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We Are All Historical Actors: A Multilogue Response to Goldenberg's "Youth Historians in Harlem," Part 1 of 2

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Education's Histories

methodological grist for the
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Notes

¹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 6.

² As quoted in Peter Novick, *Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 7.

³ Goldenberg, Barry M. "Youth Historians in Harlem: Exploring the Possibilities in Collaborative History Research Between Local Youth and Scholars (Part 1 of 2)." *Education's Histories*, March 6, 2015. <http://www.educationshistories.org/youth-historians-in-harlem-exploring-the-possibilities-in-collaborative-history-research-between-local-youth-and-scholars-part-1/>.

We Are All Historical Actors: A Multilogue Response to Goldenberg's "Youth Historians in Harlem", Part 1 of 2

Mike Suarez

Michel-Rolph Trouillot once wrote, "Each historical narrative renews a claim to truth."¹ The manners in which individuals recall certain events or phenomena help explain the perpetuation of ideas and the transmission of culture, while also elucidating power and privilege in society. A pragmatic view of historical research acknowledges the importance the present plays on the reconstruction of the past. In this sense, a history says as much about the time when it is published as it does about its subject. Goldenberg's work with youth in Harlem exemplifies this assertion and challenges the reader to simultaneously question a) Who has access to the construction of historical narrative; and, b) Is objectivity in historical inquiry like, as one historian has claimed, "nailing jelly to the wall"?²

Goldenberg sets his research agenda around two excellent guiding questions:

- 1) When historians and local youth conduct historical research together, how does their work challenge notions of hierarchy and control, and/or complicate ideas about legitimate knowledge?
- 2) How do processes of historical research shift, and responsibilities change, when creating history with students via online digital formats?³

The author would like to thank Barry Goldenberg and the editors at Education's Histories for giving him the opportunity to review this excellent essay and participate in this multilogue discussion. Mike Suarez is a former high school teacher and current doctoral candidate in the School of Education at the University of Colorado at Boulder. His program

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Both of these questions imply a critical lens to analyzing data sources. Coupled, with the author's captivating prose, future installments to the essay series will offer important contributions to the field through its critique of how individual experiences align with, or contend with, edified historical narratives about Harlem's past. Goldenberg triangulates his data with riveting sources, which will include oral histories from Harlem Prep alumni, analyses from 11th and 12th grade student-researchers, and the graduate students facilitating the Youth Historians in Harlem project. Going forward, it will be helpful to understand how these sources lend themselves to answering those questions, or if new ones arise out of the findings.

Goldenberg's essay exposes the complexities and challenges of conducting important and innovative research. As such, he is also pressing readers to question their own subjectivities and stances on issues of reliability and validity. Goldenberg writes, "Although historical accuracy, on its most basic level remains important, events like a walking tour lend nuance to ideas of legitimacy in historical research, particularly around oral displays of perceived knowledge (or lack thereof) by the historical 'storyteller.'"⁴ Oral histories will reveal evidence on how participants locate their own experiences and understanding of Harlem's past. For the second essay, it will help the reader to learn more about the oral historian's role in the research process:

- What types of questions were asked?
- What concepts could or could not be explored based on the availability of research subjects?
- And most importantly, how the author analyzed primary record?

Goldenberg's exciting research shifts the lens of historical inquiry outside of the academy, which can at times be too insular, by leveraging ideas conveyed by both students and their interviewees. Still, how will findings warrant valid, or what some methodologists call "credible," claims?⁵ The interplay

⁴ Goldenberg, "Youth Historians in Harlem: Exploring the Possibilities in Collaborative History Research Between Local Youth and Scholars (Part 1 of 2)."

⁵ Referencing the work of Guba, Lincoln, and Denzin in Paul Atkinson, Amanda Coffey, and Sara Delamont, *Key Themes in Qualitative Research: Continuities and Changes*, (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003), 156.

between individual recollections and broader historical narratives is complex, and subsequent installments to the essay series will provide insight into the process of analyzing these oral histories. Goldenberg references Hayden White, who once responded to criticism concerning relativism and solipsism by proclaiming that, "What we postmodernists are against is a professional historiography, in service to state apparatuses that have turned against their own citizens, with its epistemically pinched, ideologically sterile, and superannuated notions of objectivity."⁶ Any individual can be a historical actor, demonstrating agency in the manner in which one recalls past events.

⁶ Hayden White, "Introduction: Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality," *Rethinking History* 9 (2-3), 2005, 152.

Personal memory is essentially subjective; however, historic events become part of a collective memory through negotiation between individuals in a society. Memory and the collection of oral histories cannot necessarily provide credible sources for accounts of past activity, but these sources do provide insight into how individuals internalize historical phenomena, and most importantly, how one perceives the present. Remembering the facticity of an incident does not matter as much as what the event *means* to those recalling it. Each person remembers an event in one's own way. Internalizing past events and reconstructing them through memory can lead to more opaque or fictitious portrayals of past events. On the other hand, the stories people tell, whether to themselves or to a researcher, provide primary sources into the way individuals have internalized an event, how they perceive its importance, and what it *meant*. Parts two and three of Goldenberg's essay series will contend with these difficult issues and in doing so, will provide the reader with all the more insight.

This well-articulated and compelling essay is an outstanding contribution to the field of historical scholarship on the history of schooling in America. Goldenberg's focus on lived-histories will surely invoke new ideas and ways of thinking about the process of conducting historical research. As Trouillot states, "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. But nothing is inherently over there or here. In that sense, the past has no content. The past—or, more accurately, pastness—is a position."⁷ There is no *one* truth in interpretive research, and historians accept that fact. Instead of bickering about relativism or the search for *the* defining historical account, the field is free to conduct research, present findings, and enter the discussion

⁷ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 15.

about a given state of affairs. Last, and most importantly, Goldenberg's essay reminds the reader that historical narratives must account for the perspectives of the youth. These students hold the key to future understandings of civic engagement and how vitally important it is for youth to take the lead in constructing historical narratives that account for their perspectives and experiences.

Suggested Reading

Atkinson, Paul, Coffey, Amanda, and Delamont, Sara. *Key Themes in Qualitative Research: Continuities and Changes*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003.

Novick, Peter. *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Portelli, Allesandro. *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1991.

Richard Rorty, "Method, Social Science, and Social Hope," in *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972-1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 191–210.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.

White, Hayden. "Introduction: Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality." *Rethinking History* 9 (2-3), 2005, 147-157.

Education's Histories would like to thank Mike Suarez for his careful review of Barry Goldenberg's essay, "[Youth Historians in Harlem: Exploring the Possibilities in Collaborative History Research Between Local Youth and Scholars \(Part 1 of 2\)](#)" and for allowing us to publish his review in our experimental multilogue format.





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