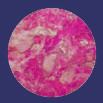

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Book Review: When God Lost Her Tongue: Historical Consciousness and the Black Feminist Imagination by Janell Hobson (2021). Routledge. ISBN 978- 0367198343

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As a Black Caribbean immigrant woman and candidate in a dual-title Art Education and African American and Diaspora Studies doctoral program who studies and teaches at a university in the United States, I felt a moral and cultural responsibility to write this review for *When God Lost Her Tongue: Historical Consciousness and the Black Feminist Imagination* by Janell Hobson (2021). Given the recent U.S. legislative attempts to delegitimize Black studies (Russell-Brown, 2023) and the ban on Black-authored books in more than thirty U.S. states (PEN American, 2023), engaging in this Black feminist literary discourse that pulls Black studies and gender studies toward creative inquiry is important to my work as an emerging scholar.

Written during the global pandemic and the heightened racial justice movements of 2020, this politically charged moment prompted a resurgence of Black women activism (Ross et al., 2022). Kimberlé Crenshaw (2021), a leading figure for civil rights and critical race theory, was one of many Black feminist scholars (Bailey, 2021; Blain, 2021; Cherry, 2021; Woodly, 2021) who responded to the systemic inequalities that aim to suppress Black scholarship in academia and publishing. I place my perspective as an Afro-Caribbean critic and graduate student in conversation with Hobson, an African American author and women's studies professor who specializes in cultural studies and the integration of literature, film, visual, and popular culture. My review intends to contribute to a cultivation of a collective representation of Black diasporic authorship that extends the Black feminist intellectual tradition. Black diasporic writing practice is not purely intellectual work, but, also, embodies what cultural studies scholar Ella Shohat (2006) calls "relational feminisms."[1] Challenging demarcations of nation-states, academic disciplines, and views that maintain essentialist ideologies is central to radical feminist activism. In an effort to protect Black intellectual freedom, Hobson (2021) pushes against limitations of popular culture and visual culture historiography that exclude Black women's perspectives and narratives.

When God Lost Her Tongue's unique intervention employs the imaginary as a historical method to reimagine histories of Black women through the arts and across the African diaspora. Yet, Hobson's (2021) book has received little recognition in the global academic community. To date, only five publications have engaged discussions on Hobson's perspective of the Black feminist imagination (Benton, 2024; Hamilton, 2022; Pearson, 2023; Wynter, 2023; Zemke, 2022). Two emerging scholars (Beckford, 2023; Gentile-Reyes, 2023) extend Hobson's discourse on Black feminine divinity to support their dissertations on wellbeing (Beckford, 2023) and Reggaetón[2] (Gentile-Reyes, 2023). And there have been no scholarly reviews published that provide a critical assessment of the book's

1. "The notion of a relational feminism goes beyond a mere description of the many cultures from which feminisms emerge; it transcends an additive approach, which simply has women from diverse backgrounds contributing separate perspectives. Instead, relational feminism emphasizes the interconnectedness of various forms of identity and oppression, advocating for an integrated framework that considers how different social categories—such as race, class, gender, and sexuality—intersect and interact. This approach seeks to understand and address the complexities of power and inequality in a more nuanced and holistic manner, rather than merely adding up distinct experiences and viewpoints." (Shohat, 2006, p. 2)

2. "Reggaetón Cultura is composed of a certain fashion and aesthetic style derived from transatlantic, Caribbean, and Afro-Diasporic fabrics and styles, and often functions as a sartorial practice for perreo. Perreo is a distinctly Puerto Rican iteration of global booty-shaking dances, unique in its back-to-front partnering, and the influence of Puerto Rican bomba, a dance-drum tradition that emanated from enslaved West African and Native peoples." (Gentile-Reyes, 2023, pp. 13-14)

content, methodology, or contribution to the fields of Black, gender, or cultural studies. Writing this review two years after the book's release exceeds reflective insight. But it is part of the reparative literary practice that is inherent to Black historical studies. In my refusal to perpetuate the conditions that do not center Black women as authors, storytellers, and custodians of embodied knowledge, the goal of this review is to amplify Hobson's (2021) contribution to the intellectual and cultural communities.

