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The Infamous Rosalie: Infanticide as Female Slave Resistance

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The gendered history of female slave resistance in pre-revolutionary Saint Domingue struggles against the sparsity of primary source material. Contemporary historiography both before and after the Haitian Revolution reveals the dominance of white, colonial narratives that seek either to explain the causes for insurrection, or else, to sensationalize the atrocities committed. Évelyne Trouillot, sister to scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot and niece of leading Haitian historians Hénock and Ernst Trouillot, seeks to remedy this problem of Haitian source material by expanding into the realm of factual historical fiction. In *The Infamous Rosalie* ("Rosalie l'Infame"), Trouillot chronicles a slice of life from female slaves prior to the revolution, and in doing so, prioritizes their voices over dominant colonial narratives to engage with an underrepresented part of history. Dealing with slavery, oppression, sexuality, death, liberation, and perhaps most notably, infanticide, Trouillot's *The Infamous Rosalie* enters "the *chambres interdites* of Haiti's past— places that have remained closed, hidden, or merely overlooked" and offers fresh perspective into the plight of gendered slave resistance.[1] In doing so, Trouillot allows the historian to empathize more fully with the infamous acts of slave resistance so often condemned by colonists who could not understand their suffering.

Infanticide — often seen as a moral affront, economic injustice for plantation owners, and a most notorious crime against

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[1] Jason Herbeck, "History, Humanity, and the Literary Construction of Haiti in Évelyne Trouillot's Works," *Palimpsest*, vol. 8:1 (2019). p. 7.

humanity— is portrayed throughout *The Infamous Rosalie* as a means for furthering the collective spirit of resistance and liberation within the female slave populace. Trouillot does not question the ethicality of infanticide— the predominant form of female slave resistance throughout the text— but instead, raises questions that relate simply to the human condition, the cost of liberation, and the indomitable resilience of humanity. Not only does Trouillot offer a solution to the problem of Haitian historiography, inasmuch as that semi fictional literature can fill the void of lost experiences, but also, Trouillot's work reveals that the memory of freedom and trauma often provided an impetus for slave resistance that is largely disregarded by dominant colonial narratives.

If the dominant narratives from pre-revolutionary Saint Domingue fail to illuminate the plight of female slaves, and the many acts of resistance they engaged with, Trouillot's novel serves to shed light on such lost experiences and the emotionality that accompanied them. According to the author herself, *The Infamous Rosalie* is a "direct, fact-inspired narrative," that seeks only to "acknowledge [the] characters' humanity," rather than strictly conforming to the genre of historical fiction.[2] Building upon the work of her family, Trouillot attempts to "reverse [2] the archival silences" identified by her brother Michel-Rolph Trouillot in his *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995), as well as the work of her aunt and uncle published in *Revue de la Société Haïtienne et de Géographie*.[3] scholars have tried to circumvent the [3] issue of colonial-dominated source material through an intense examination of white sources, ascertaining bias and hyperbole (Popkin 2003); while others expound upon the "unthinkability" of the Haitian Revolution as the reason for such

[2] Évelyne Trouillot, *The Infamous Rosalie*. trans., M. A. Salvodon (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), viii, 132.
[3] Alyssa G. Sepinwall, "If This Is A Woman: Evelyne Trouillot's The Infamous Rosalie and the Lost Stories of New-World Slavery," *Fiction and Film for French Historians*, vol. 1.8 (2015).

imbalanced source material and slight coverage on slave resistance being relatively impossible for the whites to conceive amidst scientific racism and selfish colonial interests (Michel-Rolph Trouillot 1995).

As a semi-fictional memoir, sometimes termed a "neoslave narrative,"[4] or else, a "captivity narrative,"[5] Trouillot's novel seeks to avoid dependence on white colonial voices and their interpretations of female slave resistance, while still maintaining authenticity through authoritative sources. . Most are aware that Saint Domingue was home to the "first black republic in the Western Hemisphere," and yet, as Trouillot is at literary pains to emphasize, "few people know what it meant for these eventual victors, or their parents and grandparents, to have survived the specific route of the Middle Passage," nor what daily life was like for female slaves, the acts of resistance they often employed, and the emotional cost of such continual suffering.[6] Though *The Infamous Rosalie* is [6] hardly an authentic primary source such as the *La Révolution aux Caraïbes*, from which the story pulls its most prominent source material, nonetheless, Trouillot's work fills the archival silences identified by Michel-Rolph and other historians, through her amplification of semi-fictional female slave voices.

Trouillot's *The Infamous Rosalie* discusses female slave resistance, especially in the form of infanticide, but begins prior to the revolution in 1750, following the life of Lisette, a young Creole slave woman, who recovers her strength as well as her cultural identity through the many stories shared by her relatives— most notably, through the story of her great-aunt Brigitte's infamous infanticidal resistance. Lisette knows little about her ancestry, and views herself as little more than:

[4] Sepinwall, "If This Is A Woman."
[5] Jeremy D. Popkin, "Facing Racial Revolution: Captivity Narratives and Identity in the Saint-Domingue Insurrection," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 36:4, (2003): 511.
[6] Trouillot. *The Infamous Rosalie*, vii.

