

The Mask

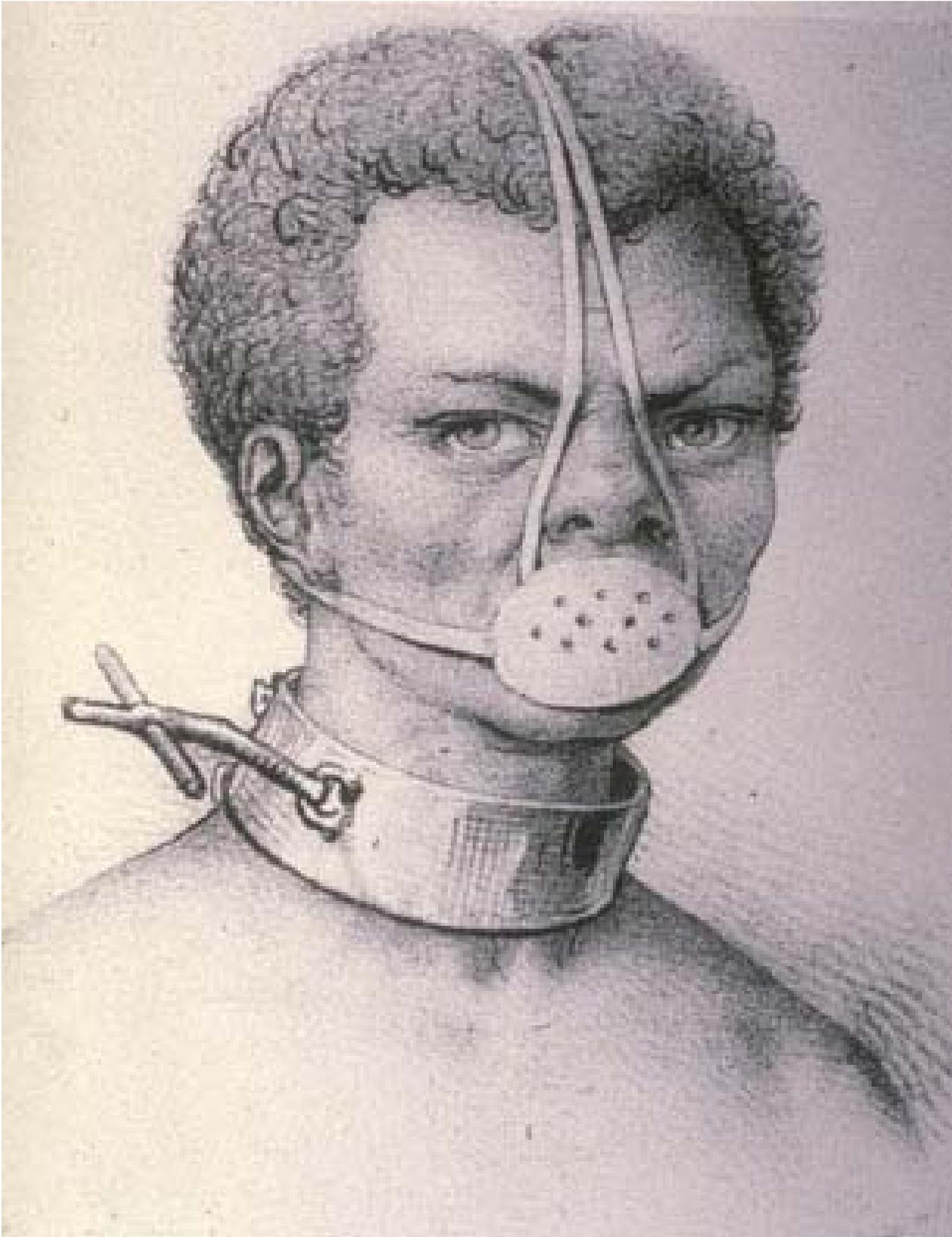
Remembering Slavery, Understanding Trauma

Grada Kilomba

There is a mask, from which I heard many times during my childhood. The many recountings and the detailed descriptions seemed to warn me that those were not simple facts of the past, but living memories buried in our psyche, ready to be told. Today, I want to re-tell them. I want to speak about that brutal *mask of speechlessness*.

This mask was a very concrete piece, a real instrument, which became a part of the European colonial project for more than three hundred years. It was composed of a bit, placed inside the mouth of the Black subject, clamped between the tongue and the jaw, and fixed behind the head with two strings: one surrounding the chin and the second surrounding the nose and the forehead. Formally, the mask was used by *white* masters to prevent enslaved Africans from eating sugar cane or cocoa beans, while working on the plantations, but its primary function was to implement a sense of speechlessness and fear, inasmuch as the mouth was at the same time a place of muteness and a place of torture.

The mask represents, in this sense, colonialism as a whole. It symbolizes the *white* sadistic politics of conquest and domination, and its brutal regimes of silencing the so called 'Other.' I intend to remember this mask as a symbol of speechlessness and violence, and how these - speechlessness and violence - are restaged in everyday life. In other words, I am concerned with two main questions: Who can indeed speak? And what happens when we speak?



