Haitian Modernity: Memory, Trauma and History

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Haiti and the revolution that led to its founding have always occupied an eccentric place in relation to both Europe and the Americas. Mainstream historiographies of the Age of Revolution continue to focus on France, on the United States, and within political theory–a field where the texts surrounding the foundation of the United States of America, for instance, are treated as canonical–Haiti and its founding ideology of revolutionary antislavery do not seem to exist at all. This may not surprise you–the ostracism and isolation that Haiti has suffered ever since its founding in 1804 is well-known after all. Still, one might have thought that at least from an ideological or typological perspective the Haitian Revolution would have been considered as extremely important, since it is the only modern revolution that placed race and color at the heart of the agenda. But the contrary is the case: the grander and more abstractly typological the theory, the less likely that Haiti finds a place. And certainly,

when it comes to the idea of Western modernity, it seems almost extravagant to bring Haiti into the picture.[1]

The history of silencing of the only successful slave revolution in the slaveholding Atlantic has been well-documented by scholars of the African diaspora–one thinks of Winthrop Jordan's powerful *White Over Black* (1969) and Michel-Rolph Trouillot's more recent *Silencing the Past* (1995), which has become almost a canonical text in the U.S. academy, and an indispensable starting point for any work about Haiti with a theoretical and political orientation. My own *Modernity Disavowed* comes out of that tradition and tries to show to what extent the silencing of Haiti shaped Creole nationalism and Creole culture in the Greater Caribbean. But I also think that "silence" is not the whole story.

Clearly, we need to remember that "silence" has a specific social and geographic location: the impact of the Haitian Revolution was never purely "negative." There is a new consensus emerging among younger historians: that the informational embargo imposed on Haiti never succeeded and that the events of the revolution and its key figures were well-known among slaves and free people of color throughout the slaveholding Atlantic. There were songs, rumors and artifacts of all sorts circulating in the harbor cities of the Caribbean; certain names–such as Jean François (or Juan Francisco in the Spanish Caribbean), one of the generals in the revolution's earlier stages–seem to have become shorthand for an invocation of the revolution.[2]

We also need to remember that Haiti was a key reference point for African American abolitionists and activists

from Frederick Douglass to Martin Delany, and later for the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, the Négritude movement, the anti-colonial activists of the 50s and 60s, and the Black Power movement in the US of the 1970s. At a symposium at Northwestern University about the Haitian Revolution last year, the Senegalese philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne gave a wonderful talk about the significance of Haiti in Africa. The title of his talk was borrowed from Aimé Césaire, one of the founding figures of the Négritude movement: "Africa, (…) I mean Haiti." Haiti, despite its troubled history (and perhaps also because of it), has so much symbolized the struggles and aspirations of the people of color both in Africa and in the diaspora; so many writers of the diaspora, from C. L. R. James and Ntozake Shange to Walcott and Glissant, have written important works that were inspired by the Haitian Revolution, that any analysis of the silences in the Western record needs to be balanced against the fact that Haiti also occupies a central position in the cultures of the Black Atlantic. It has been like that ever since the days of the revolution: tight-lipped silence and passionate debate, knowledge of detail and denial of transcendence, public protestations of ignorance and private recognition, denial and celebration–this is the contradictory historical condition in which the Haitian revolution has existed ever since it began in 1791.

It may be tempting simply to think that the Haitian Revolution was known in the African diaspora and silenced and denied by the colonial powers, the slave owners, as well as their neocolonial successors. But I think that things are

more complicated than that. In fact, I'd argue that the complexity of the relation between silence and memory mirror the complexity of the relation between African and European heritage, and between Western and colonial enlightenment. The two sides are inextricably linked, shaped by each other; silence cannot be understood without memory, just as Europe cannot be understood without Africa, and colonial enlightenment cannot be understood with its European counterpart. This, at any rate, is what I'll try to discuss today. Consequently, I have divided my remarks into three parts: in the first part, I'll talk about the memory and disavowal of the Haitian Revolution; in the second, I'll back-track a little and offer some thoughts about the place of slavery and antislavery in mainstream political thought of the European enlightenment; and the last part brings us back to Haiti and its founding ideology and tries to show the true radicalness of Haitian revisionism of Enlightenment political thought.

