

The uses of silence

Researching sexual harassment against female domestic workers in Brazil

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ABSTRACT: In this paper I discuss the experiences of silence related to two fieldworks in Brazil, during which I was investigating the topic of sexual harassment against female domestic workers by male employers. In the first fieldwork I interviewed a group of upper-middle class men self-identifying themselves as white. With the aim of investigating their apprenticeship of whiteness and masculinity, I asked them to talk about their first sexual experiences; some of them talked with ease about their «sexual initiation» with female domestic workers. Men presented these «sexual initiations» as a form of «normal» violence, well known in Brazilian society. Even if for those men it was easy to name these harassments, I had to face the way they silenced the multiple forms of domination included in them (sexual, racial and class). In the second fieldwork, I interviewed female domestic workers and union organizer (most of them black) asking them to talk about the problem of sexual harassments by male employers. Contrary to the men who had practiced this violence, for female domestic workers it was much harder to talk about it: silence was the main code to relate to this experience, and I had to find out the right words to approach the question. Comparing these two fieldwork experiences I will consider how silence can be at the same time a way to legitimate power relations and to contrast them. I will also reflect on silence's role in the ethnographic relations.

KEYWORDS: SEXUAL HARASSMENT, SILENCE, RACE, CLASS, BRAZIL.

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Introduction

In this paper I discuss my encounters with silence in two fieldwork-based research projects I conducted in Brazil, investigating the sexual harassment of female domestic workers by their male employers¹. In 2009-2012 I interviewed a group of upper-middle class men living in Rio de Janeiro and self-identifying as white (Ribeiro Corossacz 2018). With the aim of investigating their apprenticeship in whiteness and masculinity, I asked them to talk about their first sexual experiences: some of them talked with ease about their *iniciação sexual* («sexual initiation», losing their virginity) with female domestic workers and prostitutes. This topic proved to be key, not only for investigating certain characteristics of the trajectories of whiteness and masculinity sketched by interviewees, but also for understanding how racism, sexism and class inequalities intersect in producing the two social groups involved: white middle-class men and poor women, mainly black or non-white². I therefore decided to delve deeper into this phenomenon by listening to female domestic workers' and union organizers' accounts of their experiences. In subsequent the second fieldwork (2013-15 and 2017), I interviewed female domestic workers and union organizers (most of them black) in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Campinas, Nova Iguaçu and Natal, asking them to talk about the problem of sexual assault and harassment committed by employers (Ribeiro Corossacz 2016, 2017).

In the first research, men presented these «sexual initiations» as an example of «normal» relationships of power, relationships they could talk to me about without particular forms of censorship or embarrassment. As I will discuss, although it was easy for the men to name these instances of harassment, I had to address the fact that they simultaneously silenced the multiple forms of domination involved: sexual, racial and class domination and their imbrication. In particular, the men did not consider their whiteness to contribute significantly to these instances of harassment, nor did they consider it a relevant factor in their social relationships more generally. In contrast to the men who had enacted this violence, for female domestic workers it was much harder to talk about this phenomenon: silence was their main code for relating to these experiences, and I was faced with the emotional

1. I wish to thank *Anuac* anonymous referees for their useful and stimulating comments, which helped me to improve the paper and further develop my research.

2. In Brazil there are 7.2 million domestic workers, of whom 93% are women, and 62% of those women are black (Ipea 2011). In 2016, Brazil's population was 205 million, of whom 46,7% are *pardos* (dark skin people), 44,2% are white, 8,2% black (PNAD 2016, IBGE).

burden of asking the women to talk about moments of suffering and humiliation. I thus focus on these two experiences with the aim of understanding different uses of silence in researching the same social phenomenon.

In this article I compare two ethnographic studies involving two hierarchically opposed social groups: white middle-class men and poor, mainly black women engaged in one of the least valued jobs in Brazilian society. My analysis thus focuses on the silence produced by individuals belonging to dominant groups and that enacted by members of the dominated group. Although they occupy hierarchically opposite positions, these two groups maintain a relationship of proximity historically marked by slavery, a relationship that takes shape within domestic space, namely the home, perceived as a site of affection and intimacy. At the same time, in analyzing the type of silence found in each experience I also examine my own ethnographic position in relation to these groups, a position that takes different shapes within the intersection of class, color and gender.

In this paper I address silence understood both as «the absence of sound» in the interview process and as a lack of words to define and talk about specific aspects of Brazilian social life and individual social lives: whiteness, and the sexual harassment and assault of domestic workers. I thus use the term silence to refer to micro-units, such as pauses, as well as macro-units (Seljamaa, Siim 2016: 7), silence in interactions and silence in collective discourse. In the latter case I examine the silence that negates the sexual harassment and assault of domestic workers as sexist *and* racist violence, as well as the silence that surrounds this problem, manifesting as a scarcity of comprehensive information about its scope (DeSouza, Cerqueira 2009; Mori *et al.* 2011; Ribeiro Corossacz 2016).

