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CHAPTER 1

Silence is a sound: resistance as an (im)possible memory¹

Ana Rita Alves*

Emancipation and obliteration: an introduction

I came across the book by Harriet A. Jacobs displayed on a shelf of a library where I usually go. Out of curiosity I started to flick through it and in no time I came to realise how, through an autobiographical and intimate narrative, Harriet was able to portray an entire system of both racial and patriarchal oppression — constantly underlined by herself as such. In the course of *Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl* (1993 [1861]), Harriet denounced both the violence of chattel slavery in every-day life and her tremendous resilience towards the subordination, humiliation and dehumanization entailed by that same system. To that extent, Jacobs's personal account not only recalls other stories of individual resistance in times of slavery² but also relates to memories on processes of collective struggle. This is the case of the *Revolution of San Domingo* (1791–1803) where the violence of the *masters* over the enslaved, under a particular kind

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² Cf. Prince *et al.* (1988) and Equiano (1789).

of *total institution* (Goffman, 1961) — chattel slavery — had (also) led to an insurrection. San Domingo became the only revolutionary process that successfully constituted a rebellion both against the enslavers and their mother countries (Nimako and Willemsen, 2011), leading to the establishment of the first Independent Black Republic, in 1804 — Haiti (Small e Walvin, 2012). Nevertheless, the account additionally mirrors other histories, other attempts at collective resistance, namely in Jamaica, Antigua or the United States, which were British colonies back then, as testified by the First Maroon War (1730–1740), the Stono’s Rebellion (1739) or the Tackey’s Revolt (1760), to name only a few (Small and Walvin, 2012). Likewise, it is also important to underline the existence of memories on Maroon communities, which were also important spaces in the anti-slavery resistance movement (Small and Walvin, 2012). These communities that were constituted by former enslaved served as a shelter where an unchained life was possible and as a place of political resistance to slavery and colonialism. One of the more well-known Maroon communities was *Quilombo dos Palmares* (1605–1694), in Brazil. And, lastly, the role of free blacks is also part of this story of resistance, since they not only lobbied through publications and abolitionist movements but also “played an important role on aiding to runaways”, both within national and international networks (Small e Walvin, 2012: 47), as Harriet Tubman’s emblematic experience.

Notwithstanding their capacity to persist over time, all these experiences constituted acts of insurrection and rebellion against chattel slavery that testify how “fear of death, violence and torture was not enough to quell the spirit for freedom” (Small e Walvin, 2012: 44), making enslaved Africans survivors rather than victims (2012: 44). Because of this, the “history of slavery can be written in terms of slave resistance”, testifying how “Africans have always refused to submit enslavement and have utilised diverse tactics for asserting their humanity and affirming their dignity” (2012:

41). This resistance was collective and individual, spontaneous and planned, violent and passive and “carried out by men, women and children” at “local, national and international levels” (2012: 41). Nevertheless, neither the individual story of Harriet nor the collective uprising in San Domingo are usually displayed in contemporary historical narratives, contributing to the silencing of important world-wide historical events, the removal of centrality of enslaved blacks in fighting for their own freedom and the redemption of whiteness through the supposed universalization of rights, in particular France and the United States of America.

Acknowledging that History is a collective narrative on past events and a particular form of allocating memory and making it somehow present, we have to take into account that some memories become stronger than others (Traverso, 2012) due to particular matrixes of power-knowledge production (Maeso and Araújo, 2015). Thereby, *absences* are actively produced as such, for they correspond to *non-credible alternatives* being thus constituted as *impossible objects* of the social sciences (Santos, 2002: 246). In this essay I intend to depart from the analysis of Harriet Jacobs’ narrative in *Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl* (1993 [1861]) and relate it to C.L.R James’s depiction of the Haitian Revolution in *The Black Jacobins* (1989), analysing how the intertwining of both works can lead to a better understanding of the history of oppression and rebellion against chattel slavery. Drawing particularly on the work by Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995), Kwame Nimako and Glenn Willemsen (2011), I aim to comprehend the logics behind these same historical silences, their legacies in the way slavery is presently remembered and grasp some of their consequences. This will expose the fact that, as Nimako and Willemsen (2011) once argued, emancipation is an *unfinished business*.