The Mouth

The mouth is a very special organ, it symbolizes speech and enunciation. Within racism it becomes the organ of oppression par excellence, it represents the organ *whites* want - and need - to control, and therefore, the organ which historically has been severely confined.

In this particular scenario, the mouth is also a metaphor to possession. It is fantasized that the Black subject wants to possess something which belongs to the *white* master, the fruits. She or he wants to *eat* them, to devour them, dispossessing the master from its goods. Although the plantation, and its fruits, do 'morally' belong to the colonized, the colonizer interprets it perversely, reading it as a sign of robbery. "We are taking what is *Theirs*" becomes "They are taking what is *Ours*." We are dealing here with a process of denial, for the master denies its project of colonization and asserts it onto the colonized. It is this moment of asserting onto the other, what the subject refuses to recognize in her-himself, which characterizes this ego defence mechanism.¹ In racism denial is used to maintain and to legitimate violent structures of racial exclusion: "They want

¹ Denial is often confused with Negation. They are, however, two different ego defense mechanisms, in the first the subject denies that she/he has such and such feelings/ thoughts/ experiences but goes on to assert that someone else does; the second, negation, is the process in which a perception or thought is admitted to conscious in its negative form. For instance: "We are not taking what is *Theirs*," "We had no colonies" or as a Black person could argue "I never experienced racism." The point here is that none the less the idea that "We are taking what is *Theirs*," "We had colonies" and "I do experience racism" must have occurred, before its negation. But the information they contain cause so much anxiety, that they are formulated in their negative form. Negation protects, therefore, the subject from the anxiety certain informations cause once they are admitted to conscious.

to take what is Ours, therefore, They have to be excluded." The first and original information ("We are taking what is Theirs") is denied and projected onto the 'Other' ("They are taking what is Ours"), the Black subject becomes then what the *white* subject does not want to be acquainted with. This is based upon processes in which split off parts of the psyche are projected outside, creating the so called 'Other' always as an antagonism of the 'self.' Film is the perfect playground for this process, while the Black subject turns into the intrusive enemy, the *white* subject becomes the sympathetic hero, that is, the oppressor becomes the oppressed and the oppressed the tyrant.

This splitting evokes the fact that the *white* subject is somehow divided within her-himself, for she/he develops two attitudes towards external reality: only one part of the ego - the 'good,' accepting and benevolent - is experienced as 'self,' the rest - the 'bad,' rejecting and malevolent - is projected onto the 'Other' and experienced as external. The 'Other' becomes then the mental representation of what the *white* master fears to know about her-himself, in this case: the violent thief, the indolent and malicious robber. Such dishonorable aspects whose intensity makes them too unpleasurable and shameful are projected outside onto the 'Other,' so as to escape from them. In psychoanalytical terms, this allows positive feelings towards oneself to remain intact (the 'good' self), while the manifestations of the 'bad' self are projected onto the outside and seen as external 'bad' objects.

In the *white* conceptual world, the Black subject is identified as that 'bad' object, embodying the aspects the *white* society has repressed and made taboo. We are, in this sense, used as a screen of projection for what the *white* subject fears to

knowledge in itself: aggression and sexuality. We come to coincide with the threatening, the dangerous, the violent, the thrilling, the exciting and also the dirty, but desirable - allowing whiteness to look at itself as morally ideal, decent, civilized and majestically generous, in complete control and free of the anxiety its history causes.

The Wound²

Within this unfortunate psycho-dynamic the Black subject becomes not only the 'Other' - the difference against which the *white* 'self' is measured - but also Otherness - the personification of the repressed aspects of the *white* 'self.' We become what the *white* subject does not want to be like. Toni Morrison (1992) uses this expression of 'unlikeness,' to describe whiteness as a dependent identity which exists through the exploitation of the 'Other,' a relational identity, constructed by *whites* defining themselves as unlike racial 'Others.' That is, Blackness serves as the primary form of Otherness by which whiteness is constructed. So, the 'Other' is not other *per se*, it becomes one through a process of absolute denial. And in this sense, Frantz Fanon writes,

What is often called the Black soul is a white man's artifact.
(1968: 110)

Reminding us that it is not the Black subject we are dealing with, but with *white* fantasies of what Blackness should be like. Or better, with dominant images and narratives which are re-projected onto the Black subject as authoritative and objective pictures of ourselves. 'I cannot go to a film. I

² The term trauma derives from the Greek word wound and it is in this sense that I use it here, wound as trauma.

wait for me' (1968: 140), writes Fanon³. He waits for the Black savages, the Black barbarians, the Black servants, the Black prostitutes, whores and courtesans, the Black criminals, murders and drug dealers. He waits for what he is not.

