

How/Should We Generalize?

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In Carl Kaestle's 1992 essay "Standards of Evidence," generalization is how we know when we know. Kaestle sketches a model of increasing certainty in historical claims as they are developed and refined at increasing scales of research, from local to international. A historical claim might originate in the study of a particular place or case, but to know that the claims were true, the historian needed to move from the microlevel view to a more macro one, perhaps at the national rather than local level. Once tested and refined through comparison with other cases, possibly smoothing some of the rougher edges in the process, the claim could then be transferred beyond national borders. When a historical claim is polished enough to fit other contexts, we know it is true. Kaestle illustrates this increasing certainty through increasing scale with reference to the history of literacy and, more specifically, to scholarship on how Western European and US industrialization shaped literacy rates. Bringing studies from various locales into connection, and then comparing these cases with the national context, Kaestle summarizes that it was the commercial processes of urbanization, rather than industrialization itself, that helped produce rising literacy in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.¹ Generalization at greater scale becomes not only the means through which to claim the value of historical work, but the basis for constructing historical knowledge in the first place.

Although this image of interpretation at increasing scales conveys a kind of confidence, Kaestle and historians before him cultivated humility in facing the difficulty of ever truly knowing the past.

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¹Carl Kaestle, "Standards of Evidence in Historical Research: How Do We Know When We Know?," *History of Education Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (Fall 1992), 361–66.

Kaestle quotes historian Charles Beard in characterizing our profession's attempt to see into the past: "We hold a damn dark candle over a damn dark abyss."² But Kaestle wrote his 1992 essay before Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*.³ He wrote before the "archival turn" in anthropology and literature pushed the archive from the background to the foreground in historical inquiry.⁴ Works in that vein of critical archival studies, alongside the flourishing of African American history of education in the same period, help refine historical thinking about the problem of the dark abyss of the past—about what makes the candle so dim, and what to do with the darkness.⁵ These works provoke a constructive variation on Kaestle's question of how we know when we know. What can we do as researchers to ensure that we are wrestling both with what we think we know *and what we do not know*? How would doing so lead us to see the question of generalizability differently, especially in relationship to scale? What follows is a selective exploration of this matter, of certainty and uncertainty within critical views of the archive, of generalizability and specificity.

On Generalization and Scale

Like Kaestle, I am thinking about geographic scale. But while his model expands outward in space—from a local case to comparisons first with national and then international cases—my own work is boring deeper and deeper into smaller spaces. Having written a book about a city—like many urban case studies in our field—I zoomed in further to a neighborhood in a large city as the focus of a second project.⁶ Now, with partners, I am investigating a single school in New York City's Harlem that has housed teachers and students for over a century.⁷ This school building, opened as the Wadleigh High

² Kaestle, "Standards of Evidence," 361.

³ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

⁴ Ann Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2 (March 2002), 87–109.

⁵ Critical attention to the archive is also an important if at times implicit element of several other fields related to history of education, including the history of childhood and Native American histories.

⁶ Ansley T. Erickson, *Making the Unequal Metropolis: School Desegregation and Its Limits* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); and Ansley T. Erickson and Ernest Morrell, eds. *Educating Harlem: A Century of Schooling and Resistance in a Black Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

⁷ Wadleigh has been one focal point in the multipart Harlem Education History Project, harlemeducationhistory.library.columbia.edu.

School for Girls but transformed at many points since, offers a single narrative point within, and one that places African American children and communities at the center of, a swirling sea of urban and educational change.

What can be known with certainty about this place, given the limits of our dim candle over the dark abyss? And what can be generalized from that knowledge? In this work in progress, I am as yet unsure. Perhaps the field of microhistory offers a guide. That method, which reduces the scale of observation, can be expansive in the scale of its inquiry. Microhistory practitioner Giovanni Levi explains that “Phenomena previously considered to be sufficiently described and understood assume completely new meanings by altering the scale of observation. It is then possible to use these results to draw far wider generalizations.”⁸ A single diary, or a single miller and his sixteenth-century trial for heresy, are example works.⁹

Critical perspectives on the archive, read in the context of the history of African American education, may suggest an interaction of scale and generalization that is different than what Kaestle portrayed and leads to a reinvigorated call for microhistory.¹⁰ Perhaps we as historians know what we know not when our work grows outward in geographic scale, but when it moves inward in depth, with rigorous attention to multiple actors and their complex humanity. But these actors can be understood fully only in the context of the structures and forms of power that surround and constrain them. And what we can claim to know of their lives depends upon interrogating the form and limits of the archives, which are themselves embedded within those structures and forms of power.