Class and race are deeply interlocked in Brazil (Guimarães 2002), and studies demonstrate that domestic work is associate with blackness and, therefore, with low status; employing domestic workers is instead associated with superior social status and whiteness (Santos-Stubbe 1998; Goldstein 2003; Silva 2010). This state of affairs also stems from the historic formation of Brazilian society, in which domestic and plantation slavery played a central role in defining the social hierarchy with African slaves, Indigenous people and both their descendants at the bottom and European slave owners and their descendants at the top. As noted by Goldstein “the site of employer and domestic worker relations is really a site of class formation and differentiation” (2003, 67) in which class always has color connotations. For this reason, analyzing the way different actors consider and define the sexual harassment of female domestic workers by male employers also contributes to a broader comprehension of Brazilian society as a whole.

Facing silence in the field

I encountered various kinds of silence during the interviews. The first was the silence between my interlocutors and myself as an anthropologist: fundamentally, this was a silence that occurred during the interviews when the participants did not have answers to my questions or when they paused, began sentences without completing them, or made non-verbal sounds. This silence was generated by my questions, and in many cases it was enhanced by my own silence while waiting for an answer; in other words, this silence was amplified by my choice to wait for my interlocutors to speak. The second kind of silence is the one surrounding certain aspects of the lives of the people I met, a silence that took shape when I posed questions about those particular aspects. In this case, for example, my (female) interlocutors told me that they do not speak about sexual harassment suffered at the hands of their employers, or do so only rarely, while the men communicated that their whiteness is not something they are used to thinking about or talking about with others. These types of silence were enacted at an individual level, during the course of the interview or the person's life; nevertheless, they constitute collective forms of silence that must be understood as such.

In tackling the ethnographic experience of silence, I found myself engaging with the banal idea that silence must always be interpreted and that the ethnographer is obliged to transform it into words in order to include it among her anthropological considerations. Although silence is a communicative act, this process of transposition deprives it of its communicative side, its non-verbal character. In order to name it and communicate it to others, namely readers, silence itself must be set aside. When speaking of silence, in fact, we encounter the paradox of transposing what is inexpressible, what one cannot or does not want to name, into the process of writing up, understood as the crowning stage marking the completion of an anthropological study. In reflecting on her research on witchcraft in Bocage, Favret-Saada invites us to recognize how «ordinary ethnographic communication – verbal, voluntary and intentional communication, aimed at learning a system of indigenous representations – constitutes one of the poorest varieties of human communication. It is particularly inadequate in providing information about non-verbal and involuntary aspects of human experience» (1990: 8). Silence represents precisely one of these non-verbal forms of communication and knowledge. Seljamaa and Siim's observations also contribute to this point when they argue that «language is not the only way to grasp people's experiences and to understand cultural practices, nor is it always feasible or

even possible to rely on language» (2016: 6). Other forms of communication are also involved in producing silence, therefore, forms stemming from glances, sensations and physical tensions that are difficult to transcribe. Seljamaa and Siim rightly note that «the methodological challenges related to studying the unspoken point to fieldwork as an embodied experience (Okely 1992) and to the importance of the sensitivity of the researcher» (2016: 10).

Silence as an ethnographic experience explicitly touches on the emotions of those who produce as well as those who listen to it. It can also come to represent a moment of uncertainty for the ethnographer in assessing the correctness of her own methods and understanding whether it is better to remain silent along with those who remain silent or to break the silence. Engaging with silence in the field thus involves confronting the sphere of emotions. My experience is shaped by this maze of forms of conditioning: I reacted to silence by thinking that I had asked the wrong questions or been indiscreet, always trying to keep a record of the emotions and forms of non-verbal communication that accompanied its production.

The experiences of silence in the two studies represented different types: with the men, silence was staged and experienced during the interview while simultaneously evoking a precursory form of silence shared with others. During the interviews with the female domestic workers, in contrast, we spoke about the silence surrounding the sexual harassment of domestic workers, the difficulties they face in breaking this silence and the fact that women who suffer harassment often do not report it. In the first case, silence was the result of the fact that the men were somehow *unprepared*, catching them almost by surprise during the interviews; in the second case, instead, the silence was a known element, it was addressed as a problem or simply described by the women as they explained how they had faced situations of harassment. It was not a silence produced during the course of the interview, it was a silence that the interview set out to explore.

The men's narratives

I conducted 21 interviews with men who self-identify as white and upper-middle class living in wealthy neighbourhoods in Rio de Janeiro. At the time of the interviews they were aged from forty-three to sixty-year-old. The majority of them were freelance professionals, but they also included state employees and one employee of a private company. All of the interviewees except for one grew up in families with one or more domestic workers. At the moment, they were interviewed, all of them employed one or more women to take care of their houses. These men shared the experience of having lived

their childhoods and adolescence in settings where black people were present but almost always in the capacity of service workers, and still today they live in a social landscape where whites and blacks almost only ever meet within clearly codified circumstances in which the white people occupy privileged positions and the black people subordinate positions. In the interviews, several men described how the female domestic workers were considered inferior to their families and social environments, and how they were taught to reproduce these hierarchical relationships from a very young age. Eight of the 21 interviewees recounted having experienced «sexual initiation» with a domestic worker, and 10 of them with a prostitute. In some cases, these had been collective experiences in which a group of friends or cousins harassed or raped a female domestic worker. At other times, they described a male relative known to have had sexual relationships with domestic workers, even if this fact was not openly discussed within the family. The men who had not experienced this «sexual initiation» with an *empregada*³ nonetheless recognized it as a very common social practice among their generation.

