

## CHAPTER THREE

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# Entanglements: Searching for Historical Authenticity

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EASTER SUNDAY, APRIL 5, 1942. Nearly 3 years old, there she was! Standing knock-kneed and intent on opening a tiny locket necklace whose latch stubbornly refused to give way. Donna was the sole subject of this photo taken with a brownie box camera at the local Olan Mills Studio. The backside of the proof read: *Navy blue hat and ribbon with gold stars. Hair, chestnut brown. Sweater and skirt, yellow-like with dark brown buttons. White knit stockings and black shoes.* Directly under that note and written in pencil by her mother were directions intended for the touch-up person: *Take wrinkle out of stocking.* Now, eight decades later, I laugh softly to myself: “Wrong: take wrinkle out of *both* stockings.” Yes, the same baggy stockings with a mothball bag pinned to the waistband that she wore to first grade to ward off colds. But that’s a story for another time.

For now, it’s enough to concentrate on the locket that wouldn’t open. By second grade, when she needed a picture of herself as a baby for a school project, Donna searched the family’s two photo albums expecting to find evidence that she really was a baby at one time. Finding none, she had asked her father, “Where did I come from?” Not given to unnecessary talk, he would answer, “Go ask your mother.” But after several fruitless attempts (the last one causing her mother to take to the couch with a bad attack of asthma), Donna accepted the fact her “coming to be” was not worth pursuing further. In place of a baby picture, the school project had to settle for a broken locket that possibly contained it.

In retrospect, I'd like to think this explanation for the missing baby picture marked my earliest encounter with the idea of *historical authenticity*. If not, then surely it was my junior high school history teacher, Mr. Cheplick, who planted that seed when he asked our class to consider the possibility of Christopher Columbus not being the first to discover America! To this day, I vividly recall one of my classmates calling out, "Then why is Columbus Day a national holiday?" It took me until graduate school to grasp fully why that question (and others like it) was met with the customary dismissal: "Oh, you must be the product of a time when revisionist history teaching took root."

Regardless, the idea of questioning historical authenticity continues to intrigue me. It has worked on me (and I on it) for over seven decades. Whether inspired by Michel-Rolph Trouillot's study of the making and recording of history, Chinua Achebe's debut novel about a culture on the verge of change, or Michel Foucault's approach to genealogy, I have started (and mostly finished) research projects that let me dig deeper into assumptions about historical writings, be they (reportedly) bona fide histories, novels, or evolving methodologies that support studying relations of power in recorded historical events.

*The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility;  
the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots.*

—Michel-Rolph Trouillot

For whatever reason, I do not recall being taught in high school or earlier grades the value of distinguishing between a primary and a secondary source in terms of establishing a probable degree of historical authenticity. But I do remember vividly being proud of the fact I had memorized Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "Paul Revere's Ride" for a fifth-grade project and could recite it fully on request wherever and whenever (which was frequently, I might add). Memorizing poetry made up for the fact that living on a small farm, and later in a slightly larger village in Upstate New York, meant piano, ballet, tap, and any number of other childhood diversions were not part of my identity. But words like these would send shivers up and down my Yankee spine.

*One if by land, and two if by sea;  
And I on the opposite shore will be,  
Ready to ride and spread the alarm*

*Through every Middlesex village and farm,  
For the country-folk to be up and to arm. . . .*

Later, after moving to Georgia and on a bet that my 40-something mind was not quite up to snuff when it came to reciting “Paul Revere’s Ride,” I won the bet handily in a near-sober state of mind. Of course, showoffs eventually meet their Waterloo, and I was no exception. Someone in the small crowd of Confederate friends gathered ’round me informed all of us that the good patriot-propagandist Paul Revere was only one of 40 or more riders to spread the alarm the British were coming by sea on April 18, 1775. Another cloud of doubt dampened my quest for historical authenticity. But not for long!

What became of greater relevance for me was the fact that Longfellow, a northern abolitionist, had altered significant details about Paul Revere’s ride in an effort to warn the northern states about the South’s threat of secession. Longfellow’s poem appeared in mid-December of 1860 in the *Atlantic Magazine* but to no avail. South Carolina, the first state to secede on December 20, 1860, was followed shortly by the other Confederate states.

Recalling this incidence of poetic license now reminds me of Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s caveat that the invisibility of power should never go unchallenged; rather, it should motivate one to dig deep to expose its roots. While I might have entertained that thought since the baby picture dilemma as a child, it took reading Trouillot’s (1995) *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* a half-century later to make “dig deep” a part of my research agenda. This book was not a resource for my National Reading Conference (NRC) presidential address (Alvermann, 1993), but “Researching the Literal: Of Muted Voices, Second Texts, and Cultural Representations” would have benefited from Trouillot’s insights about power. What writing that address did for me, however, was to validate my instinct to dig deeper into ways of keeping research methods and scholarly writing from masking more than they disclose. Certainly, pulling from published accounts of second-wave feminists who adhered to the slogan “the personal is political” was a good starting point.

