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Historiographical Assumptions

In *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot points out the obvious flaw in the production of historical narratives. Though his initial observation is not in the least bit unique to him, his conclusions are worth considering, especially in light of this study.

Trouillot begins his work by making an obvious observation: humans participate in history as actors and narrators. In the vernacular, history is the story of actors and narrators. Actors participate in the sociohistorical process by doing something. Narrators serve to tell the story of what happened.[1] This view of history serves to create a dichotomy between those who make a story happen and those who tell the story. Such a view of history too easily separates the two participants in the historical process. The task of the modern historian is to look past the dichotomy of the vernacular understanding of history.[2]

A theory of the historical narrative must acknowledge both the distinction and the overlap between process and narrative. The events as they happened must finally be told but the process from event to narrative can be troublesome because it is extremely complicated. As one reviewer wrote "The practice of history necessarily generates an ambiguous twilight between reality and text, between the doers and sayers of deeds."[3]

Agents, or those who are the participants in an historical event participate in one form or another in an historical act or movement. Agents occupy positions within the historical process. Yet these agents

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1. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 2.
2. Ibid., 4.
3. Paquette, review of *Silencing the Past*, 189.

eventually become subjects who are studied by historians who seek to determine who they were and what they did by placing them into a wider context. Thus, a person who is involved in a strike becomes a striker. They have been defined and described.[4] Oftentimes the description of the person or event is based on research which does not provide the entire reality of the agent or subject. The narrator must determine what facts to report and what facts to leave out of the narrative. Does it matter that the striker is also a mother? Does it matter if the striker, who is also a mother, is incapacitated during a violent repression of the strike and is thus unable to care for her children? The determination of how to describe the striker is based upon the narrator who is all-powerful in his or her decision-making process. The narrator has full control because the narrator controls what is mentioned and what is omitted.

Yet people are not always subjects constantly confronting history. The capacity upon which they become subjects is part of their condition. This reality makes people fully historical. It engages them simultaneously in the socio-historical process and in narrative constructions of that process. Embracing this ambiguity is the first step in understanding how history works. It is the first move any student of history must make in order to fully comprehend the production of history.

With that task accomplished the student of history must then make the second move—the methodological move—and focus on the actual process of the production of history.[5] It is this second move that will inform the methodology utilized in this study.

The search for the nature of history has led us to deny ambiguity and either demarcate precisely the line between historical process and historical knowledge or to conflate the historical process and the historical narrative. For Trouillot, the process of history should not serve to answer the question, 'What is history?' Rather the historian must confront the question, 'How does history work?' What history *is* changes. How history *works* reveals processes and conditions of production of historical narratives.[6]

The production of narratives begins long before historians reach the scene. In the process of developing the historical narrative someone always enters the scene and sets a cycle of silences, or more specifically, someone decides what not to say about a particular event or series of

4. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 23.

5. Ibid., 24.

6. Ibid., 25.

events. Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments.

First, there is the moment of fact production. Someone must create the source and say something about the event or person. The person who creates the source may well be the person involved directly in an historical event. However, the source may also be the account of those present, and, at times, the source is created by someone who did not witness the event. Therefore it is important to understand something about the source in order to identify possible filters in the final narration of the person or event.

After the fact is produced it must then be assembled. Someone must decide to preserve the event through a narrative or by preserving artifacts. In this way an archive of the event is produced. Again, the decisions concerning what to retain and what to abandon as a representative of the facts also present the historian with a challenge. Who decides what to retain and what to discard? Why was the particular decision concerning the production of the archive made? What was at stake politically, philosophically, or personally for the person who collected the facts?

Eventually someone must undertake the task of creating a narrative of the person or event. This is the moment of fact retrieval. Again, this is a moment in the process where silences can easily enter the narrative. What facts will be reported and what relevant facts will be omitted? What is the rationale for the inclusion of some aspects of an event and the omission of other aspects of the event? Certainly historians must be allowed to distill information in order to create manageable narratives. Yet it must be acknowledged that a portion of the event is often untold.