The way I was socially classified in terms of color, class and gender played a key role in shaping how the interview unfolded. As a white, middle-class Brazilian woman (although currently living in Italy) and university researcher, these men identified me as one of them, as somebody with whom they shared a common cultural background. The fact that I was considered part of the social environment to which the interviewees belonged encouraged dialogue, as my interlocutors felt they could refer to supposedly «mutual» perceptions and representations. While this simplified our encounter, in some cases the qualities they perceived us having in common instead represented an obstacle to speaking about whiteness. Most of them did not expect me to consider whiteness an object of research for understanding social relations and racism any more than they did. At the same time, I noticed that the men I interviewed felt comfortable talking with me about their adolescent «sexual initiations», incidents which in reality constituted sexual harassment of other women⁴. The fact that I was white and middle-class clearly led them to think I would not feel affinity with the poor, black women they had harassed. Rather, they assumed I would more easily identify with their point of view regarding the «normalcy» of these incidents of sexual assault and harassment.

3. Literally «employed», implicitly domestic.

4. Although it is possible that the men did not report all of their experiences of «sexual initiation» with domestic workers.

During the interviews with this group of men, therefore, I explored two different forms of communication: on one hand, a silence surrounding whiteness and difficulty in speaking about it, when in fact I would have liked to dialogue about whiteness with more ease. On the other hand, I found the men exhibited a certain casualness when speaking of harassment targeting domestic workers, a topic I would have expected to provoke more reticence and silence. I thus reflected on this distribution of words and silence to understand what remained unspoken and what was expressed, as well as what this combination of words and silence revealed about the interviewees' position.

White people's silence, understood as a lack of responses or specific ideas regarding their position within the system of racism and as the socializing element of racism itself, is one of the most widely studied elements in critical whiteness studies (Frankenberg 1993; McIntosh 1997). Indeed, it was one of the behaviors I observed most frequently among my research participants over the course of the interviews. Silence, embarrassment, laughter, pauses, hesitation, facial expressions of surprise were the most common reactions when I asked them to define who is considered white, to classify their own skin color and to describe moments in which they had felt classified as white. In these cases, silence did not indicate a refusal to answer the question but rather an inability to engage with questions concerning their whiteness. In these interviews, silence referred to the obvious, an experience that was perceived as taken for granted, natural, and thus not in need of being defined or named. In many cases, I did not change the subject but instead tried to find new paths that would allow my interviewees to speak. Usually, in these moments of communicational dead-end, the men found a way out by using class to define whiteness, that is, by evoking social relationships described in terms of class inequality to outline their position in terms of color as well. I interpreted this difficulty in talking about their whiteness and subsequent tendency to define it in terms of class as a reflection of the fact that these men were sure of their social position as whites: they were subjects who did not have to think about the privileges whiteness entailed and the consequences these privileges have on others.

Indeed, the men's silence about whiteness as a condition of their social lives must not be understood as solely a silence inherent in the interviews; rather, it is a form of silence that already existed beforehand. It was clear that the majority of my interviewees had never asked themselves questions that exposed their whiteness as a social position, and they expected the same from me. The expressions of amusement, laughter and silence revealed that no spaces of verbal communication existed between relatives and

friends regarding this aspect of their lives. Therefore, silence was first and foremost a genuine element of the process through which they had been socialized to racism and their whiteness (Sherover-Marcuse 2017).

In contrast, when we spoke of «sexual initiation» with domestic workers, the men were relatively open in describing their experiences, explaining how they viewed these episodes that they themselves saw as embedded in a context of oppression, often connecting them to the history of slavery. Many of them described a situation involving power relations in which the domestic worker was completely subjugated to the desires of her male employers. According to Aécio, having sex with domestic workers was considered «normal», and Fábio remembers that when adolescent «you perceive that she has... is a black woman over whom you exert domination». Others recalled that references to the sexual harassments of domestic workers had been cloaked in irony, clearly illustrated by the expression TED, *terror das empregadas domésticas*⁵, that demonstrates the air of legitimacy surrounding these instances of harassment. In the interviews, many men made a connection between female slaves' «availability» in the slavery-period *fazenda* and female domestics' «availability» in urban apartments, based on the idea that a domestic worker is characterized by the obligation to provide both domestic and sexual services⁶. However, the interviewees did not consider the color of these female domestic workers to represent an important element for understanding their own experiences of «sexual initiation», even though when speaking in general terms they identified domestic workers as a group as black or *nordestina*⁷.