Janell Hobson is known for her scholarship in the fields of Black feminist theory, cultural studies, and media studies. Hobson's (2018) most notable work, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture*, explores the history of Black women's beauty and its representation in popular culture. In addition to her academic work, Hobson is a contributor to *Ms. Magazine*, the first national magazine in the U.S. dedicated to feminist journalism. Her writing style and philosophy employ accessible language and tone that champion inclusivity and remove the barriers of academic texts that often exclude readers outside of the academy.

Throughout the five chapters, *When God Lost Her Tongue* takes the reader on a reconfiguration in which Black women of the past, through divine intervention, collide with "Black queens and goddesses" of contemporary popular culture to glorify Black feminine beauty (Hobson, 2021, p. 9). Further, Hobson (2021) reframes Black subjects in European art and repositions Black women as symbols of power. Her inclusion of poetic language invokes the visual and performative sentiment of three overarching concepts from a transnational Black feminist perspective of the past in present popular culture, European art history, and power.

Contextualizing "When God Lost Her Tongue" in African Diaspora Studies

The 2021 petition to ban 'critical race theory' echoes the racially driven events[3] of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, which led to the formation of Black Studies as an academic discipline (Joseph, 2003; Bunzel, 1968; Orrick, 1970; Rojas 2006). Black Studies is a liberatory field that has been under attack by institutional resistance, state and federal funding cuts, and invalidation of research since its inception (Alkalimat, 2021). In the 1990s, Black Studies scholars (Hall, 1990; Gilroy, 1993; Cohen, 1997) grappled with the theoretical foundations that would extend the field to define African Diaspora studies. Comparative literature scholar Brent H. Edwards's (2001) essay "The Uses of Diaspora," investigates the intellectual history of the term 'diaspora' in the context of African diasporic experiences. In *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, Edwards (2003) contended that the use of the concept, 'diaspora,' is "continually necessary to attend to the ways the term [diaspora] always can be re-articulated" (p. 13). Although the concepts of 'African diaspora' and 'Black feminist imagination' both gained prominence in the 2000s, few scholars have made parallels with how Black feminist thought and the arts shape diasporic experiences.

The nexus of Edwards' (2001, 2003) use and practice of 'diaspora' and feminist-activist-scholar M. Jacqui Alexander's (2005) 'black feminist praxis' is a touchstone to *When God Lost Her Tongue.* To emphasize the importance of imagination and alternative perspectives that challenge and expand conventional academic methods in Black Studies, Hobson (2021) places Edwards (2001), Alexander (2005), sociologist Gordon, (1997) and African diaspora scholar Young (2006) in conversation. Dominant narratives of the African diaspora often frame slavery as the point of departure to highlight the dehumanization and suffering of Black people, oversimplify the diversity of diasporic experiences, and fail to account for cultural, ethnic, and gendered differences. Hobson (2021) takes up the work of recasting the African diaspora by articulating the ways Black women across multiple geohistories imagined themselves and each other by focusing on issues of connection and collaboration. She signals a more critical view that illuminates the fragmented, nuanced, and disruptive qualities of the diaspora.

Situating "When God Lost Her Tongue" in Black Transnational Feminism

The concept of 'plurality' in *When God Lost Her Tongue* frames a global co-mingling of multiple Black feminist identities. The book specifically reconstructs "theories of liberation across relational geographies" (p. 16) to foreground Shohat's (2002) perspective on "relational feminism," that is a

[3] The 1960s Civil Rights Movement reflected social, political, and cultural changes that were driven by grassroots activism and scholarly efforts. The Black student-led protests and demands for curriculum changes at universities nationwide "began in 1965 and climaxed in the spring of 1969 to push and pull the discipline of Black Studies into the academy" (Rogers, 2012, p. 21).

situated practice in which histories and communities are mutually complicated and constitutively related, open to mutual illumination (Shohat, 2002). As climate change, resource shortages, and civil unrest in our contemporary moment force a global paradigm shift where statelessness (Kochenov, 2024) has become a reality, Hobson (2021) and Shohat's (2002; 2006) relational approach offers a generative framework for scholars in Black Studies to think through new ways of understanding Black transnational feminism.