I develop this argument with debts to texts from colonial and postcolonial studies and the history of the African diaspora, which

⁸Giovanni Levi, “On Microhistory,” in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke, (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 102.

⁹Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* (New York: Knopf, 1990); and Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

¹⁰History of education has multiple examples of single-school studies that produced major reinterpretations. See Vanessa Siddle Walker, *Their Highest Potential: An African School Community in the Segregated South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); and David Labaree, *The Making of the American High School: The Credentials Market and the Central High School of Philadelphia, 1838–1939* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992). More recent works include Michelle Purdy, *Transforming the Elite: Black Students and Desegregation in Private Schools* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); and Erika Kitzmiller’s work in progress on Philadelphia’s Germantown High School.

have furthered critical examination of history and the archive.¹¹ Scholars in and of these fields and communities have witnessed purportedly generalized historical knowledge that excludes or misrepresents them; they know best what is at stake.

Critical Views of the Archive

If Kaestle says we know that we know when we can apply an argument about historical change from one case to another, Trouillot says we know that we know only when we have interrogated the arrangements of power that shape what we think we know and what we think is unknown or unknowable. One dense sentence captures a key idea in Trouillot's *Silencing the Past*: "The ways in which what happened and that which is said to have happened are and are not the same may itself be historical."¹² No doubt the readers of the *History of Education Quarterly* are accustomed to recognizing that what historians produce—in the form of a narrative, a quantitative accounting, or even a map or a photo essay—is not *the past* per se. But Trouillot wants us to think into this gap, to ask *why* it exists and what shapes it, to see that gap itself as historical—as a construction of the arrangements of power in both the past and present.¹³

A scholar of colonial Saint-Domingue and the independent nation of Haiti, Trouillot built his life's work around one of the most actively silenced portions of the Age of Revolution. Trouillot's examinations of the Haitian Revolution reckoned with the overall silencing of the revolution as a conceptual impossibility on the world-historical stage (as a moment of black-led theorizing and revolutionary change deemed inconceivable or unimaginable for many of the privileged westerners of European descent who wrote histories). Scholars set the revolution outside of historical narratives or, in Trouillot's terms, silenced it.

¹¹In addition to the works on archives that I discuss below, this discussion is informed and inspired by the example of Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). Her book is a powerful example of the "methodological and ethical project" of working at microscale to foreground the lives of often-silenced figures like enslaved women and how the archives shape what is known about their lives.

¹²Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 4.

¹³As I planned this essay, I wondered if it was commonplace to think with Trouillot in the history of education. It may be that his ideas are fully absorbed into the structures of our training, in methods courses, and more. Yet a search of *HEQ* issues within JSTOR (1961–2013) yields no uses of the name in text or footnotes. Perhaps a revisiting of this now-classic text is valuable. In the interest of full disclosure, Trouillot's work was not part of my own training. I did not read Trouillot's *Silencing the Past* until about 2015, in a search for critical texts on archives to read with my students.

He considered also the contest over which story of the Haitian revolution would dominate among those who recognized it and which would be submerged or entombed: also silenced. A Haitian man, working on the history of Haiti, Trouillot had intimate experience with not only the stakes of historical production but the inequalities that shaped it. He identified where silencing happens in the production of history: “Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance) [emphasis in original].”¹⁴

I can illustrate the point about fact creation and assembly from my own research experience operating at microscale. As a scholar interested in a single New York City school, you might think I would turn first to the papers of the local school district in which that school sits: the Board of Education of the City of New York. Yet the papers of the Board, as any researcher who has worked within them knows, are not organized to help a historian see any particular school. They are organized to present the workings of the Board, and particularly to represent what the Board thought to be its accomplishments and its problems. One of the few references to Wadleigh in the Board of Education’s collection—which runs to thousands of linear feet—appears not in a folder findable by the name of a given school, but in a case of printed material labeled “Negroes in Schools.” Within this container, the report of a 1947 human relations commission (chaired by the then president of my home institution) devoted a few paragraphs to what it characterized as the “Wadleigh problem.” The commission worried that this problem, which they identified as the existence of a majority-black high school, could spread to other schools in the city.¹⁵ (Zone lines that consciously restricted black students to Wadleigh and provided white students the option of many other majority-white schools in the city went unremarked in this document.)¹⁶ In making its archive, the Board of Education defines Wadleigh as the problem, silencing other views of the school.

¹⁴Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 26.

¹⁵Advisory Committee on Human Relations, “To the Members of the Teaching and Supervising Staff,” May 20, 1947, box 8, series 753, Bureau of Research, Reference, and Statistics, Pamphlet Collection, circa 1888–1966, Records of the New York City Board of Education, Municipal Archives of the City of New York (hereafter cited as Board of Education).