The ease with which they approached this topic can be explained by considering two factors: my status as a person simultaneously outside of their world (because I live abroad) and part of it, as they saw me as sharing their skin color and social background by virtue of my also being Brazilian; and the status of «normalcy» middle class white people commonly attribute to this kind of relationship, although the interviewees were careful to clarify that they had developed a critical stance on it over time as a result of more recent cultural and social changes. They did not censor themselves when talking about a situation they recognized as being related to “normal” power relations and violence. This attitude produces a normalization of this form of

5. The *Terror of domestic workers* refers to young men harassing domestic workers.

6. For a more detailed analysis of slave owners' sexual abuse of female slaves, how they were used to provide first sexual experiences for their sons in the slavery period and how these incidents of violence were celebrated in literature and naturalized and incorporated into Brazilian common sense, see Gonzalez 1983; Ribeiro Corossacz 2005 and 2018.

7. A person from Brazil's Northeast, of indigenous ancestry.

harassment that is clearly conveyed by the use of the expression “sexual initiation” to refer to incidents of violence. Indeed, not labeling this act as sexual harassment is part of the process of silencing the phenomenon. Men also explained to me that, although these episodes of violence were effectively legitimized by their male relatives and the larger culture and made the butt of jokes among peers, at the same time they were supposed to be kept secret in a way, not considered something to be made public. Mothers were the ones who most frequently disapproved, however I was not able to gather sufficient information about white middle-class women’s position in relation to this violence: did they have enough strength to challenge their husbands’ and sons’ harassment of domestic workers? Were they interested in contesting this form of violence against poor black women?

Therefore, even though the men felt comfortable talking with me about episodes of sexual assault against domestic workers, they also explained to me that such practices were often cloaked in silence. However, it seems that the silence in question here is partial, as this is a phenomenon everybody in Brazilian society is aware of regardless of their color, gender or class. It is not a secret, therefore, but rather a topic unanimously treated as something that cannot be spoken about openly. The tacit silence surrounding the sexual harassment of female domestic workers serves to ensure that it is not defined as an illegitimate form of violence. As long as these practices are considered childish or an example of legitimate violence, it is still possible to name them.

This brings us to the question, under what conditions is silence produced? «The meaning and evaluation of silence is not revealed by its length, but by the way it is framed by context and co-text» (Crapanzano 2008: 37). In conversations with the men interviewed, silence manifested especially when it came to speaking about whiteness, but it was also evoked, in the form of something that must be kept hidden, when the men did speak to describe experiences of «sexual initiation» with domestic workers. In this later case, two different codes of communication existed side by side to produce an “open secret”: one code that recognized sexual harassment against domestic workers as common practice, and thereby normalized it, and another code that sought to diminish its significance through joking, thus negating the responsibility/accountability of offenders. In this case, there is clearly a simultaneous movement to both deny and recognize the reality of sexual violence. Lastly, silence also manifested where experiences of whiteness and «sexual initiation» intersected: the male interviewees’ silence regarding the color of the *empregadas* was also silence regarding their own skin color, forming a part of the unmentioned whiteness I encountered with when trying to talk

about their whiteness. In the interviews, it is clear that the men considered their own color to be an irrelevant factor in their relationships of «sexual initiations» with female domestic workers. The context and co-text of these experiences convey the sense of legitimacy the interviewees expressed: paradoxically, both the men's ability to describe power relations («sexual initiation») and their lack of preparedness in recognizing and talking about them («whiteness») reveal that the interviewees perceived their social position as legitimate and normal, part of a *natural* order of things.

The women's narratives

For the second research project, I collected accounts from 10 union organizers, all but one domestic workers, and 20 domestic workers as well as two lawyers who provide free legal services at the Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo offices. The workers I interviewed were aged between 67 and 34 years old, with a majority of women in their fifties. The oldest of them had begun working at approximately 8/10 years of age, without having completed compulsory education. Of the 20 respondents, five self-identified as black-skinned/*negra*, six as brown-skinned/*parda* and five as white or yellow, with *nordestinas* making up a majority of this latter category. In the case of four workers I was not able to ask how they self-identified: of these, two were black, one *nordestina*, and one white. Of these 20 women, nine reported that they had never experienced sexual harassment and assault, but were aware that it is a widespread problem; 11 said they had suffered harassment or attempted assault at the hands of the husbands of their female employers or other male relatives. Of the 10 union organizers, three of them had been sexually harassed by their employers.

Silence is central for understanding the general conditions of female domestic workers in Brazil. Despite the substantial improvements in labor rights achieved in recent decades, the entire history of domestic workers' political organizing can be understood as the effort to overcome the silencing that rendered them invisible as workers and the conditions of exploitation under which they worked (Cornwall *et al.* 2013). The initiatives launched by female domestic workers – poor and majority black women – were characterized by speaking out, producing political discourses and making claims to oppose the dominant white, wealthy representation of their subjectivity, that is, as figures who are invisible yet maintain a silent presence in taking care of middle-class white homes and families (Gonzalez 1983). This broader picture is necessary to understand the obstacles encountered by domestic workers when addressing the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace,

where silence was the tool most frequently used to manage these forms of violence. We must, in fact, interpret the prevailing silence surrounding the issue of sexual harassment as reflecting the extreme difficulty domestic workers face in naming, and therefore reporting, this kind of violence, and not as an indication that it does not exist.