Hobson (2021) introduces Alexander's (2005) *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* as a key text to explicate the interconnectedness of Black women's issues across national boundaries. It is important that readers unfamiliar with Alexander's work understand Hobson's interest in "a transnational feminism that fully integrates the Black feminist imagination*"* (Hobson, 2021, p. 15) through Alexander's framing of the term "crossing." Alexander (2005) uses "crossing" as a conceptual metaphor to draw on the ancestral trauma of the Middle Passage to examine the intersections of feminism, sexual politics, memory, and spirituality. Alexander's (2005) concept of "pedagogies of crossing" refers to methods of teaching and learning that facilitate the crossing of boundaries between different areas of knowledge, experience, and identity. Alexander (2005) and Hobson (2021) are both interested in the epistemic and cosmological features of the global Black feminist imagination that bridge, divide, and create new ways of understanding.

Black feminist scholars, political activist Angela Davis (1981), and literary critic Hortense J. Spillers (1987) made the earliest contributions to the intersection of diaspora and Black feminist imagination. They challenged dominant narratives that silenced the ways Black women resisted oppression. Hobson (2021) includes Alexander (2005), Davis (1981), and Spillers (1987) as part of her extensive research to address the politics of Black historiography. Hobson extends four decades of scholarship by situating Black feminist imagination as a methodology for re-articulating what constitutes the contemporary African diaspora.

Popular Culture: Black Feminist Diaspora Imagination as Knowledge and Divine Resistance

When God Lost Her Tongue joins the tradition of Black feminist scholarship that aims to affirm Black women's representation in and beyond the academy. In what predates Black feminist theory, Hobson (2021) pulls from narratives of 19th-century feminist abolitionist Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman to deepen the readers understanding of the book's historical context. She also draws from the interpretations of mid-20th-century Black women artists Faith Ringgold (1991) and Elizabeth Catlett (1975), whose artistic depiction of Tubman and proximity to the foundations of Black women's collective action[4] in the 1970s ground Hobson's argument for Black feminist imagination as "embodied knowledge and marginalized ways of knowing" (p. 2). For Hobson (2021), this form of knowledge production is both transformative and spiritual. It crafts ways of knowing that engage the complexities of human experiences and emotions.

Hobson (2021) cautions the reader to anticipate her style of writing as "artistic introspection" (p. 10), a privilege afforded by her position as a full professor who is no longer restricted by the publishing expectations of her earlier career. From the book's prelude on slavery and postlude on Afrofuturism, Hobson (2021) employs poetic prose throughout each chapter. Incited by Black feminist, poet, and civil rights activist Audre Lorde (1984), whose lesbian writings produced unique imaginations of the world that read across geohistories, through difference, and toward freedom, Hobson (2021) invokes Black prose as a liberatory project. A central theme of *When God Lost Her Tongue* is the use of poetics as an aesthetic for imagination and Lorde's use of poetic language as a means of rewriting Black history.

> In an interview with historian Robert Greene II for *Black Perspectives,* the African American Intellectual History Society blog, Hobson shared that "this new book is much more experimental in its writing and poetic, and it expresses my ideas beyond the context of career goals. My first book was for tenure; my second book for promotion to full professor. This third book is really for me". (Greene II, 2021, para. 4)

[4] The Combahee River Collective was a pivotal group in Black feminist history, established in Boston, Massachusetts in 1974, composed of Black women who aimed to highlight the specific issues faced by Black women and advocate for a broader, intersectional approach to feminism and social justice, particularly by addressing the overlapping systems of oppression based on race, gender, and sexuality; they are most recognized for their "Combahee River Collective Statement," which is considered a key document in the development of contemporary Black feminism and the concept of intersectionality,

Hobson's demarcation of academic timeframes speaks to the space where academic and cultural freedom collide for women of color. This resonates with my personal experience negotiating the challenges that impact access to resources, mentorship, and institutional support.