¹⁶David Ment, “Patterns of Public School segregation, 1900–1940: A Comparative Study of New York City, New Rochelle, and New Haven,” in *Schools*

The Board of Education, the structure of its archive tells us, was disinterested in daily life at Wadleigh and disinterested in the meanings that African American New Yorkers, as parents and children, made of and at Wadleigh. The Board of Education's archive silenced Wadleigh, in Trouillot's terms, at the point of fact creation and assembly. Histories of education in New York City, or of urban education operating across cities, have too rarely reckoned with that silence.

Ann Laura Stoler, a historical anthropologist who works chiefly on the history of the colonial Dutch East Indies, helped open a critical conversation about the archives not only as sources but as sites of inquiry.¹⁷ Stoler recognized efforts to read “against the archival grain”—to read for resistance and the robust humanity of colonial subjects in state-generated materials designed to deny these.¹⁸ But Stoler wanted to push in a new direction, to encourage reading *along* the archival grain. The categories, the methods, of the archive are ways the colonial state was constructing itself. Its silences matter, *a la Trouillot*, but its inclusions and expressions are also necessarily grounds of historical inquiry.

The Board of Education conducted a “nationalities survey” from 1931 to 1947, asking New York City educators to identify the national, and at times racial, identity of their students.¹⁹ These sources give us much to read “against the grain,” with indications of bureaucratic or student resistance as well as commentary from those who refused to participate as racial categorizers. But they are equally powerful when read “along the grain,” as evidence of how the resources and machines of the Board of Education constructed its own authority,

in Cities: Consensus and Conflict in American Educational History, ed. Diane Ravitch and Ronald Goodenow (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1983).

¹⁷Continuing the survey of the *HEQ* corpus from note 13, I found one reference to the work of Ann Stoler in the journal. It engaged her work in the history of decolonization, but not with respect to archival studies. I came to Stoler's work via an interest in the structure of archives and archival information while working on Ansley T. Erickson, “Historical Research and the Problem of Categories: Reflections on 10,000 Digital Note Cards,” in *Writing History in the Digital Age*, ed. Jack Dougherty and Kristen Nawrotzki (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

¹⁸In the history of education, we have strong examples of this reading against the grain, with Heather Williams's work on education in the context of slavery coming first to mind. She draws not on Stoler but on James Scott's notion of hidden transcripts. Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). Jackie Blount's *Fit to Teach* also demonstrates the practice, given the limitations of archival sources on gay and lesbian history. Jackie Blount, *Fit to Teach: Same-Sex Desire, Gender, and School Work in the Twentieth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

¹⁹Bureau of Reference, Research, and Statistics, Nationality Statistics Surveys, 1931–1947, series 763, Board of Education.

in part by exceptionalizing and excluding black students well before the declaration of the “Wadleigh problem.”

More recent work on archives as places of historical inquiry shows that silencing is never complete. While the Board of Education was indifferent to Wadleigh’s specificities or defined the school as a problem, others with connections to Wadleigh wrote themselves and their school into the archive. In so doing, they worked in the tradition of Frederick Douglass, who made himself the most photographed man of the nineteenth century, Arturo Schomburg, who crafted a literary, artistic, and scholarly collection of “vindicating evidences” of the lives of people of African descent, and Dorothy Porter, who painstakingly reworked the Dewey Decimal System in her Howard University library to stop the silencing of works by and about black people.²⁰ Wadleigh constituents documented their own and their school’s lives in ways that refused the Board’s silencing and insisted that neither they nor their institution were problems. Melva Price, a graduate of New York City public schools in Harlem and Brooklyn, daughter of a man born into enslavement in North Carolina who led his family north at the leading edge of the Great Migration, taught briefly at Wadleigh in 1926. The collection of papers Price left at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture accounts for her life inside the Board of Education’s processes. A file of her report cards from elementary schools gives way to teaching-position appointment letters and later to notes from former students.²¹

But, of course, those who write themselves into the archive also keep their own silences. What are those passages about a friend, written in Greek characters rather than English, in this classicist’s journal? Why did Price teach Latin not close to home in Harlem, but an hour and a half away at Staten Island’s New Dorp High School? What is silenced or revealed in the decision to identify Ruth Martin as Price’s “partner” to the 1940 Census enumerator? What does that choice signify, when terms like roommate or lodger were available options in the Census lexicon, while friend, lover, colleague, or wife

²⁰See Deborah Willis, ed., *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography* (New York: New Press, 1994); Vanessa K. Valdez, *Diasporic Blackness: The Life and Times of Arturo Alfonso Schomburg* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017); and Laura Helton, “On Decimals, Catalogues, and Racial Imaginaries of Reading,” *PMLA* 134, no. 1 (Jan. 2019), 99–120. Any reference to black individuals, communities, or institutions as “a problem” echoes with W. E. B. Du Bois’s question “How does it feel to be a problem?” from his *Souls of Black Folk* (1903; repr., New York: Dover Thrift, 2004).