Beginning with my first conversations with union organizers, they explained that workers rarely speak about these experiences, not even with the union organizers themselves: according to my interviewees, this silence reflects a prevailing sense of shame, not the fact that harassment is somehow rare or uncommon. In her analysis of racism in Brazil, Sheriff notes that «the experience of *vergonha* (shame) and the possibility that it may be exacerbated rather than relieved by talking» (2006: 121) is central, although this alone does not explain the silence surrounding racism. In my research as well, I found that silence is a way for women to deal with a sense of shame originating from an experience of violence in which sexism, racism and class oppression come together. Indeed, union organizers interpret domestic workers' silence as reflecting, in part, their awareness that most of society will not believe them. Naira, a 50-year-old *morena* woman who had experienced attempted assault on two occasions, explained to me that the position of domestic workers means that, even when they are in the right, they are not believed: «because, you know, we are always the ones who end up paying».

I approached my interviews with domestic workers with a full awareness of these elements and the fact that I might cause them embarrassment and uneasiness. It was clear to me that the phenomenon of sexual harassment could not be isolated from the broader context of their working and living conditions, so I concentrated on these aspects in order to explore the problem of sexual assault in more depth. Crapanzano notes that, in some cases, the ethnographer realizes that he cannot ask direct questions about the things he wants to explore. «You have to wait, so you are being silent in the sense that you are not talking about something you want to talk about» (2008: 35). In these cases, according to Crapanzano, the issue for the ethnographer's interlocutors is less silence and more reticence, and in fact I found this to be true when interviewing domestic workers. I also considered this reticence to be linked to the structural conditions of the ethnographic encounter, about which I was aware: a meeting between a poor and usually non-white domestic worker and a white, middle-class woman who might easily be seen as a potential employer. The only way to overcome the complications inherent in this structural social disparity is to be aware of it. After my first encounters, I fine-tuned my tools for addressing the most del-

icate issue during the course of the interview, waiting until the end to ask if an employer had ever *faltou de respeito*, «treated her disrespectfully». This was the most allusive yet clear and effective phrase for addressing the issue of sexual assault, an issue I knew would be difficult to name and deal with. The task was thus one of striking a balance that would grant space to both the aspects of experiences that were most important for the domestic workers and the aspects I was most interested in, aspects which were probably cloaked in silence. Thus, each interview was an experience of mediating between speech and silence, between what was possible to talk about and what was not, an experience in which I constantly sought to avoid putting my interviewee in a position, that of victim, that would clash with her own self-perception.

Depending on the type of dialogue I managed to establish with the interviewee, I was able to address the issue of harassment more or less explicitly. In raising the issue, I always made clear that I personally condemned this behavior. When my interviewee revealed that she had undergone this kind of experience, I tried to understand how much she was able to talk about this issue while respecting her emotional state, in other words, how much I could ask. I was not always able to ask «how did it happen? When? Where? How did you react? How did the man of the house react?» Indeed, silence was a central element: although this communicative act apparently did not provide information (Pinçon and Pinçon 2002), I opted to accept it in view of the fact that this silence is part and parcel of the historical tendency to deny and silence forms of violence committed against poor, black women in Brazilian society. It is also possible that some of the women preferred not to speak with me about their experiences because we had just met and therefore did not enjoy a deep degree of intimacy, or because of my specific class and color position. There were thus two forms of silence permeating this research: a silence of omission that did not recount certain events, and a silence of allusion that hinted at them but without providing a precise description.

The interviews revealed that workers' most common reaction when facing sexual harassment was to leave the job, often without explaining the real reasons behind their decision. This attitude stems from the fact that, as domestic workers and activists report, female employers generally would not believe the accounts of their employees or would deny that the incidents had happened. In the interviews, female employers appeared in the role of ally in only a few cases; most of the time, domestic workers and activists described these employers refusing to believe that the violence had occurred. Aware that they might very well not be given credit for telling the truth and influenced by the pressure to remain silent, leaving without reporting the sexual