As part of its gendered reworking of the African diaspora, *When God Lost Her Tongue* begins in the Caribbean and moves through Europe, Africa, and North America, ending in the diaspora at large. A critical component of Hobson's writing is her emphasis on understanding imagination as a form of knowledge creation that challenges the US-Eurocentric canons of White imperialism and patriarchy in constructing history. Yet, some scholars may find Hobson's use of dominant language problematic. While her inclusion of the words 'American, Western, royal, and queen' perpetuates structures of power rooted in White supremacy, colonialism, and patriarchy, these words are also cited in her references. This citational practice underscores the tradition of scholarship that defends the use of dominant language in academic contexts, arguing that it provides clarity, precision, and standardization that enhances communication across disciplines.

When God Lost Her Tongue frames the ways Black feminist imagination in contemporary times reconceptualizes and politicizes the experiences of Black women across diasporic historical consciousness. By articulating how Black feminists of the past are reincarnated as heroines and goddesses in visual art, literature, film, and music, she engages empirical historical research in the discussion. Using the perspectives of Black feminist writers, including Audre Lorde (1984), Toni Morrison (1987), Alice Walker (1982), as well as popular culture icons such as Janelle Monáe, Rihanna, and Beyoncé, Hobson illustrates how these "Black women have refused to be silenced, using their imagination to retrieve, resuscitate, and conjure history" (Hobson, 2021, p. 14). Yet she is able to pay attention and illuminate the distinct ways each Black woman engaged in a politics of reclamation.

Hobson's (2021) decision to begin the narration of Black history with a liberatory account is a welcomed departure from the dominant transatlantic slave trade narratives that perpetuate colonial perspectives. Chapter One, "A Meditation on Black Feminist Divinity," begins with the first successful slave revolt, the Haitian Revolution at the turn of the 19th century. lwa Ezili Dantor, a love goddess and protector of mothers, women, children, and queer people, drives Hobson's narration of Black feminist divinity and the genealogy of goddesses. Ezili's story of losing her tongue during the revolution is the organizing metaphor for the book. A disfigured deity, "who refused silence even without the ability to form words, presents the intersectional experience of race, gender, sexuality, and disability as well as situates power through marginalization" (Hobson, 2021, p. 2). Hobson (2021) places revolution and religious lore in an entanglement that reconfigures Black women as both spiritual and heroic figures.

Ritual is employed as both theory and method throughout Chapter One. Hobson's writing method enacts "Black magic women who invoke gods and conjure art" (p. 15) and pulls their spiritual work into an intellectual discourse to validate their practice. The Chapter is organized under seven theoretical headings that are threaded by a spiritual undertone: Invocation, Reclamation, Reconnection, Restoration, Reformation, Revolution, and Convocation. Collectively, her analysis of literature, folklore, religion, film, and art reads as prayer, poetry, and proclamation.

Reframing Black Women Subjects in European Art

Chapter Two, "Reframing Portraits of Black Womanhood," and Chapter Three, "Revolving Doors of No Return," use the enslaved woman as a point of departure in European art and colonial spaces to clarify nuanced narratives of Black womanhood. Chapter Two's focus is the unnamed Black subjects in 18th-century European portraiture who remained invisible in "Western art history" (p. 39) until they gained renewed interest in contemporary Black feminist works. The British film *Belle* (Sagay, 2013) and the U.S. music video *Apeshit* (Knowles-Carter & Carter, 2018) are two examples Hobson draws from to explicate the power of contemporary Black art and its fusions with and critique of colonial genres. African American artist Ayana V. Jackson's photographic self-portrait "Lucy" (2017)—from her series *Intimate Justice in the Stolen Moment* (2017)—is an example of artistic criticism that recreates French painter Marie-Guillemine Benoist's 19th century painting *Portrait d'une Négresse [Portrait of Madeleine]* (1800).

Chapter Three's relational histories of two inter-racial women are

informed by the politics of space, revealing a more complicated narrative of the shared history of these two unknown figures in European paintings. Hobson (2021) articulates the Black woman as a subject in European art created by White men to be both the slave and the signare,[5] such as *The Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies* (ca. 1797) by British painter Thomas Stothard and *African Venus (*ca. 1851) by French sculptor Charles-Henri-Joseph Cordier.