We could actually say that in film/in the *white* conceptual world, the collective unconscious of Black people is like pre-programmed for alienation, disappointment and psychic trauma, since the images of Blackness, we are confronted with, are neither real nor positive. What an alienation! To be forced to identify with the heroes, who are *white*, and to reject the enemies, who are Black. What a disappointment! To be forced to look at ourselves *as if we were in their place*. And what a pain! To be trapped in this colonial order.

This should be our preoccupation, we should not worry about the *white* subject in colonialism, but rather about the fact that the Black subject is forced to develop a relationship to her-himself always through the alienating presence of the *white* other. Always placed as the 'Other,' never as self. 'What else could it be for me,' asks Fanon, 'but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood?' (1968: 112). He uses the language of trauma, like most of Black people when speaking of their everyday racism experiences, indicating the painful bodily impact and loss characteristic of a traumatic collapse, for within racism one is surgically removed, violently separated of whatever identity one might really have. Such separation is defined as classic trauma, since it deprives one's own link with the society, unconsciously thought of as *white*.

³ In film these colonial fantasies are restaged and celebrated scene after scene: there, we have been primitivized, infantilized, decivilized, sexualized, dehumanized, brutalized and killed - shamefully, we rarely manage to survive the first 10 minutes of a film.

'I felt knife blades open within me,' 'I could no longer laugh' (1968:112) he remarks. There is indeed nothing to laugh about, as one is being overdetermined from the outside by violent fantasies one sees, but one does not recognize as being oneself.

This is the trauma of the Black subject, it lies, exactly, in this state of absolute Otherness in relation to the *white* subject. This infernal circle, as Fanon writes, '(w)hen people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my color. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of my color. Either way, I am locked' (1968: 116). Locked within unreason. Fanon believes, therefore, that Black people's trauma stem not only from the family-based events, as classical psychoanalysis argues, but rather from the traumatizing contact with the violent unreason of the *white* world, that is, with the unreason of racism which places us always as 'Other.' The 'Other' of the *white* subject.

Speaking the Silence

The mask raises many questions: why must the mouth of the Black subject be fastened? Why must she or he become silent? What could the Black subject say, if her or his mouth were not sealed? And what would the *white* subject have to listen to? There is an apprehensive fear that if the colonial subject speaks, the colonizer will have to listen. It would be forced into an uncomfortable confrontation with 'Other' truths. Truths, which have been denied, repressed and kept quiet, as secrets. This phrase "quiet as it's kept" is an expression of the African diasporic people, which announces how someone is about to reveal what is presumed to be a secret - something which we all know, but which was kept quiet by force - like

the dirty business of racism and its deep wounds.⁴

The *white* fear of listening to what could possibly be revealed by the Black subject can be articulated with Sigmund Freud's notion of *repression*, since the 'essence of *repression*', he writes 'lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at distance, from the conscious' (1923: 17). It is that process by which unacceptable ideas - and unacceptable truths - are rendered unconscious, out of awareness due to the extreme anxiety, guilt or shame they cause. While buried in the unconscious, however, as secrets, they remain latent and capable of being revealed at any moment. Repression is, in this sense, the defence by which the ego controls and exercises censorship towards what is instigated as an 'unacceptatble' truth.

In a similar way, the mask sealing the mouth of the Black subject, prevents her/him from revealing those truths, which the *white* master wants 'to turn away,' 'keep at distance' at the margins, invisible and 'quiet.' Once confronted with those uncomfortable truths, such as the brutality of racism, the *white* subject commonly argues: 'not to know...', 'not to understand...', 'not to remember...' or 'not to believe...'. These are expressions of this process of repression, in which the subject resists making the unconscious information, conscious. That is, one wants to make the known, unknown. Otherwise, collective secrets of racist oppression and denied aspects of a 'dirty' history would be revealed.

In order to deny knowledge of itself as responsible, the colonizer silences the colonized maintaining the fantasy that

⁴ A sentence commonly used by Toni Morrison to describe her artistic work, as she argues, her writings bring into light the so called 'dirty business of racism' (1992).

only its own discourse reveal the authentic and universal truth, while the speech of the colonized is a dubious subjective interpretation of the reality, not imperative enough neither to be spoken out, nor to be listened to. So to say, the mask protects the *white* subject from listening to 'Other' truths and from acknowledging 'Other' knowledges.

The mouth, however, symbolizes not only speech and enunciation, but also possibility - the possibility of saying 'yes' or 'no.' An open mouth can say one or the other, it can verbalize. Yet, the mask controls this possibility. Here, the Black subject can neither say 'yes' nor 'no,' it becomes impossible. This impossibility illustrates how speaking and silencing emerge as an analogous project. The act of speaking is like a negotiation between those who speak and those who listen, that is, between the speaking subjects and their listeners (Castro Varela & Dhawan 2003). Listening is, in this sense, the act of authorization towards the speaker. One can (only) speak, when one's voice is listened. Within this dialect, those who are listened, are also those who 'belong.' And those who are *not* listened, become those who 'do *not* belong.' The mask re-creates this project of silencing, it controls the possibility that the *colonized* might one day be listened and consequently might belong to the center.

This is in Remembrance of Our Ancestors)

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