assault represented a way for these women to rebel against the violence and exert their own subjectivity, a strategy of resistance (similar attitudes are described by Mori *et al.* 2011). Reporting the incident to the authorities represented a further step that might earn them nothing but frustration and humiliation. If the domestic workers find it hard to speak of these experiences with the female union activists, it is easy to imagine how hard it would be to face the prospect of reporting the attack to the authorities. In this context, in fact, words have a public and institutional value: they are tantamount to breaking the silence surrounding the harassment workers suffer. It is reasonable to assume that pressing charges with the competent authorities is particularly difficult, as such an act also represents taking a stand against the collective silence that has allowed these forms of harassment to pass as something of minor importance rather than a real problem. According to the two lawyers, there are very few cases in which domestic workers have decided to press charges and initiate legal proceedings, in part because of their fear of suffering the associated stigma. The female lawyer from São Paulo described a case she worked on in which a woman decided to press charges, after which her husband left her, she lost her job and in the end she was not able to achieve a fair verdict. Furthermore, it is very difficult to win such cases: the lawyer from Rio de Janeiro reported that she has never been able to win a sexual violence case against an employer because it is impossible to prove that the incident actually took place. In her opinion, it is the word of the *empregada* against that of her employer, and the individual tasked with judging the case is strongly prejudiced against the *empregada*: «Employers of domestic workers are everywhere. They are judges, lawyers, ministers and politicians». Behind each of these professional profiles is a man with a domestic worker, a white, upper-middle-class man. The lawyer's comments seem to suggest that there is an automatic mechanism of identification between the man judging the case and the man on trial, an identification that creates complicity based on their belonging to the same sex, class and race as well as a culture that makes light of and legitimizes incidents of sexual violence against domestic workers. Female domestic workers therefore choose to remain silent in this context as well. In view of the considerations raised by the lawyers, the workers' silence represents a reaction to a situation in which pressing charges would lead not to obtaining justice but rather to being made to feel even more socially inferior, and thus silence is part of a strategy of resistance. This was made quite clear by my conversations with Anazir Maria de Oliveira, Dona Zica, an 80-year-old historic black leader of domestic workers in Rio de Janeiro, about the difficulties domestic workers encounter in their interaction with the justice system, specifically in

proving that the sexual harassment and assault committed by their employers actually took place. First of all, she explained, workers find it difficult even to «report the incident». According to Dona Zica, episodes of violence against female domestic workers have decreased as compared to the past, but it is important to keep in mind that this phenomenon is very «well hidden» (*oculto*, in Portuguese). Union organizers' struggles over the last few decades have been central to changing the situation and helping domestic workers, with the result that these women are much better supported in reporting experiences of sexual harassment and assault and thereby challenging the culture that silences this phenomenon.

At this point I would like to examine how women react to sexual assault, including verbally, to explore how the domestic workers themselves recognize the silence about sexual harassment as a problematic element. Debora, a 34-year-old *morena*, started working as an *empregada* when she was 15. She described an incident of sexual assault that took place when she worked on a live-in basis in an apartment looking after the house and the couple's children. The male employer got into the habit of walking into her room, then one night he came in and tried to molest her. She had the impression that he was drunk. The morning after, Debora talked to the man about what had happened. She confronted him, saying that the next time it happened she would report him. For some time all was well, then one night he tried to molest her again. The next morning Debora, who had decided to report her employer, asked to talk with him, but in the end she instead requested that she be let go. She decided to continue working for the family but no longer as a live-in, and to justify this change in the eyes of her female employer, who she had not told about the incident, she gave the excuse that she wanted to go back to school. Debora completed her account by saying, «Because it is like that, I specifically see it like that: the man of the house in his place, and me in my place. But maybe the employer sees us as...you're there as an *empregada* and I don't know, maybe they end up seeing us as a sexual object for their use». Through her actions, Debora managed both speech (with her harasser) and silence (with his wife and the police) in a way that illustrates her ability to navigate spaces «where the conditions and limits of action and choice are negotiated, contested and tested» (Seljamaa, Siim 2016: 6).

Maria José, a 70-year-old, *nordestina*, came to Rio when she was 20 years old to escape the drought: «I came from the countryside, I was a young woman with no experience, no boyfriend, and he molested me. It was horrible because I was in the kitchen washing the dishes and he came into the kitchen from his room, naked, that was horrible for me». The sexual harassment went on, with her male employer masturbating in front of her and ask-

ing her to touch him. It was not possible for me to ask for more information during our conversations. Maria José wept as she described these experiences. Many years later, by participating in Theater of the Oppressed⁸ activities together with other domestic workers, Maria José was able to talk about these incidents for the first time: «I cried all day because we hold these things inside and we do not have the courage, we are ashamed to talk about them». Hearing her story has encouraged other workers to talk about similar experiences and organize theatrical performances about this issue.

A key point is the possibility that the women might report the attempted assault to someone else or even simply scream. Laura, a 54-year-old light-skinned *morena*, noted that «lots of women don't say anything. I told him: if you try to molest me again, I'll tell your wife». The man responded, «Are you sure you'll tell her? If you do, I'll fire you. Will you really be brave enough?». A similar situation was narrated by Zezé, a 71-year-old retired *nordestina*. In one of her two experiences of sexual assault, when she asked the male employer to stop he yelled at her to «shut your mouth, Zezé!» She answered him: «“I won't be quiet, because you are there”. He ordered me to shut up ...». The fact that the men in these accounts did not want the women to speak out indicates that the power they exercise is never truly absolute: women have the capacity to speak. The men recognize that the women's ability to speak up and name this form of violence represents the first step in a rebellion that goes beyond physical self-defense, and this is why Zezé's harasser ordered her to shut up⁹. Another woman who experienced two attempted assaults reported that, in one case, the man was afraid: «afraid I would talk».

