



## WRITING THE FUTURE: HISTORY AS A TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE

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“Yet being who I am and looking at the world from there, the mere proposition that one could—or should—escape history seems to me either foolish or deceitful.”

— Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*

Written histories hold the potential to transform the way we conceptualize ourselves and the world around us, both consciously and subconsciously. They influence our political convictions, the prejudices we hold, what we know of our cultural heritages, and how we situate ourselves in a global context. By disempowering people not included in the dominant narrative—which is to say the ideologies and histories that uphold systems of power—many written histories serve to justify the violence and oppression of the modern world.

If we admit that these historical narratives are, in fact, constructions, then we are faced with a number of difficult questions. What history should we be learning? How can we write history that challenges the dominant narrative? How can we place ourselves and our experiences within the histories we write? I believe there is a simple answer to these complex questions: history must be researched and written in pursuit of liberation.

A history of the world that begins with the “discovery” of the Americas and leaves out indigenous histories, movements, and resistance does not serve the goal of liberation. Textbooks that regale us with biography after biography of white cisgender men only affirm the power already given them. We must tell the histories considered subversive and dangerous. We must be willing to “liberate those patches of ground on which we stand—in our classrooms, in our studies...with our whole selves all the time, rather than in moments carefully selected by others.”<sup>1</sup> Writing liberatory history is a process not constrained to the act of writing, but also how we read, research, and learn to be critically aware of the ways that histories we hold true affect ourselves and our communities. The act of unlearning, of decolonization, requires constant engagement.

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1. Howard Zinn, *The Politics of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 14.

I am arguing in favor of intentional, value-driven subjectivity. We must reject the feigned objectivity of historians and the disinterested pursuit of pure academia.<sup>2</sup> Our own experiences can and should be prominently factored into our writing of history: subjectivity is unavoidable due to our unique socializations and cultures. The pursuit of a nonexistent objectivity places us in the passive position of bystanders, complicit in the reinforcement of dominant narratives.<sup>3</sup>

By speaking over or for groups of people, the dominant narrative constructs a representation of these groups and their histories that has little to no resemblance to reality. Through being intentionally subjective, we can write histories that affirm our own identities and begin a process of healing. Remember that subjectivity is a valid and powerful source of knowledge. Choose your values, rather than letting them be chosen for you, and write history with those values pressed close to your chest. Choose to write history that serves the needs of those in the present, including your own.

Taking the reconceptualization of history into our own hands provides us opportunities to reorient ourselves in the world, giving us power over our self-representation and erasing the presumed truth of the dominant narrative. Perhaps, in the practice of writing history, we should strive to write historical futures—accounts that sing of the possibility of survival, struggle, and transformation.

#### TOWARD A VALUE-DRIVEN SUBJECTIVITY

As the main argument of an essay, the thesis allows you, as the writer, to choose and argue from a certain perspective of an event. While it is uncommon to use the first-person “I” in an academic text, the thesis gives space for that “I” without directly referencing yourself. It allows you to take a stance about something that matters to you. While the body of a paper may convince the reader of the thesis’ validity, the thesis itself is merely one argument among many that can be made concerning a given subject. It is a premise, or a theory, and not a fact.

Even in the research and brainstorming stages, long before you construct your thesis, you can operate within the sphere of your own value-driven subjectivity. There are groups of people whose overlapping and intersectional stories are glaringly absent from most history books—women, people of color, indigenous people, immigrants, young people, and more. Look for historical accounts written by members of these groups that reflect their struggles during the era or event you are researching. Recognizing the value of these identities and experiences means incorporating them into your writing in a meaningful way—beyond mere citations or sidenotes. For any history writer, the ability to integrate new information into your own paradigm and recognize when you may have left out important voices is vital and powerful.

#### REPRESENTATION AND ALLYSHIP

Find authors whose perspectives challenge the dominant thinking around the subject you are writing about. Noticing that I was struggling to find resources that challenged healthism in food

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2. Ibid.

3. Ibid, 40.

justice movements, a friend suggested that I look for perspectives from a group of people impacted and stigmatized by healthism—fat people. Her advice demonstrated a basic tenet of allyship: you cannot write history without representation from the people you are writing about. Gloria Muñoz Ramírez presents a powerful example of this sort of history writing in her book *The Fire and the Word: A History of the Zapatista Movement*. Based on interviews with the movement’s original organizers, Ramírez weaves together first-person accounts, historical context, and reportage in ways that honor how the Zapatistas want their story to be told. Writing history is a process of writing in coalition toward mutual liberation.