We could phrase the issue at the heart of the memory of the Haitian Revolution almost in terms of a paradox: why is it that one of the most obsessively observed, discussed and analyzed events of the slaveholding Atlantic is also, supposedly, "unknown"?

It might be easier if I explain my argument by contrasting it here with Trouillot's well-known claims about the silencing of the Haitian Revolution. According to Trouillot, the silencing of the Haitian Revolution is due to its profound "unthinkability": the Haitian Revolution "entered history

with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened" (73). He explains:

> Lest accusations of political correctness trivialize the issue, let me emphasize that I am not suggesting that eighteenth-century men and women *should* have thought about the fundamental equality of humankind in the same way some of us do today. On the contrary, I am arguing that they *could not* have done so. (…) *The events that shook up Saint-Domingue from 1791 to 1804 constituted a sequence for which not even the extreme political left in France and England had a conceptual frame of reference.* They were "unthinkable" facts in the framework of Western thought. (82; italics in the original.)

Trouillot's vision would ultimately lead us to think of silence and memory, denial and recognition as a dichotomous structure that maps onto the geography of color: recognition and memory are located in the African diaspora, silence, denial, and "non-thought" within Western modernity. In Trouillot's text, this dichotomy manifests itself visually in the use of italics for "memory"–which is thereby given a somewhat personal character, almost like an interior monologue and ordinary print for the analysis of "silencing."

But what are we to make of the fact that the events were known? The press in Europe reported about them at some length. Diplomatic correspondence between the colonial administrators and the metropolises in the decades after 1791 is replete with calls for vigilance and admonitions to maintain control "in order to prevent the entrance (...) of any

reports about what is happening in the French Islands and Empire." Can we say something is unthinkable when so much effort is spent on tracking it? If it was not strictly speaking "unthinkable," then the whole problem shifts from an epistemic one to a political and moral one. And that is where I would locate the issue.

But there is a second point to be made: was there really a readily identifiable framework of Western thought at the time? It was, after all, a time when the meaning and scope of "liberty" and "equality" were contested in parliamentary debates and the subject of endless pamphleteering; a time when new concepts were invented and old concepts took on radically new meanings. We must not lose sight of all internal contestation within modern Enlightenment discourse; most importantly, we should not lose sight of the fact that modern discourses of emancipation are neither of exclusively European origin, nor the exclusive property of those in power. Again the events of the Haitian Revolution constitute an important reminder: slave liberation started in the Caribbean, with the actions of slaves and their free allies–black, mulatto, and white–it did not begin in the Assembly in Paris.

As an alternative to the concept of "unthinkability," which would in fact (and paradoxically) erase the Haitian Revolution from Western modernity, I propose the concept of "disavowal" to signal the contested nature of modernity in the Age of Revolution, to accommodate the heterogeneity of responses to Haiti in the West. In its everyday sense "di-

savowal" just means a "refusal to acknowledge," "repudiation," and "denial"–that is, "silencing"; in its more technical sense in psychoanalytic theory, it means a "refusal to recognize the reality of a traumatic perception"[3] – as in the case of a war, or a terrible accident. As Freud explains, disavowal exists alongside recognition: "Whenever we are in a position to study acts of disavowal they turn out to be half-measures, incomplete attempts at detachment from reality. The disavowal is always supplemented by an acknowledgement."[4]

Thinking about the founding of Haiti through the concept of disavowal allows us to think about Haiti in relation to modernity without denying its particularities. Rather, it can be understood as a vernacular kind of modern state: the interpretation of "equality" in terms of "racial equality" and "liberty" in terms of "liberty from racial slavery" meant a daring departure from mainstream Western traditions and this radical difference is what leads to disavowal on the part of European thinkers and politicians.

