of color, and he knew its eugenic violence even as he admitted its universalizing promise. In our “secular” and “progressive” times, comprehensive forms of intimidation and punishment function as the backdrop to civil community. And nowhere is oppressive state magic more accomplished than in cases of policing and torture, where infernal treatment thrives under cover of necessity.

Terms like “decency,” “humane,” or “culture,” just like the word “universal” that Chinua Achebe long ago warned against, make state violence less obvious. Absolute power, once set in motion by a panic of imperial brutality, depends on what Hannah Arendt described as the “general validity of reason as a purely formal quality”—a validation that enables rationally pursued subjugation. To read Trouillot is to know the power of words: the event or eventuality created in utterance. In that he remained true to a politics of engagement from which he never wavered. That politics depended upon a sense of human life and loss. He found there a space for ethics. He struggled and wrote and taught in order to exhume the hidden while resisting the lure of transparency.

If it had not been for Rolph, I never could have known what it meant to question the turn to vodou. It was not to serve, he warned, as a metaphor for all that *was* once vital in Haitian culture, a project of nostos or lamentation that was almost always written by ethnographers—I'm thinking here of Paul Moral who mourned in his *Le paysan haïtien* (Moral, 1961) the “progressive weakening of ancestral practices” as “a sort of degradation.” Rolph distrusted the idea that a ceremonial practice could stand in for what is “true” or “empowering” in the lives of peasants. In our discussions, he reminded me that their beliefs, services, and devotion could not be taken out of a context of attitudes and feelings that are at best ambiguous. For vodou practice was only one element in a network of forces, part and parcel of changing social and economic needs. His warning changed the course of my work.

And although I did not quite wean myself from my sense that these rituals were central to a much-needed re-interpretation of Haitian history, I never forgot his questioning enunciation of the project that became *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Dayan, 1995). Always alert to the sinews of the terminology that controls, while betraying a more textured and complex narrative, Rolph emphasized the connection between the continuous demagoguery of ever-ephemeral politicians—and the culture-mongers who serve them—and the particular way that “le peuple” (peasants and workers) get hyperbolized. “Ah,” he once laughed, “beware of the whoring hyperbole.” Certain kinds of literary, ethnographic, and historical representation, he knew, even when produced by progressives on the left, allow (or encourage) the manipulation of the over-symbolized: the groups excluded by factions or parties or professors who devise ideologies of power. And these ideologies, Rolph knew, were yoked to the “totalitarian humanism” of culture.

Not only did Rolph believe that the future of Haiti—and the Caribbean—would come from the peasantry, those whom Gordon Lewis in *The Growth of the Modern West Indies* (Lewis, 1968) had called the only real source of culture, “the black-brown masses,” but he never ceased fighting against the Eurocentric “view of peasants as atavisms.” Instead, he brought together history, political economy, and anthropology—an ensemble he insisted upon as early as *Peasants and Capital*. He aimed to “observe human beings in their daily reality”—no matter how much, and especially if, the details of that reality fly in the face of “a world economy dominated,” in his words, “by the laws of capitalist accumulation” (Trouillot, 1988: 15). Instead of peasants being “puppets of capital,” as he wrote, the “emergence and resilience of Caribbean peasantries” must be seen against a background of grotesque violence and exploitation. But he did not use these terms. Instead, he argued simply and without bombast that we should “take into account the initial violence through which the region itself was born.” Instead of speaking for the silenced or disenfranchised, we might simply—and rigorously—record the meaning that those frequently sentimentalized or misrepresented groups have formed for themselves. To quote a sentence that has stayed with me for over 30 years, “The peasantization of the Caribbean might then look less like a naïve response to market incentives and more like a strategic barrier against other forms of forced integration in a world dominated by trade and profit” (Trouillot, 1988: 22)

But no matter whether it was Haiti, the 19th-century Americas, the Caribbean writ large, or literary history taken in all its textual specificity, Rolph's tact, wit, and grace are with me still. For those of us who struggled with the lure of jargon and cliché—and safe

consensus—his writings shaped how we thought about the humanities. His engagement and invitation to debate were exemplary: a call to thought that never eluded politics.

Recently, his example inspired my graduate Melville seminar last semester, making it the most exciting class I ever taught. In the second week, one of my best students asked me: “Why teach Melville?” She wondered why this esteemed white novelist of the so-called “American Renaissance” deserved such exceptional attention—and for an entire semester? I wondered aloud with her that day: “What was it about Melville that made his works so liberating for Caribbean and African-American writers?” Only when we read together *Silencing the Past* could Melville’s radical and alternative history of the Americas be both understood and experienced, and the unpopularity—and oblivion, or, we could argue, suppression—of his late fiction be grasped.

Rolph understood the permeability of the boundaries between fiction and history. He suggested the terrific anxiety of the powerful, the machinations of power—and the terrible selectiveness of their historical production. In making “the silences speak for themselves,” he clarified Melville’s challenge to the status quo, to the brittle legitimacy of a country that guaranteed racial exclusivity, and worse. Most of all, Rolph taught us all how to read carefully, argue passionately, and write responsibly, without being afraid to offend the bugbears of academia: civility and compromise.

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