This does not mean that you cannot use sources from those in privileged positions; as academia is oversaturated with white male voices, it would indeed be difficult to write without doing so. However, ensure that the authors you choose write in coalition with those they are writing about. You can often identify this by reading a text’s abstract or introduction and checking the author’s bibliographical references. Determine the author’s purpose for writing about their subject and whether they carry out their intentions by sourcing voices that are often underrepresented.

#### PRIMARY SOURCES AND FACTS ARE NOT THE SAME

Be sensitive and critical of biases evident in the lack or inaccuracy of primary source material—that is, sources written or created during the time under study. For example, birth records kept by plantation owners in the Caribbean inaccurately report low infant mortality rates. Historians trying to understand Caribbean slave family history may use these records as fact, when they are not: infant mortality was so high that owners often did not record a birth until the child reached a certain age. Thus the records, superficially factual, make invisible a part of the trauma experienced by slave families.<sup>4</sup>

Make every effort to incorporate transparency into your paper. Interrogating the premises of your sources ultimately strengthens your paper’s analysis. Research the sources that you use by seeking out critical reviews that can point to inconsistencies in analysis and figures. Do not purposefully mislead the reader, even if the faulty evidence supports your argument.

#### AGAINST THE “JUSTIFICATION” OF HISTORY

It may be tempting to think that history can be explained merely by finding the antecedent events that make possible a subsequent event. Be aware of how you are framing your story. In a class that examined the development of and transition to capitalism, we learned to view history as a process in which different conclusions can be reached depending on which sources you examine. This opposes the more common practice of writing history backward, where a starting point is carefully chosen to make a predetermined endpoint seem probable or inevitable. Too often, this ends in histories that are both misleading and insubstantial.

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4. William K. Storey, *Writing History: A Guide for Students* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 29.

The backward construction we examined in this class, for example, was the dominant capitalist narrative that Europe “forged” capitalism from feudalism, becoming the world’s hegemonic power in the 1500s “by its own strengths and virtues.”<sup>5</sup> However, by studying the Asian-centered global system that existed prior to 1400 AD, we realized that its downfall—which occurred prior to events that could have foretold the rise of capitalism and Europe—was a vital consideration in understanding capitalism. The question shifted from why the West rose to how and why the East fell. While the selection of a narrative starting point in the 1400s supports the ethnocentric idea of the West as the “natural” hegemonic power, examining capitalism from an earlier date refutes such claims.

### BEGINNING THE PROCESS

I won’t pretend that I know all the answers to writing history. I know that being embedded in these systems of power—systems that both grant and deny me certain privileges—will constantly affect how I write and see the world. However, we must work and write in the direction of transparency. Acknowledge the inextricability of the historical subject and the positionality of the writer. Acknowledge the delicacy and raw potential that exist in the intimacy between the writer and their subject. Acknowledge the privilege that exists in the very act of writing academically about people whose identities and experiences you may not share.

The transparency we work toward must be earnest, sincere, and humble because we will not always get it right. In recognizing that we cannot know everything, we also recognize that we will make mistakes. We must be willing to be held accountable for our writing of history. We must be willing to be wrong, again and again, because liberation requires a lifelong process of unlearning. The approaches outlined in this article are only steps in this process, but it is in knowing that they are not enough that we can begin.

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5. Janet Abu-Lughod, “On the Remaking of History: How to Reinvent the Past,” in *Remaking History*, ed. Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989), 114.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY AND FURTHER READING

At fourteen years old, I read James W. Loewen's *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. It was my first introduction to the idea that history could be questioned. By analyzing numerous high school history textbooks, Loewen unearthed falsities, bias, and an artificial sense of resolution in American history. He made clear that thinking of history as a dull, closed subject serves the interests of those in power because alternative histories could erode the fabricated historical justifications for violence and oppression.

Since reading Loewen's book, I've come across a number of other books that have further enabled me to think critically about how I read and research history for my own writing. The following list is a non-comprehensive guide to some of these texts.

Abu-Lughod, Janet. "On the Remaking of History: How to Reinvent the Past." In *Remaking History*, edited by Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani, 111-129. Seattle: Bay Press, 1989.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1970.

Levy-Navarro, Elena. "Fattening Queer History: Where Does Fat History Go From Here?" In *The Fat Studies Reader*, edited by Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, 15-25. New York: New York University Press, 2009.

Rampolla, Mary Lynn. *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2012.

Scott, Joan Wallach. *Gender and the Politics of History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.<sup>6</sup>

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.

Zinn, Howard. *The Politics of History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970.

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6. While *Gender and the Politics of History* is still a relevant and valuable text for feminist history research, it is cissexist in its lack of inclusion and analysis of trans women. The introduction to the revised edition begins to address this problem by responding to issues in the original text.