Now, clearly, there were important forces at work in Haiti that cannot be reduced to a Western enlightenment in the colonies: there were other constitutive influences, most importantly African traditions and Creolized popular practices. But that should not represent a problem for our thinking. The real problem, it seems to me, concerns accounts of modernity that claim primacy for its European face. All too often, the assumption seems to be that there are more or less "pure" cases, that the "purer" the cases of modernity, the

more "originally" or "authentically" modern. If we read modernity from the perspective of the Caribbean colonies, the opposite view seems more plausible: that heterogeneity is a congenital condition of modernity, and that the alleged "purity" of European modernity is an *a posteriori* theorization or perhaps even part of a strategy that aims to establish European primacy. It may well be best to think of the purported homogeneity of European modernity as having been distilled out of the hybrid hemispheric phenomenon–distilled by ideological operations, forgetfulness and active suppression of "impure," "hybrid" elements. Familiar claims about the "unfinished project of modernity" and its utopian promise would, from this perspective, just be one of the strategies of "purification."

Thinking about Haiti through the concept of disavowal also allows us to see that Haiti (and all it came to represent for Europeans) is in some sense present in European thought, even where its name is carefully avoided. It allows us to see that people who we know, nevertheless would not acknowledge their knowledge. This is a highly charged, meaningful silence that had an enormous impact on political actions and political theories and thus needs to be restored to the record. Unlike currently popular notions of trauma which tend to move the traumatic event into the realm of the unspeakable or unrepresentable and thus render it, in my view, non-political and thus useless for critical purposes, the concept of "disavowal" requires us to identify what is being disavowed, by whom, and for what reason. It is more a stra-

tegy (although not necessarily one voluntarily chosen) than a state of mind and it is creative or productive in that it brings forth further stories and fantasies that hide from view what must not be seen: a colonial modernity that reorganizes and reinterprets the core principles of enlightenment discourse in a way that challenges white supremacy and European dominance.

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Writing Haiti back into the history of Western modernity cannot be done if we cannot account for the element of denial or disavowal. It cannot be done unless we distinguish clearly between different sorts of silence and denial. Let me just give you a couple of examples of what I have in mind.

Here is Hegel, whose arguably most famous piece of writing is about a master and a slave who engage in a life-and-death struggle. In an important article Susan Buck-Morss has shown that it would be extravagant to think that Hegel was not aware of the events in Haiti, even though he doesn't mention them explicitly. (Keep in mind that he did not mention the French Revolution either, but few people would want to doubt that it figures in his writings.) Buck-Morss used her evidence to argue that Haiti in important ways shaped Hegel's philosophy. I disagree with her interpretation of the data: I think Hegel's master-slave dialectic is a classic example of disavowal. What is most striking about the text in question is that Hegel fails to clarify the

outcome of the master-slave dialectic. That failure can very plausibly be explained as a result of his reluctance to integrate the Haitian Revolution[5]–and revolutionary slaves–into his account of the development of the spirit and the realization of freedom. All commentators agree: Hegel becomes strangely incoherent at the end of what may well be his most famous piece of writing. Why not think about this as a form of corruption, or form of denial, where enlightenment philosophy becomes untrue to its own ethos and its own principles?

Or here is an example that takes us back into the history of political thought before the Haitian Revolution and concerns the status of the term slavery in political thought. Political theorists are fond of explaining that "slavery" is a "root metaphor" in Enlightenment discourse and that it had nothing to do with "racial slavery" as it was practiced in the distant colonies. In that picture, Locke's ringing denunciation of political slavery as "so vile and miserable an estate of man, and so directly opposite to the generous Temper and Courage of our nation; that 'tis hard to conceive, that an *Englishman*, much less a *Gentleman*, should plead for't" can coexist with his notorious justification of slavery by casting slaves as prisoners taken in a "just war" and as having chosen slavery over certain (and deserved) death. Our imaginary political theorist would argue, then, that slavery in the first instance is used just metaphorically, and that the attribute of "vileness" was directed at his opponent Filmer, and obviously not meant to apply to racial slavery.

