Mobilisations of African and Afro-descendant Women in the Insurrections of Saint-Domingue and Cuba.

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The revolution of Saint-Domingue (1791-1804) and Cuba's First War of Independence (1868-1878) established an inseparable bond between "the destiny of the nation and the destiny of the slaves"[1]. Gradually, the participation of Africans and their descendants played an increasing role in the abolitionist character of these conflicts[2]. In recent decades, historiography has placed the resistance of individuals and enslaved populations at the heart of historical interpretations that explain the Atlantic revolutions of the nineteenth century[3]. However, there is still a need for more in-depth feminist approaches to the history of insurrections in the context of nineteenth-century Atlantic revolutions.

The most consequential slave revolution in the Atlantic world took place in Saint-Domingue. Some works regarding different periods of the revolution show how enslaved women fought alongside men in the armed revolts and how they were involved in various forms of resistance[4]. Historians agree that what could frequently appear as manifestations of a "docile" femininity might actually have been subtle forms of conscious and rational protest. For instance, women could refuse to cooperate with the authorities in this way, or manipulate stereotypical gender notions to "hide" resistance activities. Scholars suggest that women of African origin or descent articulated multiple forms of resistance between 1791 and 1804, although closer examination of such resistance practices is needed.

In the case of Cuba, researchers have focused on slave resistances during the first half of the nineteenth century, generally until what is known as the conspiracy of *La Escalera* (1844). In the past decades, scholars of social and gender history have focused on the period between 1860 and 1880, revealing how enslaved women used notions of law and gender to seek freedom for themselves and their families, contributing to the gradual abolition of slavery[5]. During Cuba's First Wat of Independence (1868-1878), enslaved and free women of colour resisted their enslavement and colonial rule in different ways, through knowledge they had acquired for generations. They sometimes managed to improve their living

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[1] Robin Blackburn, *The American Crucible: Slavery. Emancipation and Human Rights*, London, Verso, 2011, p. 470.
[2] Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba. Race, Nation and Revolution, 1868-1878*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1999.
[3] See for example, Aline Helg, *Plus jamais esclaves ! De l'insoumission à la révolte, le grand récit d'une émancipation (1492-1838)*, Paris, La Découverte, 2016.
[4] Jayne Boisvert, "Colonial Hell and Female Slave Resistance in Saint-Domingue", *Journal of Haitian Studies* 7, 2001, p. 61-76; Bernard Moitt, "Slave Women and Resistance in the French Caribbean", in David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (eds.), *More than Chattel. Black Women and Slavery in the Americas,* Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 239-258; Philippe Girard, "Rebelles with a Cause: Women in the Haitian War of Independence, 1802–04", *Gender & History* 21, 2009, p. 60-85; Judith Kafka, "Action, Reaction and Interaction: Slave Women in Resistance in the South of Saint Domingue, 1793-94", *Slavery & Abolition* 18, nº2, 1997, p. 48-72.
[5] Digna Castañeda Fuertes, "Demandas judiciales de las esclavas en el siglo XIX Cubano", *Temas* 5, January-March 1996, p. 1-5; Camilla Cowling, *Conceiving Freedom: Women of Color, Gender, and the Abolition of Slavery in Havana and Rio de Janeiro*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2013; Adriana Chira, "Affective Debts: Manumission by Grace and the Making of Gradual Emancipation Laws in Cuba, 1817-68", *Law and History Review* 36, February 2018, p. 1-33.

conditions, even though, eventually, women had to face harsh conditions of labour and survival both in the colonial and insurgent territories[6].

There are sources regarding particular cases, such as Paula Agüero's escape from her master when the revolution started[7], or the case of Guillermina Portuondo, who was incarcerated for *infidencia* (the crime of rebellion), and used legal resources to request a reprieve (in 1873 and 1877)[8]. Then there is the case of Maria Barrueta's large family, who refused to report their relatives fighting in the insurgent army – and who were thus deported from Cienfuegos (in Central Cuba) to the *Casa de Recogidas* (a female prison in Havana) in 1870[9]. The declaration of the abolition of slavery made by the rebel government in 1869 encouraged Angelina Sánchez – holding her daughter in her arms – to run away from her owners[10]. The beginning of the revolution also raised hopes for freedom: this is what happened to a woman named Merced, who faced a court-martial for "trying to rebel" after telling her enslaved neighbours that the insurrection would "finally" put an end to slavery[11].

Analyses of women's resistance practices allow us to reconceptualise how scholars research processes of resistance to enslavement[12]. The historical interpretation of Black women's agency in the context of nineteenth-century Atlantic revolutions dilutes the border between active and passive resistance. It also contributes to a rethinking of the behaviours of enslaved women, which have often been interpreted as passive or secondary to main historical events. By linking slave resistance and warfare, moreover, the ideas of race and gender become more clearly entangled – not only at a discursive level but also in terms of the repression and tensions that operate within social systems.

To better understand the insurrections of societies structured by slavery from a feminist perspective, it is necessary to research Afro-female participation in the independence processes and the abolition of slavery in different contexts throughout the Atlantic. Currently, Afro-feminist activism in Cuba is advocating for the remembrance of African and Afro-descendant women's resistances. Since the publication of the biography of Reyita Casillo Bueno in 1997, there has been rising interest in Black women's history in Cuba. Collective volumes such as *Afrocubanas* (2011) and *Emergiendo del Silencio* (2016), along with the journal *Afrocubanas* founded in 2020, represent a crucial contribution to Afro-Cuban and feminist collective memory on the island[13]. Further research is needed to promote historiographical debates on the gendered social meanings of Afro-female mobilisations and the conditions that made them possible.

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[6] Rebecca J. Scott, *La Emancipación de los esclavos en Cuba: la transición al trabajo libre, 1860-1899,* México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999; Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba*, *op. cit.*

[7] Archivo Histórico Nacional, Ultramar, f. 4417, doc. 28. The dates of the document are 1870 and 1871.

[8] As far as we know, she did this on two occasions, in 1873 and 1877. Archivo Nacional de la República de Cuba, Asuntos Políticos, f. 68, doc. 41 and AHN, Ultramar, f. 4767, doc. 46 (respectively).

[9] AHN, Ultramar, f. 4353, doc. 47.

[10] Real Academia de la Historia, collection Fernández Duro, f. 3, doc. 9/7911.

[11] ARNAC, Military Commission, file 126, doc. 14.

[12] Aicha K. Finch, "'What looks like a Revolution': Enslaved Women and the Gendered Terrain of Slave Insurgencies in Cuba, 1843-1844", *Journal of Women's History,* Spring 2014, p. 112-134.

[13] Daisy Rubiera Castillo, *Reyita, sencillamente*…, Havana, Pro Libros, 1997; Daisy Rubiera and Inés María Martiatu (eds.), *Afrocubanas: historia, pensamiento y prácticas culturales,* Havana, Ciencias Sociales, 2011*;* Oilda Hevia Lanier and Daisy Rubiera Castillo (eds.) *Emergiendo del silencio. Mujeres negras en la historia de Cuba*, Havana, Ciencias Sociales, 2016; *Afrocubanas. La Revista.* Available at: https://afrocubanas.com/

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