African women of mixed-race (i.e., African, and European descent, whose wealth and influence were accumulated through relationships with European traders, merchants, and colonial officials) are integral to Hobson's examination of *Gorée Island's House of Slaves*, which is regarded as a world heritage site by UNESCO. The site is frequently visited by African American tourists who honor the victims of the transatlantic slave trade. Hobson describes Venus Johannes' precarious fall as the domestic slave to Anne Roussine Pepin, an Afro-European woman, as she traverses Africa and the Caribbean in her transitory status between slavery and freedom.

Black Women Symbols of Power

In Chapter Four, titled "Cultural Currency and the Value of Harriet Tubman," the book shifts from the unnamed and subjugated to Harriet Tubman as a symbol of self-emancipated African American womanhood. As Hobson (2021) observes, Tubman is an exception to the historical silencing of her era, which has allowed her legacy to endure into the 21st century. Tracing her life story through photographs enunciates the critical value of Black self-making and belonging.

Additionally, Hobson (2021) emphasizes the importance of reading images and the role of affect responses. Black feminist visual culture theorist Tina Campt (2012) argues that photographs "produce affective resonances and attachments in ways we cannot necessarily explain and that are often detached from personal or biographical investments" (p. 16). Although specifically addressed in Chapter Two, Hobson's (2021) close reading of unknown Black women's portraiture occurs throughout the text. Her method of Black feminist imagination recovers these women's forgotten identities through what she refers to as 'shifting'. She maintains that this reframing of portraits requires the field of art history to represent a "specific method of seeing differently in shifting Black women, as bell hooks would say, "from margin to center" [hooks, 1984]" (Hobson, 2021, p. 41). Chapter Four underscores the financial and cultural value of Black women's visuality.

Chapter Five, "To Play the Queen, to Embody the Goddess," closes with a rhetorical analysis of Black royalty and divinity across the African diaspora. Hobson draws from popular cultural figures in film, music, and visual art, whose depiction of Black queens and goddesses attempts to "reinforce fantasies of power as well as provide opportunities for self-refashioning, oftentimes to elevate the gendered, raced, and classed status of African-descended people" (p. 127). She frames goddess imagery in conversation with public rhetoric to offer a comparative analysis that reveals the desire and African diasporic royalty across multiple identities, relational geographies, and periods.

Conclusion: Rewriting Women into the African Diaspora

By mapping creative ways Black literary thinkers, feminist figures, and artists created possibilities of Black existence, Hobson's central goal is to disrupt the dominant historiography of women of the African diaspora. In this vein, she provides a complex and engaging exploration of how Black feminist thought intersects with historical consciousness between the 17th and 21st centuries. It is, however, her emphasis on the imaginary as a form of Black knowledge production that maximizes Black creativity, cultural expression, and speculative thought as means for understanding and interpreting the world.

In terms of visual culture, *When God Lost Her Tongue* reveals how historical consciousness can be applied to the analysis of visual media representations of historical memory, identity, and trauma. Hobson (2021) also provides the reader with tools for critiquing and challenging dominant visual aesthetics that have marginalized or misrepresented Black women for over four centuries.

As a graduate student conducting research on the historiography of Black arts education, *When God Lost Her Tongue* has deepened my understanding of the

[5] Signare refers to "the class of free African women called signares who were mostly of mixed-race African and European (or Afro-European) descent and who had amassed wealth and influence through liaisons with European traders, merchants, and colonial officials" (Hobson, 2021, p. 69).

potential of imagination as a conceptual method for addressing archival absences. My current archival inquiry on Black arts education and artistic production in mid-20th century New York examines the transcultural characteristics and historical conditions that have impacted the multi-cultural Black artist community. I look specifically at how Black women artists-educators used their visual, intellectual, and advocacy work to assert and challenge ideals of racial, gender, and cultural identity. Hobson's (2021) authorship and scholarship has created a forward-thinking path for emerging scholars like me to follow.

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