But this argument clearly does not hold up to scrutiny: had slavery been merely a metaphor, the way that "castle" might be a metaphor for "home", there would have been no need to worry about distinctions and connections between the metaphorical term and the proper term; nobody would feel compelled to say, for instance, that their home is a castle, though without turrets and moat. When we look at the writings of Locke, Montesquieu, or many other enlightenment philosophers, however, we see them very worried about the distinction between one sort of slavery and the other: all sorts of sophistical arguments about wars, prisoners of war, climate, and what not get introduced to establish the difference.

Disavowal is not a rational epistemological position: it marks the moment when Western philosophy ceases to follow its own rules and its own ethos. As Freud said, disavowal is a "half-measure"; it tries to deny a reality that is perceived as traumatic, but it always retains a moment of recognition. I believe that Haiti and the ideas that were to become its founding ideology were not unthinkable.[6] They were thought, considered, and then somehow set aside.

3

Let me end my observations by turning back to Haiti in the Age of Revolution. Arguably there are no documents dating back to the early days of the new state that speak more eloquently to the extraordinary refiguring of Enlightenment

ideas than the early Haitian constitutions. In the first twelve years of the new state's life, six constitutions were issued. They differ radically in respect of the state form they adopt and details of institutional design, but share a number of features that set them apart from all other constitutions of the revolutionary age. They all have an unequivocal ban on slavery and racial subordination, generous asylum clauses for victims of slavery and colonial genocide, and an explicit non-interference clause *vis-à-vis* neighboring territories.

Why aren't these constitutions better known? Why have they been dismissed as "fictions" or a "comic clash between dream and reality"? I do not believe that the answer is simply that the constitutions were ineffectual. Rather, I think the question goes right to the heart of the problem of the conspicuous absence of the Haitian Revolution in most canonical accounts of the Age of Revolution. What I'll try to show is that the reason why the Haitian Constitutions have been excluded from the lists of canonical readings on Enlightenment universalism and revolutionary politics can be found in the fact that by thinking universalism through the lens of race and antislavery, the framers of the Haitian Constitutions end up by revising some of the core concepts of liberal constitutional theory. Unless we realize to what degree the goals of the Haitian Constitutions were at odds with the parameters set by European constitutional thinkers, these constitutions must indeed seem muddleheaded manifestoes of sorts, written in a terrible rush and discarded at the earliest convenience at best; at worst, half-hearted attempts to disguise the absolutist authoritarianism that characterized

Haitian politics from the day of Independence on. But this, I think, would be a terrible mistake. The constitutions will not tell us much about the political regime on the ground. But they teach us important lessons about the limits of enlightenment universalism, and the possibilities of a universalism that would include racial equality.

Taking as their point of departure the French Constitutions of 1791 and, especially, the Jacobin Constitution of 1793, the Haitian Constitutions are unique rewritings that show the intellectual labor that was necessary in order to place the issue of racial equality at the center of the modern universalist agenda.

Dessalines' Constitution of 1805 proclaims that "all Haitians will henceforth be known by the generic denomination of blacks." From the taxonomical lunacy of a colony that had over a hundred different terms to refer to different degrees of racial mixture and color, we have moved to a generic name: "black." Through the act of renaming, the Constitution of 1805 performs one of the most troubling paradoxes of modern universalist politics–the paradox that the universal typically is derived through a generalization of only one of the particulars. Calling all Haitians, regardless of skin color, black is a gesture like calling all people, regardless of their sex, women: it both asserts egalitarian and universalist intuitions and puts them to the test by using the previously subordinated term of the opposition as the universal term.