1 Struggle and Resist

1.1 Harriet's story

Harriet Jacobs was an abolitionist born enchained in North Carolina, possibly in 1813. As many other black women, by that time she was someone else's *property*³ and after her mother's death she was sent to the house of her mother's *tutor*, a *kind* woman that taught Harriet how to read and write. However, by the time Harriet was twelve the *tutor* had passed away and Harriet was bequeathed to one of the *tutor's relatives*. From this day on Harriet was imprisoned under cruel conditions by the Flint family. At this time she was coming of age and Doctor Flint, the *master* of the house, started to develop an obsession about her that was constantly materializing into sexual harassment. Determined to resist Mr Flint's onslaught and hoping that things would eventually change, Harriet constantly undermined his authority by talking back, defying and sabotaging his intentions and plans. These attitudes, according to Small and Walvin (2011), were common features of individual black resistance in the times of slavery, especially by women. During the years, Harriet fantasized more and more about becoming a free woman since her captivity was exacerbated by Doctor Flint's sexual obsession with her, who constantly invaded her intimacy and prevented Harriet from having a life of her own. After seeing her only love and her only chance of happiness cast away, Harriet decided to get pregnant from a white man in order to force Doctor Flint to let her go, through marriage. Unexpectedly, he refused to free her and she ended up in her grandmother's house, still enslaved and fearing for the future of her beloved children because, according

³ In the course of the essay, a number of words related to notions of 'mastery' and 'property' appear in italic format. This is so in order to both map and denaturalize a set of concepts that conceal processes of material and symbolic violence under chattel slavery, particularly by maintaining unquestioned notions of objectification and dehumanization. For further debate cf. Nimako (2015).

to the *partus sequitur ventrem* legislative principle, infants should follow their mother's condition (Davis, 1983).

Devoted to God, the principle of freedom and to her children, Harriet realized that the only way she could ever be free was by joining many other friends and relatives by running away to the northern states. The depictions of runaways are pervasive throughout the book. Thereby, in the aftermath of disobeying once again the *master's* instructions and being sent away to a cotton farm as a form of punishment, Harriet decided to escape. One night, while everybody was sleeping, she slowly crept down the stairs and ran away never to return again. After finding shelter in a variety of different places, Harriet ended up confined in the only secure place she could find: a tiny spot in the attic of her grandmother's house. It is important to understand that according to Gutman, even though "countless slave families were forcibly disrupted [...] the bonds of love and affection, the cultural norms governing family relations, and the overpowering desire to remain together survived the devastating onslaught of slavery" (*apud* Davis, 1983: 23). Patiently waiting for an opportunity to escape to the northern states — where slavery had already been abolished — she accompanied, in silence, the growth of her child and the episodes of the city for seven years through a little hole in the roof and secret conversations with her grandmother Marthy and her uncle Philip. However, time did not seem to deter Flint's obsession for Harriet and even when she was able to finally escape by boat to Philadelphia and thereafter to other cities in the north, he never ceased to pursue her and to bring her back to slavery, continuously reasserting his privileges as a white male. Nonetheless, in the meanwhile, Harriet was able to forge a plan to surreptitiously *buy* her children from Flint's family and, even if haunted by a ghost of uncertainty and danger, they managed to reunite again and start a new life. At last, after Mr Flint's death and a set of other vicissitudes, her then current *mistress*, Mrs. Bruce, acknowledged Harriet's story and *bought*

Harriet's freedom out of the Flint's family. Nevertheless, violence persisted in Harriet's life as a free woman, through formal racial segregation and everyday racism (Essed, 2002) since "by the time slavery was legally abolished, the enslaved had already been labelled, represented and misrepresented" (Nimako, 2015). Indeed, according to Avery Gordon, chattel slavery is an "ending that is not over" as "something of it continues to live on" (Gordon, 2008: 139).