> Mademoiselle Sarah's Negress, always ensconced in the masters' room, with my mistress's perfume on my skin, traces of her powder on my fingers, and the imprint of her hand on my cheek. I carry the weight of her son's hands in my sex and the brunt of the whip on my back and thighs.[7]

Through the story-telling of relatives around her, Lisette learns that she is an "Arada woman," who, allegedly, "belong[s] to no one," and even "have the power to foresee misfortune."[8] Her father was a "Nago man" killed with other maroons, and her great-aunt Brigitte, tried for infanticide.[9] Her longing for freedom, her inability to cope with the confines of slavery, and her resilient rebellious streak, then, seem to run in Lisette's family— a family she never knew, but must recollect the fragments thereof through tales shared. Lissette learns about her traumatic family history through the stories of Grandmother Charlotte and Ma Augustine, who tell of the terrible Middle Passage and the Barracoons, preparing Lisette for the "day when you'll need wings to carry yourself beyond the present moment."[10] Alyssa G. Sepinwall notes that "the word *barracon* has disappeared from French dictionaries," which Trouillot reclaims in her work, "thus restoring the side of the slave experience to our consciousness" with their very rheotoric.[11] For Lisette, as well as many other slaves, Saint-Domingue was a "land that seem[ed] to bear the mark of our pain— Creoles, Aradas, Congos, Nagos, Ibos, newly arrived Negroes, forever *bossales*, confronting our chains."[12] But the pain is seen not only in the land, but in their very persons, as "each of these nations carries its scars not only on their bodies and faces but

7 Trouillot, *The Infamous Rosalie*, 51.
8 ibid, 4, 39-40.
9 ibid, 31.
10 Ibid, 25.
11 Alyssa G. Sepinwall. "If This Is A Woman."
12 Trouillot, *The Infamous Rosalie*, 12.

in people's gait, in the cadence of their words, in their ways of resisting slavery."[13] Much of *The Infamous Rosalie* is spent emphasizing the nature of trauma, embedded in the very bodies of these slaves, from scars to pregnancies, and the way in which trauma persists so as to afford resilience, and to provide reasons for resistance in itself. Through the painful stories shared, Lissette recovers not only her cultural and ancestral identity, but also, regains the strength needed for resistance and eventual rebellion.

For the record of mass infanticide, Trouillot found her primary source material in Descourtilz's *La Révolution aux Caraïbes,* citing an Arada midwife who claimed to have killed seventy children.[14] However, Popkin writes that M. E. Descourtilz's work is "the most extensive captivity narrative other than Gros's *Historick Recital*," but reflects only a one-sided perspective of Saint-Domingue's chaotic climate between 1799 to 1803, where "Descourtilz could give free reign to the bitterness engendered by this overturning of the racial hierarchy."[15] Decourtilz's voice, then, should not be prioritized as accurate nor authentic, since not only was he not a slave, nor a black woman, and evidently bitter.

Slavery offers, perhaps, the most extreme example of archival silences, since, in the case of the Haitian Revolution, "virtually all former slaves in Saint-Domingue were illiterate," leaving the victors unable to memorialize their triumphs in written form.[16] While the "whites comprised fewer than 10 percent of the colony's population— 40,000 [whites] versus approximately 500,000 slaves and 30,000 free people of color," their views predominate in colonial source material, ultimately silencing the voices of slave women who, most certainly, had much to say

13 ibid, 15.
14 M. E. Descourtilz, *La Révolution aux Caraïbes*.
15 Popkin, "Facing Racial Revolution: Captivity Narratives and Identity in the Saint-Domingue Insurrection," 524.
16 Philippe Girard, "Rebelles With A Cause: Women in the Haitian War of Independence, 1802-04," *Gender & History*, vol. 21:1 (2009): 63.

during this time of such suffering and oppression.[17] Lamenting this historiographic imbalance, Trouillot notes that "the emphasis was always put on the great figures, the heroes, and not the mass of enslaved and of newly freed slaves," and continues to make her remarkable claim that "if the slaves had not fought for their dignity, if they had not managed to maintain some dignity amid the most inhuman system, the Haitian Revolution would not have been possible."[18] With the novels' emphasis on oral storytelling, Trouillot offers another explanation for slave women's silence on the subject, as Grandma Charlotte says that "the alphabet will always embody the character of hell," forever stamped, burned and branded onto the skins of so many slaves.[19] *The Infamous Rosalie*, then, portrays story-telling as slave resistance— and one which rebels against the dominant form for communication (i.e.: the written word)— without which, the impetus for resistance would perhaps have remained dormant, and even the notion of infanticide would, most likely, have been inconceivable for young Lisette.