Trouillot’s work on power and its role in producing history has answered questions I had forgotten to be interested in! For instance, to what degree, if any, had civil disobedience in support of people’s civil rights and ending the war in Vietnam mattered? Memories from the 1960s and 1970s sprang vividly to mind as I reflected on joining numerous protest marches—first at

Cornell University, and later in New York City and the Capitol in Washington—all the while unaware we protesters stood little chance of having our story represented in the dominant narrative being written even as we marched. It would take Trouillot's chronicling of Haiti's struggle for justice, plus a daylong visit to Lyndon B. Johnson's Presidential Library, for me to realize that many of us in the so-called civil rights era had not been dubbed "flower children" for simply random reasons.

Finally, had Trouillot's (1995) book on power relations appeared but five or six years earlier, I might not have overlooked what was then termed "anecdotal" data gathered outside the parameters of a rural 11th-grade classroom discussion study alluded to in the following field note. As lead researcher, my role was to inquire into how students and their student teacher experienced my presence as an observer:

[March 9, 1989] Dexter, a new boy in class, stood squarely between my desk and student teacher Vicky's desk (all names are pseudonyms) shortly before class began. He interrupted Vicky, who was paging through a jewelry catalogue, saying: "You tell the lady what you called me—how you cussed me out—called me a \_\_\_\_!" Vicky looked up at me, laughed softly, and shrugged. "You know you did! If you say it again, she'll [referring to me] write you up!"

The second bell rang, students settled in, and I dismissed the incident as unrelated to the study's purpose.

Missed opportunities for delving deeply into multilayered entanglements such as the one just described can mitigate what is learned, especially when the doers, tellers, and recorders of an observable event are positioned differently and inequitably. That is why rationales regarding decisions to "study up" or "study down" matter and deserve to be part of any research report claiming transparency. Nuances of this argument reminded me of an earlier encounter with Nigerian poet, critic, and professor, Chinua Achebe.

*Until the lions have their own historians,  
the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.*

— Chinua Achebe

I read Achebe's (1958) debut novel, *Things Fall Apart*, during my first year of college, which was, without a doubt, the unhappiest 8 months I have ever experienced. Uprooted from a small town in Upstate New York and separated from my high school sweetheart (now husband of 62 years), I matriculated at three postsecondary institutions in a matter of 2 months. Spending way too many hours traveling back and forth to each other's colleges, he and I quit school. That meant losing my New York State Regents Scholarship, and Jack his inheritance, plus the promise of a red Ferrari if he'd simply give up on me—instead, he joined the U.S. Army as a buck private. We married against our parents' wishes, bought an old Chevy, and moved first to El Paso, Texas, and then Germany. It was a formative 3 years; I worked for 75 (U.S.) cents per hour at the base exchange (opening huge boxes and hanging dresses on a movable cart), and Jack was sent to the field (Czechoslovakia) when the Berlin Wall went up. I stayed in our one-room, cold-water, walk-up flat and shared a refrigerator and bathroom with the landlord, who fortuitously owned a small bakery on the bottom floor.

Unlike its title might suggest, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* had nothing to do with my personal circumstances. But it did show me a claim to historical authenticity that increased my questioning of the idea. This time, because the book's premise rested on a Nigerian male's point of view of what it was like to be on the verge of a colonial takeover. Later, when it was critiqued by several African feminists, it was Florence Stratton's (1994) essay "How Could Things Fall Apart for Whom They Were Not Together?" that piqued my interest in the politics of gender—a fact of life I had personally experienced from junior high school to well into my 40s. My response back then was to shove aside unpleasant things that were simply part of "how life worked."

The "shoved things" were actually few but significant. After graduating with a Bachelor of Science in Education (having minored in history) from the University of Texas at Austin, I was advised not to apply for a job as a history or social studies teacher because I had no coaching experience. And how was that relevant? I would not be qualified to coach a sport, not even a girls' cheering squad. Why did I not qualify? As an eighth grader, I had been told by a female junior varsity coach (following cheerleader tryouts) that even though I could jump high and arch my back, I didn't look good in a sweater. To my left was my best friend who had just been picked for the cheer squad. One quick glance told me I didn't compare well on the sweater criterion. Never one to worry about what I couldn't do, I simply focused on what was

possible: the girls' basketball team and roller skating. And while the rules for girls' basketball at that time penalized a player for stepping over the center line to shoot a basket, I got good at passing the ball to a member of my team on the other side of that line.

So, yes, a long story to explain why I was late (nearly 50) in taking up the politics of gender as a research interest. But when I did, the work of feminist poststructuralists (Deborah Britzman, Judith Butler, Patricia Hill Collins, Patti Lather, Erica McWilliam, Bettie St. Pierre, Gayatri Spivak, to name a few) spoke volumes to me. As mentioned earlier, I had already begun to question the authenticity of research methods and scholarly writing that masked more than they disclosed. Perhaps the tarnished locket in my wooden jewelry box was worth taking out, polishing up, and using again for the creative thinking it might evoke in me on this new quest.