In order to contextualize Harriet's narrative, it is important to underline that "the slave narrative", like *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, became a form of "popular sociology of freedom" (Gordon, 2008: 143). By combining the autobiographical, the ethnographical, the historical, the literary and the political it allowed to both denounce slavery and lobby for its abolition (2008: 143). Nonetheless, as observed by Gordon (2008), it is also important to acknowledge the role played by the (white) abolitionist movement, seen as a contribution to prompt the narratives (e.g. producing, distributing) but simultaneously limiting their potentialities.⁴ Still, they remained fundamental socio-political instruments to fight racial slavery. Throughout Harriet's depictions of the reality her eyes could catch, she described slavery in all its cruelty and brutality, emphasizing its consequences in the intimate course of the lives of blacks in the United States, during the 19th century. However, she incessantly also showed the solidarity ties between family, friends, enslaved and abolitionists. Harriet's story gives an important testimony of the reality of slavery, patriarchy, white privilege and the ambiguities of abolition, paving the way to a discussion on the persistence of racial segregation after abolitionism, proving that emancipation was, by then, still an *unfinished business* (Nimako and Willemsen, 2011). Harriet's accounts express the condition of an enchained woman who grew up with an untenable desire to be free. This is also the focus of the analyses I will provide, following

⁴ For further details, cf. Gordon (2008).

Angela Davis when she states that “from the numerous accounts of the violent repression overseers inflicted on women, it must be inferred that she who passively accepted her lot as a slave was the exception rather than the rule” (1983: 29).

1.2 Daughters, women and mothers: between racialization and genderization

Angela Davis argues that under the system of chattel slavery women as well as men were first of all (field) workers since “compulsory labor overshadowed every other aspect of women’s existence” (1983: 11). Nonetheless, women were seen as even more profitable since “*they cost less to capitalize and to maintain*” (1983: 18). Due to the fact that slavery was a patriarchal system, as Harriet Jacobs insisted upon, racial and gender discrimination intertwined, subjecting women to a double and somehow different kind of exploitation. In this sense, women “suffered in different ways” because “they were victims of sexual abuse and other barbarous mistreatment” and “inherently vulnerable to all forms of sexual coercion” (Davis, 1983: 13–14). However, it is important to underline that the process of genderization of the oppression occurred following the desires and necessities of slavery, both a system of physical and symbolic degradation, and a racialized rationality:

Expediency governed the slaveholders’ posture toward female slaves: when it was profitable to exploit them as if they were men, they were regarded, in effect, as genderless, but when they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked into their exclusively female roles. (Davis, 1983)

In that sense, harassment and rape in particular were “un-camouflaged expression[s] of the slaveholder’s economic mastery and the overseer’s control over Black women as workers” (Davis, 1983:

13) and ultimately as property, through physical and coercive appropriation of their bodies and their dignity. Sexual exploitation was “a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women’s will to resist, and in the process, to demoralize their men” (1983: 34). Following the work of Eglá Martínez Salazar, rape seems to be the embodied expression of a broader “gender and racialized genocide” (2012: 216), entailing chauvinist notions of femininity and attempts at colonial domestication:

If Black women had achieved a sense of their own strength and a strong urge to resist, then violent sexual assaults — so the slaveholders might have reasoned — would remind the women of their essential and inalterable femaleness. In the male supremacist vision of the period, this meant passivity, acquiescence and weakness. (Davis, 1983: 35–36)

The exposure of the black enslaved female body to violence and humiliation was a form of embodying authority and producing dehumanization. Furthermore, it contributed to reaffirm hegemonic asymmetries between men and women, by constantly placing (black) women as subalterns to (white) male authority and to chattel slavery as a system. Nonetheless, racialization was so instrumental to the maintenance and legitimation of racial slavery as a racist and capitalist system that gender appeared as a floating signifier. Consequently, the (dis)continuity of *universal* notions of femininity were activated in accordance. A prime example of this is the fact that the “ideological exaltation of motherhood — as popular as it was during the nineteenth century — did not extend to slaves” (Davis, 1983: 14). In the eyes of the *slaveholders*, black women “were simply instruments guaranteeing the growth of the slave labor force”, they were seen as ‘breeders’ — “animals, whose monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply their numbers” (1983: 14). It was precisely under this

rationality that the children could also be sold, just like animals were. Therefore, under the Eurocentric rationality of racial slavery, there were no mothers, no children and no families; the enslaved were not humans but rather racialized bodies, conceptualized as objects, property and capital. And, in this sense, according to Davis, in such a context, all of them were, in a way, equally subjected to this structural racialized violence:

Black women were equal to their men in the oppression they suffered; they were their men's social equals within the slave community; and they resisted slavery with a passion equal to their men's. This was one of the greatest ironies of the slave system, for in subjecting women to the most ruthless exploitation conceivable, exploitation which knew no sex distinctions, the groundwork was created not only for Black women to assert their equality through their social relations, but also to express it through their acts of resistance. This must have been a terrifying revelation for the slaveowners, for it seems that they were trying to break this chain of equality through the especially brutal repression they reserved for the women. (Davis, 1983: 34)

However, due to the tenacity of past and present forms of patriarchal oppression, the role of all women that fought slavery was mostly ignored by historians (Small and Walvin, 2012) and therefore did not qualify as a memory in the fight against slavery. Yet, this is only a chapter in a broader obliteration process of black resistance against chattel slavery that remains to be told, heard and understood.

1.3 The Revolution of San Domingo

The so-called *Black Jacobins* successfully rose up against both chattel slavery and colonialism between 1791 and 1803, in San Domingo (now Haiti), a former colony that was considered by

then the *crown jewel* of an emergent French Republic. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1989 [1938]), written by Cyril Lionel Robert James, is an account of those events. Born in Trinidad in 1901, under British colonial rule, C.L.R. James was both a historian and a pan-Africanist activist. As such, *The Black Jacobins* is neither an autobiography nor a contemporary depiction of the events: it is both a temporally detached and a politically engaged academic narrative on the historical context that led to the Revolution and a detailed portrait of that same process. Accordingly, James starts by depicting the inception of colonial brutality in San Domingo with the arrival of Christopher Columbus and the decimation of the indigenous populations as well as the introduction of chattel slavery and the degradation of the African populations. Through a careful illustration of the process that led to the establishment of Haiti as the first Black Republic in world history, James opposes notions of property to those of freedom and agency. Covering the main events of the utmost successful collective insurrection against slavery, James elects Toussaint L'Ouverture, a former literate enslaved man, as its most prominent figure. Although highlighting Toussaint's important role both in terms of his military career as well as being a politician, the author argues that "Toussaint did not make the revolution. It was the revolution that made Toussaint" (James, 1989: x).

In spite of the richness of James' entire account, I will focus in particular on the first chapters of the book, since it is in these pages that the author discusses the conditions of oppression that led to the context of the revolution. As it will be possible to grasp, even though C.L.R. James talks about a different geographical and political context than the one depicted by Harriet Jacobs, the mechanisms and the logics of oppression exposed by both remain extremely similar. Also, this applies to the will to break the chains and fight mass incarceration under racial slavery. As such, the differences between Harriet and James's accounts seem to be related

to a question of language and scale more than anything else, since they depict and provide critiques to an institutional racialized power that “was largely based on ownership of enslaved property, and legal enforcement or support for slavery” (Small, 2015: 229). Thus, institutions, both civic and religious, “were almost inextricable from slavery” since the “entire system was enforced with the power of the state” (2015: 229). According to Kwame Nimako, slavery was a *legal institution* that was “sustained through violence” and “based on the apparatus of the state” (2015: 185). Therefore, considering the resemblances between (French) colonialism and (North-American) internal colonialism regarding chattel slavery, I envisage a dialogue between Harriet and James’ narratives in which the former could enrich the latter in detail and subjectivity, while the latter can imprint a broader historical and political context to the former. I argue that this will help to grasp some of the complexities of a silenced matter: resistance and the interconnection between the individual and the collective.

1.4 The unbearable fact of resistance

The first part of the book *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* is a historical narrative on *racial governmentalities* (Hesse, 2007) and the physical, symbolic and material violence they entailed. Under a system that “acquir[ed], distribut[ed] and exploit[ed] lands” (Mudimbe, 1988: 16) through colonial domination, racial slavery represented for the European powers a solution that allowed for a massive exploitation of the work force, though not reduced to it (Nimako, 2015). This was particularly important to the development of the plantation system as a new form of production that eventually led to industrialization and capitalism, as Sydney Mintz (1985) well portrayed. Within this system, the word ‘slave’ became a synonym for black (Sweet, 2003), testifying a process of racialization that entailed

degradation, objectification and dehumanization. Dehumanization was both a premise and a consequence within this racialized power structure in which acute efforts to bestialize blacks were constantly produced. In the words of C.L.R. James:

Worked like animals, the slaves were housed like animals, in huts built around a square planted with provisions and fruits. These huts were about 20 to 25 feet long, 12 feet wide and about 15 feet in height, divided by partitions into two or three rooms. They were windowless and light entered only by the door. The floor was beaten earth; the bed was of straw, hides or a rude contrivance of cords tied on posts. On these slept indiscriminately mother, father and children. Defenceless against their masters, they struggled with overwork and its usual complement-underfeeding. (James, 1989: 10–11)

Thus, symbolic and physical violence was, by then, ever-present in order to both maintain and legitimize chattel slavery. This violence could range from the examination and appropriation of people's bodies to starvation or punishments or deprivation of education opportunities. The last seemed to constitute a colonial effort for the enslaved to "remain the brute beast they [the enslavers] want him to be" (James, 1989: 17). According to James, physical violence was so common that "the stranger in San Domingo was awakened by the cracks of the whip, the stifled cries, and the heavy groans of the Negroes who saw the sun rise only to curse it for its renewal of their labours and their pains" (1989: 10). This routine resulted in huge death rates amongst the enslaved. Yet, against all racist odds, the enslaved "remained, despite their black skins and curly hair, quite invincibly human beings with the intelligence and resentments of human beings" (1989: 11). It is also important to highlight that the intention "to cow them into the necessary docility and acceptance" was also seen as a mean for *slave-owners* to guarantee their safety, constantly reified by "a régime of calculated brutality and terrorism" (1989: 11–12).

For a long time, as a response, the enslaved resisted individually through hunger strikes, poisoning their masters and even suicide. But on the night of 22 of August, after the *Bwa Kayiman* — the voodoo ceremony where the uprising was carefully and finally planned — the enslaved rose in massive revolt. According to James, this happened not only because they understood that the situation was favourable but also due to the fact that they realized that individual resistance, even if important, would not end slavery. In this context it is important to underline the central role played by cultural resistance, namely through religion (Small e Walvin, 2012). Although voodoo ceremonies were expressly forbidden in San Domingo, they kept happening and it was precisely during these meetings that networks were built and the uprising was designed. People “make their own history, and the black Jacobins of San Domingo were to make history which [...] alter the fate of millions of men and shift the economic currents of three countries” (James, 1989: 25). Hence, after talking back so many times (as did Harriet) or being so violently humiliated (as all were), the night came for them to kill their *masters* and to burn the plantations they had painstakingly cultivated, leaving chaos and erasing the traces of tyranny. Subsequently, as Frantz Fanon argued elsewhere, colonialism and, in this case, slavery “is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence” (Fanon, 1963: 61) and therefore, as recalled by C.L.R. James:

Yet in all the records of that time there is no single instance of such fiendish tortures as burying white men up to the neck and smearing the holes in their faces to attract insects, or blowing them up with gun-powder, or any of the thousand and one bestialities to which they had been subjected. Compared with what their masters had done to them in cold blood, what they did was negligible, and they were spurred on by the ferocity with which the whites in Le Cap treated all slave prisoners who fell into their hands. (James, 1989: 89)

Through the depiction of C.L.R. James, we can testify that what happened in San Domingo was a revolutionary call, a cry, a shout, a scream that was finally able to raise the lower but persistent voices, such as Harriet's voice and that of many other individuals that fought against racial slavery. Reading these books was remarkably important for me, both as a student and as a person and therefore the question remains: why are these stories not available in the public discourse, namely in textbooks, if the history of slavery was also about slave resistance, as Stephen Small (2015) has previously argued?