Finally, according to Trouillot, there is the moment of retrospective significance. Someone must accumulate the data, examine the narratives, and complete the process by considering the significance of the event or person. This is the final moment in the creation of history. Silences can enter the narrative in this stage as well. Determining what is significant about an event or individual involves a process of discernment. What is relevant? What is compelling? What is provable? What is acceptable? All these questions present opportunities for scholars to create a narrative that suits the needs of the narrator (not to mention potential readers!) as much as it serves the process of telling the story.[7]

7. Ibid., 26.

Absences and silences are created in a process that is neither natural nor neutral. One engages in the practice of silencing. Mentions and silences are thus active, dialectical counterparts of which history is the synthesis. Silences are inherent in history because any single event enters history with some of its constituent parts missing. Something is always left out while something else is recorded. Thus whatever becomes fact does so with its own inborn absences, specific to its production.[8]

Trouillot outlines this process in his retelling of the story of the slave revolt on the island of Haiti. The facts of a vibrant rebellion on the part of African slaves against white owners were silenced, according to Trouillot, because historians had no way of dealing with such a narrative.[9] The story was simply not told and as a result a silence emerged in the story of slavery in the West. The prevalent story of helpless Africans enslaved by more powerful whites would have been directly challenged by the story of the Haitian rebellion. The fact that the story was not told is, to Trouillot, an example of how silences in history serve to maintain traditional understandings of power and the systems these understandings create.

Trouillot's work can also be applied to a different end in the examination of Luther's life as it has been told by modern biographers. Silences are created when aspects of Luther's life, aspects which directly impact the development of his theology, are ignored or dismissed or misrepresented. In addition, by accepting long-held assumptions about Luther's life, a silence is created due to the assumption that the whole story has been told.

This book will provide a single example which can serve as a case study of this tendency in Luther studies. In modern biographies of Luther the reality of the political dimensions of Luther's doctrines (in this case, the doctrine of the universal priesthood) are simply ignored during the moments of fact retrieval and retrospective significance. This silence serves to further a caricature of Luther as a person interested only in the soul without reference to the world. By reexamining the context in which Luther developed his doctrines, a different narrative emerges which gives voice to the silence that has existed for so long.

What remains to be discovered once these silences are acknowledged is how they influence Luther studies. A political understanding

8. Ibid., 48–49.
9. Ibid., 82.

of Luther's doctrine of the universal priesthood opens the door for new understandings of how Luther's doctrines impact the lives of those who have attached themselves to his teachings.

The method I will utilize to discern the presences of the silences in Luther studies which impact the modern understanding of Luther's universal priesthood will be to analyze the work of those who have taken upon themselves the task of writing biographies of Luther. The task of chronicling a prominent person's life story is certainly difficult, and no scholar should be accused of a lack of professionalism simply because that person is unable—by nature of the task—to tell the whole story. Yet, in examining these works a pattern emerges. This pattern has become historical fact. However, by presenting the same story and utilizing the same facts available to those who have examined the life, thought and legacy of Luther, yet recreating the narrative by concentrating on the dialectical interplay between mentions and silences, another conception of Luther will emerge.

If Trouillot's methods can be applied to Luther studies, and if the application of his methods provides a new understanding of the political Luther, then new conclusions can be made about how to define Luther's political thought. Luther is often characterized as politically conservative. This understanding of Luther can be somewhat problematic in twenty-first century North America because the notion of what makes a person conservative is tied to issues that would not have been part of Luther's understanding of the world. Thus we must understand the concept of conservative in its most basic form. A conservative is one who wishes to retain the established order. In Luther's case, he is labeled a conservative because the narrative portrays him as wishing to reform the church without calling for change in the temporal order of society.

With the help of Trouillot's method, this study seeks to challenge that notion of Luther. This study will show that Luther's desire to radically change the structures of both church and state has been silenced. A new picture of Luther emerges. Utilizing the work done by Cornell West and armed with this new narrative, one can come to the conclusion that Luther was in actuality a political revolutionary.

In his book *Prophesy Deliverance!*, West provides insightful and contemporary definitions of such problematic terms as "political," "prophetic," "revolutionary," and "Christian." West, a thoroughly modern thinker, wrote his book in order to "put forward a prophetic interpreta-

tion of the Christian tradition rooted in the Afro-American struggle against white supremacy, informed by progressive Marxist theory and fallibilistic pragmatic thought and tempered by a profound tragic sense of life . . ."[10]

One would be justified in asking how a twentieth-century work rooted in African-American Marxist thought can provide a legitimate lens through which to understand Luther. Certainly it would not be appropriate to simply utilize West's language in a conversation about Luther and force a connection between these two very different thinkers. However, one can utilize West's definitions in creative ways to force a new conversation concerning how one might define Luther's political thought. In addition, by reconsidering the silenced aspects of Luther's understanding of the universal priesthood, through the lens of West's definitions, a new and interesting conception of Luther and his thought emerges which can revitalize the twenty-first century understanding of a sixteenth-century doctrine.