Among my readings in the feminist literature, there was a book by Lynne Pearce (1997) at Lancaster University in Great Britain that introduced me to an analytic method for rereading a text retrospectively and in an implicated fashion. Pearce analyzed novels, photographs, and movies. I adapted her method and applied it to some "texts of old"—previously published research articles I had written from a teacher's perspective rather than a student's point of view. My adaptation enabled me to locate myself in the learners I had studied earlier and them in me. As a method, implicated reading combines autobiographical (re)memories of texts and first-person (re)readings of the same texts, with retrospective commentaries interspersed in the final write-up. By mixing the personal (the autobiographical "I") with the more formal and distanced ethnographic tools in the after-school Read and Talk Clubs (Alvermann et al., 1999), both the observer and the observed qualified as subjects. This move was in keeping with the view that any vulnerability attached to being a subject was shared between the observer and the observed. Indeed, it was a sense of shared vulnerability that served as the catalyst for unlocking an empathetic awareness in the observer (Alvermann, 1999).

Success in adapting an analytic method that brought students and teachers into dialogue with each other on a somewhat more even playing field appealed to me (Alvermann et al., 1999). Equally satisfying was my sense that by entangling Achebe's call for action with my own quest for historical authenticity, I had reached a degree of equilibrium that, psychologically, at least, made academic pursuits such as large grants less frenetic. I remember feeling it was time to write books such as this one even though it wasn't on

the drawing board at the time! Meanwhile, my good friend and colleague from afar, Jim Hoffman, proposed a research project that would merge his longtime interest in Nila Banton Smith's work with my equally longtime interest in Michel Foucault's (1977) approach to genealogy. The rest is history.

*People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do;  
but what they don't know is what what they do does.*

— Michel Foucault

That quirky five-word phrase “what *what* they do does” (Foucault in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983, p. 187) has intrigued me and stayed with me for well over three decades. That aside (and without devoting precious space to etymologies of those five words), I am sharing a brief anecdote of my first encounter with the concept behind the phrasing. As an only child (prior to my one sibling's birth 9 years after mine), Friday nights were unique. On the farm, we listened to the Grand Ole Opry on radio reaching us from Nashville via Chicago. After my dad sold the farm and moved my mother and me to the village of Penn Yan, New York, about a 10-minute drive away, the entertainment on Friday nights changed drastically.

It switched from listening to the Grand Ole Opry, which I loved, to feeding-a-parking-meter-with-pennies-on-Friday-night. I distinctly recall dreading that weekly chore, probably because it was my job to jump from the backseat of our family car to plug the meter with pennies so that my parents could continue commenting on the passersby. Main Street was always busy on Friday nights because it was the only time stores stayed open for people who had day jobs. It wasn't the physical activity that got to me but, rather, my wonderings about why on earth other people's lives were so important to adults. I probably didn't ask that question, because the motto in our nuclear and extended families on both the maternal and paternal sides was this: “children should be seen but not heard.” That arrangement actually worked in my favor on “Meter Night,” because I doubt I would have wanted to join in the gossip about people who looked happy, depressed, or were making a recovery after some horrible disease or just a broken bone. How this memory is entangled with Foucault's observation that people don't know “what *what* they do does” is this: Subconscious plans were likely spinning in my under-10-year-old head on “Meter Night” that eventually led me to run off to Texas and Germany with Jack, red Ferrari or not.

Similar to my childhood memory of how Meter Night is connected to a Foucauldian epigram, graduate students enrolled in my LLED 8340e History of Reading course for the Fall 2021 semester are likely to find themselves tangling with the odd but unforgettable “what *what* they do does” phrase. Why? Because one of the required resources for that course is Nila Banton Smith’s *American Reading Instruction*. And for the first time ever, a second required reading is Jim Hoffman’s and my (2020) coauthored *Reading Research Quarterly* article that asks, What enabling conditions make it possible for Smith’s *American Reading Instruction* and the historical narrative of progress in elementary reading instruction in the United States to remain strong from the mid-1930s to the present? If you have not already read our genealogical analysis of Smith’s text, which still sells well today, you may be in for a surprise. It took Jim and me close to five years of steady working on the conception, analysis, write-up, and rounds of review to learn why searching for historical authenticity is challenging but exciting work.

### A Perpetual Entanglement

If nothing else, the epigram I associate with French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault’s work suggests entanglements all the way down. Said a different way, there is no separation of the researcher from the researched. Thus, no matter the number of rabbit holes I may have gone down as a researcher (or will go down in the future), there remain entanglements between the doer (me) and the researched concept (historical authenticity) that I chase.

Admittedly, not all entanglements associated with my search for historical authenticity have the same hold on me that the unlockable locket does. I cannot, or more to the point *will* not, do anything that might resolve the tension surrounding my self-identity. That tension is safely locked away in my unlockable locket. Its “unlockability” holds the possibility that I was adopted around the age of three or so. It’s enough to know that my fidgeting with the lock in the Olan Mills photograph on Easter Sunday 1942 had my full attention and still does to a considerable degree.

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