2 Resistance: the (im)possible memory

In the remarkable work *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, the Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) explored the production of silences within dominant historical narratives. One of the silences identified relates precisely to the constitution of the Revolution of San Domingo as a *non-historical event*. Therefore, in the course of his analysis, Trouillot drives us back to that same past that has been actively silenced. He goes back to the time of the French Revolution and the supposed universal extension of rights to all humankind, through the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*. Yet slavery was still pervasive in San Domingo. This contradiction shows us how the Abolition of slavery was/is (not) a European moral question (Nimako and Willemsen, 2011), but rather the result of a long process of resistance by the enslaved blacks in San Domingo (as in many other geographies) and their definite desire to be free. Nevertheless, western rationality — which both enabled and was enabled by the system of colonialism and racial slavery — strongly widespread among westerners, could not frame the possibility of blacks to envision freedom (Trouillot, 1995). Thus, excluding any “possibility of a revolutionary uprising in the slave plantations”

(Trouillot, 1995: 73). Yet, if it was even slightly conceived, it was both severely punished and trivialized, as comprehensively depicted by Harriet Jacobs in the aftermath of the insurrection of Nat Turner and his followers, in Virginia, in 1831 (Jacobs, 1993: 107–114). Therefore, both violence and resistance were framed as exceptional. And, accordingly, “each possible instance of resistance was treated separately and drained of its political content” (Trouillot, 1995: 83). This was the case with Harriet’s brother, Benjamin, “a slave that dared to feel man” (Jacobs, 1993: 33). The acts were accommodated to the facts and by that time the powerful fact was racial slavery. To that extent, any enslaved person who dared to rebel would be framed as a “maladjusted Negro, a mutinous adolescent who eats dirt until he dies, an infanticidal mother, a deviant” (Trouillot, 1995: 83). In consonance, the denial of resistance was a trace of that same system, provided by that same rationality. In other words, acknowledging resistance was impossible since it entailed both recognizing the humanity of the enslaved and the possibility that something was wrong with the system (Trouillot, 1995). Ironically, the fact that this same rationality underestimated the enslaved turned out to make more room for resistance. Therefore, the denial of the enslaved agency facilitated the *(im)possible* revolution by providing spaces to “formulate strategies” and prepare it (1995: 73). Additionally, as depicted by C.L.R James, according to the Governor of San Domingo and to many others “slavery proved it to be the happiest form of society known” (James, 1989: 112), leading Europeans to not understand why the enslaved would ever revolt. Again, this turned the Revolution into a “history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened” (Trouillot, 1995: 73). The author proceeds by arguing that:

The events that shook up Saint-Domingue from 1791 to 1804 constituted a sequence for which not even the extreme political left in France or in England had a conceptual frame of

reference. They were “unthinkable” facts in the framework of Western thought. (Trouillot, 1995: 84)

Thus, when the first news of the uprising reached Paris, the first reaction was disbelief. The French could neither conceive the possibility of blacks organizing themselves, nor that they could defeat the French Army (Trouillot, 1995) in order to break down “this idyllic state of affairs” (James, 1989: 113). As such, acknowledging resistance was threefold impossible. Furthermore, when confirmation of the rebellion arrived, the approach was to discredit the role of the enslaved and attribute it to somebody else (Trouillot, 1995). Nevertheless, when faced with the fact that the uprising was happening, the only solution that seemed to remain was denial. This implied, among other things, the non-recognition of Haiti as an Independent State, with several severe consequences to the territory and the population. As time went by, silence and trivialization of that same historical event took shape through what Trouillot (1995) called *formulas of erasure* and *formulas of banalization*, explaining that:

Effective silencing does not require a conspiracy, not even a political consensus. Its roots are structural. Beyond stated — and most often sincere — political generosity, best described in the U.S. parlance within a liberal continuum, the narrative structures of Western historiography have not broken with the ontological order of the renaissance. This exercise of power is much more important than the alleged conservative or liberal adherence of the historians involved. (Trouillot, 1995: 106)

Through this process, the Revolution of San Domingo was obliterated in the dominant historical narrative and this is most likely to persist while we do not change the terms of this dominant conversation (Mignolo, 2009). Notwithstanding, there have been attempts to decolonize the dominant narrative on slavery,

colonialism and racism. Arguably, both narratives provided by Harriet Jacobs and C.L.R. James present essential contributions to it. Following Enzo Traverso (2012) both their accounts can be understood as *weak memories* in the sense that they don't have any visibility or recognition. The reasons for that lie in the fact that they are disruptive of the *stronger memories* and here, in particular, of the *myth of modernity* (Dussel, 1993). Therefore, both facts — individual and collective resistance — are trapped in a broader frame of what Nimako and Willemsen (2011) called the *social forgetting of slavery*. This obliteration is related to the very fact that “what happened in Haiti [...] contradicted most of what the West has told both itself and others about itself” (Trouillot, 2005: 107).