²¹Melva L. Price papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, New York Public Library.

were not available?²² Was the selection of terms Price's decision? The Census taker's? How does the expanded archive of Price's life—now available in part on paper in the quiet reading room of the Schomburg Center and in part online via Ancestry.com and its census records and school yearbooks—challenge silences perhaps she wanted or felt she had to keep?

A few decades after Price's time at Wadleigh, Lorraine Monroe and her husband, Henry (Hank) Monroe, pooled their talents as English teacher and photographer, respectively, to help students create a yearbook that attested to the school they saw and wanted to memorialize. In their *Wadleigh Way* they portrayed a school of striving, of young people in the library with their heads down over books or at work on a printing press. They captured joy and pride, students gathered to listen to music or stage theater or visit with activist Anna Arnold Hedgeman or Judge Bruce Wright.²³ At times Wadleigh was a place of respectability—white shirts and neat ties, a classical violin, and hallway patrol badges—and at times a place of resistance and participation in the activist ethos of the time. The *Wadleigh Way* cultivated its own silences, too. The visual unity the yearbook conveyed obscures distinctions of resources, opportunity, and future paths between class 8-1 (all reading well above grade level and with the school's most celebrated teachers) and class 8-12 (all reading several years behind). The power of that tracking shows up not in the yearbook but in the gradebook annotations of a Wadleigh teacher's records and her intervention in and through the archive.²⁴

None of these snippets from ongoing research yet indicate what Wadleigh's story is, what can or should be generalized from this micro account.²⁵ But each of these small evidences—which become visible

²²On the question of Price's identification and/or self-identification in the US Census, see Dan Bouk, "The Partners of Greenwich Village," July 3, 2018, Census Stories, USA, <https://censusstories.us/2018/07/03/partners.html>.

²³See Wadleigh Junior High School yearbooks digitized as part of the Harlem Education History Project, https://harlemeducationhistory.library.columbia.edu/collection/wad_yb.

²⁴Other historians of education have made use of school yearbooks. Interpretations have often been more superficial than the sources merit, though (for example, as a source for counting students by ethnic category rather than the querying of those categories). See Paula S. Fass, *Oustide In: Minorities and the Transformation of American Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). Grade books of Wadleigh teacher Doris Brunson are in box 6, folder 2, Wadleigh High School Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, New York Public Library.

²⁵It is not fully clear yet, in Judith Kafka's terms, what this is a case study of. Kafka, "Institutional Theory and the History of District-Level School Reform," in *The Shifting Landscape of the American School District: Race, Class, Geography, and the*

and can be interrogated for and in the context of their silences—emerges because of the benefits of working at the small and human scale of an individual school. Together they illustrate how incomplete any historical claims are without probing the archive on which they rest. This is a point made strongly by archival theorists and scholars working in African diasporic and colonial studies and in the history of slavery, where the power of silencing has been most visible. But their insights apply in our field as well.

Silences in Narrative Construction

It may be easier for historians to talk about the silences, limitations, and power of the archive than those silences that we ourselves perpetuate. Trouillot's four-part description of the silencing of the past includes silencing in the process of fact retrieval and in the making of historical narratives. The most recognized work on the history of education in New York City is Diane Ravitch's 1974 *The Great School Wars*. Working from Board of Education papers, alongside other manuscript and newspaper sources, Ravitch focuses on four periods of conflict that she sees as having defined the city's schools. It is a logical and narratively powerful approach, perhaps shaped by the need to corral more than two centuries of educational developments in a massive city into a manageable form.

And it works to silence. Black New Yorkers are frequently invisible in Ravitch's account. And when they do appear, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, their demands matter in Ravitch's construction in large part because they inspire angry resistance from white New Yorkers. What African American students and teachers made and experienced in New York's schools previously—in, for example, the era of the nationalities survey, the “Wadleigh problem,” or the *Wadleigh Way*—do not appear.