Objecting entails naming these forms of harassment as what they really are, illegitimate acts of violence. The interview with Dona Zica also revealed another factor that is key for understanding the dynamics of the silence surrounding these forms of violence: the role color plays in women's ability to name them. At the age of 15, Dona Zica moved from the countryside to Rio de Janeiro to work in a woman's house, sleeping there every night except for Sunday when her mother came to pick her up. Her employer's brother harassed her: he would knock insistently on the door to her room, sometimes so hard that he pushed on it. «I was scared to death, I would never have opened the door, but I was afraid he would force it open. It was a very serious thing... in the end I confessed to my mother and she made me leave the job...But I

8. *Teatro do Oprimido* was created in the 1960s by Augusto Boal in an effort to use theater to contribute to social change and work for social justice.

9. In the study by Mori *et al.* (2011) as well, women report that the men who molested them wanted them to keep silent.

was lucky, because he could have come in, and gone through with what he meant to do». Her mother did not explain the reason why she was taking her daughter away, making up excuses instead. «At that time you remained silent, period. It happened and you didn't say anything, understand?». She told me that today matters are different, in that the union provides information and guidance about how to report and talk about this problem. Further on in the interview she reiterated: «I never protested. I protested by speaking about it with my mother and she took me away from that house». When I asked about the color of the people she worked for, she answered that they were white: «one more reason for not believing me, right?». This statement is the only one, among the multiple accounts I collected, explicitly addressing how much skin color influences the definition of who is considered credible when reporting incidences of harassment, a problem the lawyers and union activists are well aware of. Dona Zica's statement implies that the other components of the family would not have believed her because they were white and she was black. She thus raises the question of how the color classification of the subjects involved conditions the very possibility of naming this violence. As observed by Rottenberg, we need to pose «the absolutely crucial question of when and where claims of sexual harassment and assault are heard and whose voices count» (2018). The fact that she spoke about it with her mother suggests that she knew she would be able to access credibility, to draw on a network of social relationships, a community, likely to recognize the oppressive working conditions Zica found herself facing. Dona Zica's long history of political activism and developing awareness of the exploitation underlying her job contributes to explaining her choice to reveal the role racism plays in establishing what is nameable, credible and condemnable.

In our interview, Dona Zica also positioned the question of credibility in relation to the sense of guilt many domestic workers feel when experiencing harassment: «in these episodes there is also a sense of guilt that the domestic worker herself feels. Why didn't I resist? Why didn't I speak up? Why didn't I do this or that? In general, however, the issue is something else: the family doesn't believe the domestic worker». Breaking the silence surrounding this harassment therefore means facing the experience of not being believed, which materializes in the employer family's accusation that the workers is a «liar». The family makes her feel «a bit inhibited, because how could she prove it?...She is completely isolated, how can she prove it?».

These women's stories differ in various ways including historical period, but a recurring element is their awareness of how difficult yet crucial it is for them to react verbally: for the women who were able to fight back as well as

those who were forced to «hold it inside», naming the attempted violence, breaking the silence, represents a way of trying to conceive of themselves as subjects deserving of dignity. This is therefore a form of silence tied to a situation of oppression, and winning free requires effort: the silence hurts (Maria José's tears) or invokes deep feelings of impotence, «because you know we are always the ones who end up paying» (Naira). The act of posing questions about this subject is tantamount to breaking the cultural convention that uses a blanket of silence to deny the existence of this problem. The difficulty of collecting data about this problem shows that silence plays a key role in relation to this form of violence. Indeed, silence can represent a linguistic practice for denying that this phenomenon actually constitutes a form of violence but, at the same time, also a means of resisting it: «silence and inarticulateness are not, in themselves, necessarily signs of powerlessness» (Gal 1991: 176). As Sheriff notes, «silence appears to be experienced as a form of dissent and defense» (2000: 125) in a context of obfuscation, not only of sexual harassment as sexist violence, but also of the racism that is involved in them.

Indeed, if we view domestic workers' silence in the broader context of the imbrication of racism, sexism and class inequality they experience, it is clear that this silence should not be taken as an indication that they accept this violence, but rather as a way of denouncing the level of oppression these women experience and their feelings of impotence. Like the black residents' experiences of racism in the Rio Di Janeiro *favela* described in Sheriff's research, «if concrete amelioration cannot be expected, they seem to suggest, then there is no point in discussing the issue (of racism)» (2000: 124).

Conclusion

The silence surrounding the sexual harassment of female domestic workers has long been maintained by various actors, each with their own different and sometimes even conflicting positions and interests. At the same time, however, it has always been a collectively-produced silence, variously generated by *empregadas*, white middle-class men and a culture that obfuscates its character of violence. As Sheriff notes, «silence demands collaboration and the tacit communal understanding that such collaboration presupposes» (2000: 114).