Now, these provisions governing issues of racial equality are connected, through the provisions regulating citi-

zenship, to the international sphere. Here is how this problem plays out in the revolutionary constitutions: The Constitution of 1805 states in some detail the restrictions placed on whites and their right to own property in Haiti. But if we wonder what the general rules governing citizenship are, we find nothing. Are the children of Haitians given automatic citizenship or do they need to be born in Haiti? What about non-white immigrants to Haiti? Article 1 simply states that “The people who live on the island formerly known as Saint Domingue convene to organize themselves in a free, sovereign and independent State.” The only specifications in relation to citizenship we find is a list of offenses that lead to the loss of citizenship.[7]

The republican Constitution of 1806 drops the provision that declares all citizens to be black, but gives very precise and narrow criteria according to which whites can acquire citizenship (Art. 28). Like the Constitution of 1805, it neither specifies criteria of citizenship in general, nor rules the naturalization of non-whites. What we do find in the 1806 Constitution, however, is a provision according to which “The Republic of Haiti will abstain from engaging in any wars of conquest, and never disturb the peace and internal regime of foreign islands” (Art. 2).[8] A similar provision can be found in Christophe’s first Constitution of 1807 (Art. 36) and Pétion’s Constitution of 1816 (Art. 5). In the latter, we also find, for the first time, a provision that regulates the status of non-whites who take up residence in Haiti: “Art. 44 – All Africans and Indians, and those of their blood, born in

the colonies or in foreign countries, who come to reside in the Republic will be recognized as Haitians, but will not enjoy the right of citizenship until after one year of residence." The Constitution that contains the most restrictive regulations on citizenship for whites, thus replaces the deliberately vague citizenship regulations for non-whites with a provision that explicitly gives the right of residence to anyone with African or Native American blood. But as the racial component of the "asylum provisions" becomes more explicit, so are the provisions that declare that Haiti will not engage in wars of conquest and will not interfere in the internal affairs of other colonies.

The provisions regulating residency and citizenship in Haiti, thus, must be seen as directly linked to those provisions that regulate Haiti's relation to neighboring countries or colonies. We might say that the vagueness of the former was intentional, as even asylum provisions could have been interpreted as interference in other countries' affairs. Apparently Henri Christophe, whose 1807 Constitution features one of the most decidedly vague residence clauses as its first article, was strongly opposed to Pétion's 1816 provision on precisely those grounds.

What we see here are traces of a modernity that has rarely been interrogated as to its impact on political ideology. Antislavery, like slavery itself, was international and transcended the boundaries of nations and empires; it is not surprising that there should be traces of this fact in the constitutions. The transnational or transimperial orientation of

the emancipatory agenda of radical antislavery was quite well-known at the time and ever since the early days of the Revolution, rumors of “Haitian ships” and “Haitian soldiers,” and of Toussaint planning to conquer other islands had terrified the elites in the Caribbean. As Haiti was forced to respond to international pressure to provide assurances that it would not try to “export its revolution” (remember that the “Girondin wars” of revolutionary France would have been on everybody’s mind), it compensated by introducing constitutional clauses that would offer a right of residency to all people who had escaped slavery or genocide. Locke’s justification of racial slavery turned at least in part on the existence of an international realm that was supposedly in the state of nature. The ideology of radical antislavery inverts this picture and makes the international realm its political arena. The framers of the Haitian constitutions were forced to reconcile the two tendencies: they wanted to create a state, not an international movement; but they also wanted to retain the central elements of their foundational ideology. This is the result: the borders become porous, the concept of citizenship vague–the outside–the realm of Locke’s working dead–is brought into the texts.

Conclusion

What happened in the Age of Revolution was also, among other things, a struggle over what it means to be modern, who can claim modernity, and on what grounds. Revolutionary antislavery in the Caribbean was–at least in part–a

struggle over what was meant by "liberty" and "equality" and how to revise a universalism that up to that point had always found means for allowing the continuation of racial subordination and racial slavery.