This might seem to be a call for an additive approach—to set a story like Wadleigh's alongside *The Great School Wars*, to add another chapter to the table of contents. The value in microhistorical scale, and especially those studies that take as their starting point a part of a big system often conceptualized as marginal, is not simply additive. Taking a different starting point, a small locus in a big system, has the potential to redefine our understanding of the whole. Can any generalization about the history of education in New York hold if it cannot contain or fairly characterize the multiple, contradictory stories that

Perpetual Reform of Local Control, 1935–2015, ed. David Gamson and Emily Hodge (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 223–38.

emerge from Wadleigh and the interrelationships that bind that school to networks of policy-making and structures of power of the time?

There is a parallel here with Kaestle's interest in the history of literacy. In Kaestle's account, scholars became more and more certain of how literacy and industrialization related as they developed cases in the US or Western Europe, refined them by comparing micro and macro interpretations, and then expanded the scope to international comparisons. Since Kaestle wrote in the 1990s, literacy has become a focus of study by historians of African American education. Heather Williams reads against the archival grain to find evidence of literacy held and shared by enslaved people.²⁶ Legal prohibitions on reading and writing for enslaved people were part of the story, but not the whole story.

How do these stories relate to Kaestle's account of rising literacy from 1600 to 1900? He calls this the period of industrialization; it could be called the period of transatlantic slavery. What happens if the history of literacy has to account for the presence of enslaved people and their quest for literacy as well as the attempts to exclude them from it through the power of the state? The white people whose literacy Kaestle and colleagues described worked industrial machines that processed cotton. That cotton was grown and picked and packed by enslaved people whose literacy was prohibited. And that literacy was prohibited to sustain their enslavement and produce that very cotton, which would be spun and woven on machines and in factories financed often in connection to slavery.

Can there be a generalized history of literacy without reckoning with these relationships, these ties of exploitation? Are historians more likely to see those ties when they zoom in, not on the concept of industrialization, but on the social and material realities of textile workers and the cotton fibers in their hands? Does an attempt to interrupt Eurocentric historical views depend on thinking at a small scale and with a critical reading of archival traces?

In Favor of Specificity at Small Scale

Generalization is only possible once careful and specific work builds a story big enough to account for everyone, their interrelationships, and the structures that surround them. The route to that big story may be, perhaps ironically, through highly focused and deep micro cases. That scale demands encounters with archives, with names and faces and choices and perplexing and pregnant silences, which push toward

²⁶Williams, *Self-Taught*. See also Christopher Hager, *Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

the intricate examination of meaning in relationship to large structures like slavery and urban disinvestment. They highlight rather than obscure or silence powerful acts of humanity like the building of black selfhood and community in a high school in a neglected quarter of New York City.

I have framed this essay along the grain, we could say, of Kaestle's original article, following the disciplinary and institutional patterns that value knowledge when and because it is generalizable. I worry, though, that working toward generalization creates incentives to smooth, to silence, to rub off the rough parts so that one small story fits more comfortably into a broader collection of other cases or other scales. This is a well-founded concern, especially in a field whose broader synthetic works have tended to hold the experiences of black Americans and other people of color as marginal rather than constitutive of the story.²⁷

The bolder approach might be to question the whole search for polished and transportable generalizations, to dwell instead in the specificity of the micro, the uncomfortable uncertainties that cannot be unseen at that scale. Rather than assert historical generalizability, historians could instead seek other ways of articulating the value of their work rooted in specificity.

Doing so would mean relinquishing a claim to legitimacy that is currency in the social science communities of our institutions. But many social scientists are already loath to grant this legitimacy. Institutional Review Board (IRB) processes are one blunt reminder of that reality. When I fill out an IRB application at my institution, I must categorize my research in a set of predefined check-box choices. Among the options, I must indicate that my proposed archival and oral history inquiry is "not research." That is the box that best fits the work I intend to do as outlined by the IRB and the entities that govern it. The Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects defines research as "systematic investigation ... designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge." Oral history, like archival and other forms of historical research, speaks about specific individuals from whom the information is collected and thus, according to this definition, does not produce generalized knowledge.²⁸

²⁷David B. Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974); and Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).

²⁸Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, January 19, 2017, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2017/01/19/2017-01058/federal-policy-for-the-protection-of-human-subjects>.

When the *Federal Register* announced 2017 revisions that made oral history research exempt from IRB approval, I cheered a bit. I am happy to have my proposals move quickly through the IRB process as exempt from review under the banner of “not research.” But as they do, I feel a twinge of pain in the region of my disciplinary pride. Should I, alongside fellow historians, contest this representation of our work? Or should we ask whether—with appreciation for the power of silences, of imperfections, and of what we do not know as much as what we know—we should resist measuring ourselves in terms of generalizability.