The term "political" is defined by West as an "attempt to enrich and enable the struggle for freedom."[11] Any attempt at setting people free from structures that reduce the potential of freedom is a political struggle. Even if one were to conclude that Luther was interested only in the matters of the spirit, the fact that his was a struggle for liberation of the Christian from the bonds of the papacy could be understood as a political act. After a thorough study of the context of Luther's articulation of the universal priesthood, one must conclude that his understanding of Christian freedom had ramifications that reached far beyond Rome and influenced the notion of spiritual and temporal authority in ways that are felt even in the modern era. For this reason, the struggle for freedom in which Luther was engaged moved well beyond the spiritual realm.

West defines "prophecy" as the identification of concrete evils. "To prophesy is not to predict an outcome but rather to identify concrete evils. To prophesy deliverance is not to call for some otherworldly paradise but rather to generate enough faith, hope, and love to sustain the human possibility for more freedom . . ."[12] I am not suggesting that Luther would have personally espoused all the claims made by West concerning the definition of prophesy. Luther, unlike West, was happy

10. West, *Prophesy Deliverance*, 5.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 6.

to contemplate an otherworldly paradise. Yet those who study Luther should recognize in his universal priesthood a direct attack on what he considered to be a concrete evil: the Roman understanding of the priesthood and its power rooted in the papacy. His call for all Christians to consider themselves priests and inheritors of God's power to forgive in Jesus Christ freed the individual Christian from obedience to the ordained priesthood as it was understood in the sixteenth century. He utilized no weapons other than scripture and tradition to make his claim and had no illusion that his perspective would achieve any worldly acceptance. This final point leads us to consider West's definition of a revolutionary.

West believes that the task of a revolutionary thinker is "to transform abstract talk about God and suffering into concrete enactments of existential and political struggles with no human guarantee for ultimate victory."[13] Luther's call for the political authorities to discipline the pope and understand themselves as priests capable of reforming the church was a concrete act of defiance. Yet Luther held no illusions that his plan for reform would be received by those in authority. Assuming the role of the court jester Luther informs his friend Nicholas von Amsdorf, "Perhaps I owe my God and the world another work of folly. I intend to pay my debt honestly. And if I succeed, I shall for the time being become a court jester. And if I fail, I still have one advantage—no one need buy me a cap or put scissors to my head."[14] In the final paragraphs of his treatise he remarks, "I know full well that I have been very outspoken. I have made many suggestions that will be considered impractical. I have attacked many things too severely."[15] Luther recognized that there would be no great rush to enact his reforms. In fact, he acknowledges that they might be received negatively. Yet he is nonetheless moved to disseminate his ideas in the hope that they may indeed find some support among the civil authorities.

Finally, in a case study such as this West's definition of the concept of the "Christian" could fuel an interesting discussion concerning the type of Christian Luther was. West defines the term "Christian" in the context of his definitions of politics, prophecy, and revolution. In order to turn the concepts into meaningful descriptors of types of ac-

13. Ibid., 6.
14. LW 44:123.
15. LW 44: 216-217.

tions, he attaches them to an agent, the Christian person who confronts "the darker sides, and the human plights, of societies and souls with the weak armor of compassion and justice."[16] A Christian is a political person when he or she seeks to enrich and enable the struggle for freedom, not simply temporal freedom, but the freedom to live in dignity and peace. A Christian is a prophet when he or she works to identify concrete evils in the world. A Christian is a revolutionary when he or she transforms theology into concrete acts of engagement with evil. Equipped only with compassion and justice (presumably rooted in the person of Christ, though West is less than adamant about this particular point), informed by what West calls "my Marxist heritage," he goes on to proclaim the political, prophetic, and revolutionary Christian lives in the hope of new life lived in "revolutionary patience in the face of an ice age that aborts any immediate chance for fundamental social change."[17]

After giving voice to the many silenced aspects of Luther's articulation of the universal priesthood, one could easily attach West's definitions to Luther. Understanding Luther in light of these facts which inform the definitions scholars use to describe Luther as a political person should lead to a renewed and vigorous discussion as to how twenty-first century thinkers classify Luther in terms of his understanding of the relationship between faith and the structures of the temporal world.

I hope to add a new voice to Luther studies where there has remained a great silence. Luther's universal priesthood is, in part, a political doctrine that constitutes a revolutionary strain in Luther's thinking that can only be described as radical. Luther's political understanding of the universal priesthood is a challenge to the concrete structures of his day which were built upon a cosmological foundation that came under attack as a result of the Protestant Reformation. Luther undertook the work of exposing and destroying this structure with no expectation that his attack would ever deal a serious blow to the institutions of his day. In this way he takes his place among other thinkers who acted in accordance with revolutionary principles, as defined by Cornel West.

In order to make these claims we must first identify the silences. We will accomplish this task in our next chapter.

16. West, *Prophesy Deliverance*, 6.
17. Ibid., 8.