If we want to account more properly the Haitian Revolution, then, it is not enough to simply add it to the laundry list of a multicultural curriculum. We need to reread–revise, reconstruct the canon of Western thought with a keen ear for the moments of disavowal that denies the congenital heterogeneity of Western modernity and relegates the "memory" of the events to personal remembrance or particularistic interest. We also need to reconsider the intellectual labor of "vernacular intellectuals" like the Cuban carpenter and leader of a slave uprising, José Antonio Aponte, like the mid-19th century poet Plácido, and, indeed, like the framers of the Haitian Constitutions (and no doubt countless others) as attempts to inhabit the universalism of liberty from the other side, as it were.

Notes

1. An exception is a certain strand in the historiography of the Haitian revolution, which started perhaps with C.L.R. James (though it can probably be traced back to certain schools within Haitian historiography) and found an important articulation in Eugene Genovese (see my *Modernity Disavowed* for a critique of Genovese). The excellent work of Robin Blackburn and Laurent Dubois are a continuation of this tradition.
2. Ada Ferrer, and Laurent Dubois. According to Childs, Jean François's name kept popping up long after Jean François's death, the

only explanation being that those who identified with the cause of the revolution claimed his name for themselves.

3. Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York, Norton, 1973), s.v. “Disavowal (*Verleugnung*).” Disavowal is linked to 2 kinds of traumas: the perception of castration (in the case of internal trauma relating to the resolution of the Oedipal complex) and the fear of death (in the case of external trauma, e.g. a war experience, or a terrible accident. In the case of “traumatic neurosis” that can emerge after experiences of shock in war, accidents, etc., too, “disavowal” is linked not to the fear of castration, but of death. As in the first case, it functions as a defense mechanism against a “traumatic perception”, but now of a different nature. It is quite clear that Freud never resolved the tension between his accounts of internal and external trauma (see Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* [Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2000], p. 18-40 for an excellent discussion). In my usage of the term, I rely on the second meaning, admitting the first meaning only at times when the historical evidence suggests that the external trauma may have been fantasized in terms of castration.
4. *Standard Edition*, vol. XXIII, 204.
5. This argument relies on Susan Buck-Morss’ historical work that shows that it is highly unlikely that Hegel did not know about Haiti (“Hegel and Haiti,” *Critical Inquiry* 26 (2000), p. 821-63).
6. For an example concerning the ability to think about slavery through the terms established by enlightenment thinkers, see Cugoano’s writings, published in 1787 and 1791. See Anthony Bogues for an excellent discussion (*Black Heretics, Black Politics: Radical Political Intellectuals.* London, Roytledge, 2003, p. 25-46).
7. Compare the French Constitution of 1793, one of the models for the Haitian Constitution: under the title of “Acte Constitutionnel” it devotes three articles to citizenship issues and contains a long list of criteria that allow someone to claim French citizenship.

8. Again, a comparison with the French Constitution helps to bring out the peculiarities of the Haitian code. In the debates preceding the adoption of the Jacobin Constitution of 1793, Robespierre had proposed the inclusion of four articles with a clear internationalist intention: "Men of all countries are brothers and their different people must assist each other according to their abilities like the citizens of the same State. He who oppresses one nation declares himself the enemy of all. Those who make war against a people in order to stop the progress of liberty and to annihilate the rights of men must be prosecuted by all, not like ordinary enemies, but like assassins and rebellious bandits" (Godechot, *Les Constitutions de la France* 72). Robespierre's proposal was not accepted. The final compromise of 1793 contains a "non-interference" clause, which is nevertheless framed in a very telling way: "Art. 118 – The French people are the natural friends and allies of all free people. Art. 119 – They will not interfere in the government of other nations; they will not tolerate that other nations interfere with theirs. Art. 120 – They will give asylum to foreigners banned from their fatherland for the cause of liberty. They will deny it to tyrants." Read in the context of the political situation of 1793, when the fear of counter-revolutionaries invading Koblenz and elsewhere was the crucial concern of French policy, the clause according to which France will not interfere in other countries' affairs is weakened considerably by the clause that it will not tolerate interference from other nations, as it could be interpreted as possibly justifying a preventive war. Obviously, the Haitians felt that they needed to give stronger assurances.