The domestic workers' silence is a forced one, a «silence linked to the overwhelming force of domination» (Sheriff 2006: 129), but it is also the product of a form of agency enacted in conditions of oppression. The partial silence white middle-class culture produces around the sexual assault of do-

mestic workers is a way of denying the violent character of these instances of assault and rape and the overall oppression these women experience. On the other side, men's silence regarding their whiteness is an expression of the social power that allows them to avoid dealing with the effects of their privilege; theirs is a chosen silence that allows them to go on exercising dominance, including in their relationships with domestic workers. In fact, the men's tendency to render their whiteness invisible also impacts the problem of sexual harassment of domestic workers: although the men spoke with me about this issue in a casual way, they denied the role color and specifically their own whiteness played both in these forms of violence and in presenting them as licit. The interviews also revealed that, within the men's social background, these forms of violence were treated as an open secret through a communicational code involving jokes, allusions and indirect remarks that served to diminish the significance of the incidents. Talking about this violence using specific communicational modes (joking, laughing, allusions) effectively reproduces the collective silence about the violent nature of these acts. The position of white middle-class women in "reproducing" this silence should also be considered, although this is the only group involved in this phenomenon that I did not consult directly. By denying that their husbands and sons harassed domestic worker, female employers would seem more invested in defending their whiteness, class status and family image than confronting their husbands or sons about their sexual harassment of domestic workers. However, if in so doing female employers are participating in the racism that diminishes the gravity of this violence against poor black women, they also reveal themselves unable to confront the male culture that considers female bodies sexually available. To understand female employers' position in reproducing the silence surrounding the sexual harassment of domestic workers, therefore, we must consider not only the role racism and class inequalities play in relations among women, but also the role sexism plays in relations between husbands and wives, and mothers and sons.

Comparing these two experiences of silence, the men's silence about their whiteness and the women's silence about sexual harassment, it is clear that, while the former are not aware of their silence about whiteness and in particular the role this silence plays in sexual harassment, the latter do recognize the silence of women abused by their employers. Furthermore, although domestic workers actively produce silence as an instrument for facing violence and dealing with prevailing structural limitations in order to react to this violence, they also acknowledge that this silence is problematic. While for the men silence is a way of not naming a specific aspect of sexist violence against domestic workers, namely that of racism, and of naturalizing this ex-

perience of racism, for the women silence is not only a simple absence of speech; it is an action they take in order to move on. Therefore, we must recognize that silence is used in tactical ways «and grounded in given cultural, social and economic circumstances» (Selijamaa, Siim 2016: 10).

Silence can also function as a form of in-group complicity and solidarity: the men's silence regarding their whiteness and its role in racism is a way of reproducing forms of racist oppression by rendering them invisible or casting them as trivial. The women's silence, and the ability of the female workers and union organizers to recognize this silence, is a way of embracing the suffering involved in workplace harassment. It is also an expression of understanding, of the ability to create a protected space in which women can comprehend and overcome the structural difficulties entailed in naming these forms of violence. This silence stems from an awareness of the «dramatic differences in the power of opposing interlocutors» (Sheriff 2006: 120). The domestic workers' awareness of this silence and the problematic role it plays in these forms of violence, as part of the overall conditions of exploitation they live under, represents a starting point from which they create the premises to overcome silence, to encourage self-disclosure and discussion in environments that are perceived as protected and in which their statements are recognized and appreciated. First and foremost, these environments are created and supported by the domestic workers unions, as these organizations are playing a pivotal role in breaking the silence around the phenomenon of sexual harassment and assault. Given this context, my research interviews, although conducted by a white middle-class woman, may have been seized on by the women as an opportunity to grant value and significance to their experiences, promoting the chance to speak out rather than remaining silent.

The women's silence about instances of sexual harassment can also be understood as a strategy for not remembering, a way to forget the violence they endured, a violence combining sexism, classism and in many cases racism. In the men's case, in contrast, their silence regarding their whiteness in general and the role it plays in their perception of harassment in particular is a way of affirming their hegemonic position and continuing to render their whiteness invisible.

For both of the groups analyzed in this research, silence is a form of agency; the outcomes in the two cases are much different, however. In the women's case, silence is recognized as part of a strategy of resistance, although they also identify it as an attitude that must be overcome in order to change power relations and their position within them. For the men, silence and the move to not recognize it as problematic are a way of performing and

reproducing their position, of reproducing a pattern of social relations based on multiple forms of oppression. This kind of silence tends to represent power relations as inevitable. As Achino-Loeb writes, «silence is a vehicle for the exercise of power» because it «allows us to believe that the nonspoken is nonexistent» (2006: 3, 11).

The casual attitude the men displayed in talking about this assault and harassment shows that they and the larger environment they belong to consider these acts to be tolerable, albeit troublesome, behavior by virtue of their being inscribed in power relations they are intimately conscious of benefiting from. Precisely for this reason, the men know that this behavior might lead to rebellion. This is why some men, as domestic workers recounted, demanded that their victims remain silent. Although the uneven power relations are in favor of the male perpetrators, they seek to keep the domestic workers from speaking out. This may be a well-known and tolerated phenomenon in a certain white middle-class culture, but it is nonetheless necessary to keep it concealed as much as possible, even if in the end the «secret» is common knowledge. Domination is never completely safe from the possibility that it might be challenged by describing reality. Silence is imposed to keep this open secret: domestic workers are asked to remain silent regarding these abuses of power, but their silence cannot be enforced altogether.

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