Female slave resistance took shape in a variety of forms, both throughout the Haitian Revolution and within *The Infamous Rosalie,* but the most powerful and provocative acts occur through infanticide. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot notes, "resistance did not exist as a global phenomenon," but instead, was formulated according to each individual slave's cultural background, hierarchical rank, and ultimately, their capacity for resistance and resilience.[20] Not every slave, though suffering greatly, was prepared to sacrifice a child for the revolutionary cause, let alone for sheer resistance. The culmination of *The Infamous Rosalie* is when Lisette, having heard the horrible tales of the Middle Passage

17 Sepinwall, "From Saint-Domingue To Haiti," *Haitian History: New Perspectives* (Routledge:Taylor & Francis 2013): 14.
18 Trouillot, *The Infamous Rosalie*, viii.
19 ibid, 80.
20 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "An Unthinkable History," *Haitian History: New Perspectives*. Ed. Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, (New York: Routledge, 2013). p. 39.

and the Barracoons, learns of her great aunt Brigette's talisman, which Lisette has kept daily wrapped around her waist. In Descourtilz's primary account and Fick's analysis, "one slave woman from the Rossignol-Desdunes plantation"[21] is quoted as saying that "to remove these young creatures from the shameful institution of slavery, I inserted a needle in their brain through the fontanel at the moment of their birth, [and] the result was trismus, so deadly on the island, and whose cause you now know."[22] Like Descourtilz account, Lisette learns that her great-aunt committed seventy acts of infanticide, and left behind a cord with "seventy knots, one for each baby that [she] saved from slavery," and which Lisette has worn around her waist without knowing the history that quite literally entwines the talisman.[23] But Brigitte never regretted the measures she had to take to ensure children would never be born into such a brute system of slavery: "'Better dead than slaves,' she would often say. And her voice, so proud, gave us back our strength and dignity."[24] Through the revelation of Brigitte's story, Lisette is given the strength and spirit for slave resistance, and so she escapes to the hills, ready to join the maroons, and prepares to give birth to a daughter:

> Aunt Brigitte's cord reminds me of the promise of love and dignity I made in her honor as well. I must wrap myself in passion and light so I don't fear the emptiness and so I can teach my daughter to confront the barracoons and soar to the stars. […] May I find the courage to honor my promise: Creole child who still lives in me, you will be born free and rebellious, or *you will not be born at all*.[25]

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[21] Carolyn E. Fick, "Slave Resistance," *Haitian History: New Perspectives*. Ed. Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, (New York: Routledge, 2013). 56.
[22] M. E. Descourtilz, *La Révolution aux Caraïbes*.
[23] Trouillot, *The Infamous Rosalie*, 120.
[24] Ibid, 10.
[25] Trouillot, *The Infamous Rosalie*, 129.

Without the stories of Ma Augustine and Grandma Charlotte, Lisette would not have had the 'courage to honor' the 'promise' she makes, nor would she have known the spirit of resistance that, quite literally, runs throughout her family.

Though her final statement is somewhat sinister inasmuch as her child will be born free, or not at all, Lisette resembles many slave women who suffered through similar experiences in longing for liberty and, weary with shame, resorted to infanticide rather than to see their children share in such an awful existence. Trouillot's emphasis on infanticide as female slave resistance is not necessarily unique, but her treatment of infanticide as external to the plane of morality most certainly is. Haitian historiography abounds with atrocities, from slave resistance to full-fledged revolution, but the act of infanticide is often seen as "gynecological resistance," rather than outright murder or moral deviancy.[26] Historically, slave midwives were knowledgeable about plants, "such as the leaves of the avocado tree [which] could bring on an abortion," leading Demer to claim that "the abortive powers of enslaved women formed the liberating potential that was further realized through their infanticidal might."[27] Trouillot's *The Infamous Rosalie* embodies Demer's claim, inasmuch as that the story of Brigette inspires Lisette not only to escape towards freedom, but to promise her child either liberty or death— much like the contemporary motto of slaves in Saint Domingue, crying "*la liberté ou la mort*," freedom or death.[28] Throughout *The Infamous Rosalie*, Trouillot does not question the ethicality of infanticide any more than raising universal questions such as: "do we have the right to sacrifice our companions in misery in order to

[26] Anonymous, "Infanticide as Slave Resistance: Evidence from Barbados, Jamaica, and Saint-Domingue," I*nquiries Journal*, vol. 6:4 (2014).
[27] Stephane M. Demers, "Contemplating The Afterlife of Slavery: Gynecological Resistance, Marronage, and Revolution in Late Eighteenth-Century Saint-Domingue," *Caribbean Quilt*, vol. 6:2 (2021): 34.
[28] Jayne Boisvert, "Colonial Hell and Female Slave Resistance in Saint-Domingue." *Journal of Haitian Studies*, vol. 7:1 (2001).

be free?"[29] and "is it preferable to die at ten years old than at birth? will I be so reckless as to judge slaves who have claimed the right to look at themselves in the river's water without stumbling in shame?"[30] The latter question is particularly relevant, since Trouillot seems to be saying, through the literary vessel of *The Infamous Rosalie*, that modern society is in no more of a position to judge these women than the white colonial sources, like Gros and Descourtilz, that Trouillot sought to avoid. Female slave resistance, like the act of infanticide, varied widely, and often depended on the individual slave herself, whose emotionality is intricately connected to the experience so as to make it a personal, contextual decision that historiography cannot divine.

[29] Trouillot, *The Infamous Rosalie*, 126.
[30] Ibid, 122.