Conclusion

Harriet Jacobs and C.L.R. James produced two different kinds of memories. Whereas Harriet's is an intimate autobiography and an account as an enslaved woman that risked her survival for her freedom, C.L.R. James's work is a historical account from the point of view of a social scientist that tried to retell a silenced event. Yet, both recall similar notions of oppression, racism and dehumanization as well as solidarity, resistance and freedom. Furthermore, both narratives seem equally obliterated from dominant narratives on colonialism and racial enslavement.

Silvia Maeso and Marta Araújo argue that these dominant debates are definitive examples “of Eurocentrism as a paradigm of knowledge production and interpretation” (Maeso and Araújo, 2015: 13). And although, according to the authors, the last years have seen “a re-emergence of political and academic interest in the history and in memorialization of slavery”, the way the debate has been framed remains very problematic (2015: 13). In the first place, transatlantic slavery is often conceived as “an exceptional process or an appendix to the history of Europe” (2015: 14). And

although “acknowledging the negative impacts of slavery in Africa, broadly omits the benefits it brought to Europe: Atlantic slavery is approached as a process happening over there — in the colonies — with little relevance to European history” (2015: 14), leading to the depoliticization of the *racialized governmentalities* entailed by both colonialism and enslavement. Furthermore, the idea of a *naïve epistemology* (2015: 14) is often mobilized in order to justify the scarce debate on the transatlantic slavery within Western historiography, which masks particular configurations of power-knowledge production (2015). And lastly, the fact that slavery is often depicted and perceived as a universal and ubiquitous phenomenon not only contributes to its naturalization, but also erases from history what was in fact its organizing principle: ‘race’ (Maeso and Araújo, 2015; Nimako and Willemsen, 2011). Moreover, a fourth argument may be added: the obliteration of resistance among the enslaved as a form of denying both the structural violence of the system and the agency of the enslaved. And, to that extent, the works of Harriet and James can be understood as *impossible objects* of a Eurocentric scientific knowledge production or canon. As a consequence, discourses on the moral authority of *the West over the Rest*, in what rights and freedoms are concerned, continue to be pervasive, neglecting the fact that the very philosophical modern/eurocentric conception of the *Human* was not built on a void, but rather anchored on a particular historical and political context. It is important to notice that such a notion, that came to impose itself widely through a process of *epistemological racialization* (Hesse, 2007), is an extensively excluding one. Hence, the idea of the *Human*, far from being universal and neutral, is ontologically and morally constructed upon colonial and racist governmentalities and, as such, racialized. As a consequence, the notion of Human Rights is in itself axiomatic, since it also entails the production of *human rightness* (Baxi, 2006: 182). Therefore, the persistence of colonial rationalities that conceal the fact of black resistance within

chattel slavery, contribute to persistently deny the agency of the racialized subjects of modernity. Furthermore, it is also important to scrutinize what appears as historical coincidences, in particular the fact that the former colonial geographies where the people were persistently kidnapped and humiliated under chattel slavery (as well as the ones where the enslaved dared to collectively revolt, like Haiti) are some of the poorest regions in the world, which make them the primary target of humanitarian discourse and practice. In these contemporary contexts, violence, both historical and contemporary, so many times prompted by colonialist and neo-colonialist practices, continue to be concealed or masked.

Living and writing *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* could be understood as an act of resistance against a system of formal segregation; writing *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* might also be understood as a similar act of resistance. Accordingly, recalling these memories nowadays within the public debate is still, as it seems, an act of disobedience and disruption in itself. Past silences resonate in present ones, showing us that emancipation is (still) an *unfinished business* (Nimako e Willemsen, 2011). Indeed, the social memory on slavery — that is in part the *social forgetting of slavery* (2011) — is not just a history which remains to be told, but something ghostly that persistently haunts us in the sense that “to be haunted is to be tied to historical and social effects” (Gordon, 2008: 190).

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