When God Lost Her Tongue
Historical Consciousness and the Black Feminist Imagination
Janell Hobson
“From Harriet Tubman to Beyoncé, this is a book for anyone interested in the politics of Black female representation across the arts. In accessible language and through cogent analysis, Janell Hobson’s *When God Lost Her Tongue: Historical Consciousness and the Black Feminist Imagination* explores African Diasporic women’s lives as represented by others and by themselves through paintings, film, novels, music and poetry, to vivify what it means, and has always meant, to be Black and female under colonial eyes. The result is a text as freeing as it is edifying for Black women of yesteryear as of today.”

*Myriam J. A. Chancy, HBA Chair in the Humanities, Scripps College, and author of Autochthonomies: Transnationalism, Testimony and Transmission in the African Diaspora*

“Janell Hobson’s *When God Lost Her Tongue* is an epic Black feminist story, one that analyzes how Black women artists and writers engage the past in order to imagine more liberatory futures. With deft analysis and dazzling insights, Hobson takes us across space, African Diasporic traditions, and academic disciplines to reveal how Black women theorize their relationship to history and, by doing so, opens up new possibilities and genealogies for our understanding of the Divine, the Black Body, and Freedom itself.”

*Salamishah Tillet, Henry Rutgers Professor of African American Studies and Creative Writing, Rutgers University, USA, and author of In Search of The Color Purple: The Story of an American Masterpiece*

“When God Lost Her Tongue is imperative. It clearly and profoundly demonstrates the liberating power of the Black feminist imagination.”

*Ibram X. Kendi, National Book Award-winning author of Stamped from the Beginning and How to Be an Antiracist*
When God Lost Her Tongue explores historical consciousness as captured through the Black feminist imagination that re-centers the perspectives of Black women in the African Diaspora, and revisits how Black women’s transatlantic histories are re-imagined and politicized in our contemporary moment.

Connecting select historical case studies – from the Caribbean, the African continent, North America, and Europe – while also examining the retelling of these histories in the work of present-day writers and artists, Janell Hobson utilizes a Black feminist lens to rescue the narratives of African-descended women, which have been marginalized, erased, forgotten, and/or mis-remembered. African goddesses crossing the Atlantic with captive Africans. Women leaders igniting the Haitian Revolution. Unnamed Black women in European paintings. African women on different sides of the “door of no return” during the era of the transatlantic slave trade. Even ubiquitous “Black queens” heralded and signified in a Beyoncé music video or a Janelle Monáe lyric. And then there are those whose names we will never forget, like the iconic Harriet Tubman.

This critical interdisciplinary intervention will be key reading for students and researchers studying African American women, Black feminisms, feminist methodologies, Africana studies, and women and gender studies.

Janell Hobson is Professor and Chair of Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University at Albany, State University of New York, USA.
Subversive Histories, Feminist Futures

Books in the *Subversive Histories, Feminist Futures* series exemplify original research in feminist histories that “subvert” dominant and normative patterns of historical narrative by centering women, gender, and feminist politics. This exciting series delves into women’s histories, queer histories, people of colour histories and reclaims of non-western world heritage and cultures through high-quality research. The series aims to utilize intersectional historical analyses to revitalize scholarship in women’s, gender, and sexuality studies.

**When GodLost Her Tongue**
Historical Consciousness and the Black Feminist Imagination
*Janell Hobson*

**Worlding Postcolonial Sexualities**
Publics, Counterpublics, and Human Rights
*Kanika Batra*
WHEN GOD LOST HER TONGUE

Historical Consciousness and the Black Feminist Imagination

Janell Hobson
For my mother Jeanette Hobson and in memory of my grandmother Iris, my great aunt Lizzy, and my aunt Bev, who all disrupted silence with their tongues and kept our histories alive.
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Mapping Black women's histories

FRONTISPIECE
I live in a culture that dismisses history. Whitewashed stories. Forgotten names on street signs or buildings. The constant erasure of any trace of unpleasant memories (personal or national) substituted for more acceptable narratives. Conversely, the same culture loves its myths and myth making. History filtered through lore, rituals, ceremony, or ghost stories is somehow more digestible than if it were given to us straight, no chaser. Whether we prefer the stories framed by the imagination or the straightforward history based on empirical study, somewhere is the truth of the past that must inevitably shape our historical consciousness as it navigates both approaches.

The aim of this work is to specifically explore historical consciousness as captured through what I call the Black feminist imagination. Here, I am interested in reworking Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley’s definition, which posits that

the work of the imagination is … a central practice of black feminism – indeed, it remains a black feminist necessity to explicate, develop, and dwell in realities other than the Western secular empiricisms that deny black women’s importance in knowing, making and transforming the world.1

The Black feminist imagination that engages historical consciousness creates meaningful narratives to reimagine past events through an affirmation of Black women’s experiences and ways of knowing.

Tinsley’s discourse on the imagination derives from her exploration of Ezili, the Haitian lwa (spirit) of love. This deity’s particular story – of having lost her tongue during the Haitian Revolution – is the driving and organizing metaphor for this study. A maimed figure of divinity, who refuses 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. Within Ezili’s narrative, I identify an apt symbol for Black women’s histories, which are powerful enough to impact on the present moment, but too powerful to be heard, hence the attempts at silencing. The Black feminist imagination listens for the silence, detects the whispers and mumblings of history, for it is here that we will “find clues” to our enormously troubled and troubling past, as Alice Walker reminds us— with glimpses of glory here and there.

In this regard, history becomes a haunted place, where ghosts from the past are barely detected unless one actively seeks them through intermediary spiritual means or through feeling this presence. In *Ghostly Matters*, Avery Gordon advances affect theory, based on figurative hauntings, by insisting that an emotional approach is both revelatory and vital for research. As she argues, “being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition.” Similarly, Hershini Bhana Young posits that “at the margins of any discipline lies a haunted terrain, seething with ghosts who embody those stories about the relationships between power, knowledge, and experience that have been repressed in order to delimit a discipline.”

In *Pedagogies of Crossing*, M. Jacqui Alexander takes these approaches quite literally when she draws on the history of Kitsimba, a captive African woman who had survived the Middle Passage and who spoke to her through a Santeria ceremony. Disrupting the secular and spiritual divides, as well as the lines between the empirical and the intuitive, Alexander suggests a transformative methodology beyond “cold knowledge” to engage in Black feminist praxis. As she describes,

[Kitsimba’s] emergence is pedagogy in its own right: to instruct on the perilous boundary-keeping between the [sacred] and secular, between dispossession and possession, between materialism and materiality – the former having to do with the logics of accumulation, the latter with the energy and the composition of matter. She has traveled to the heart of feminism’s orthodoxies to illustrate that the personal is not only political but spiritual.

Taken together, Gordon, Young, and Alexander illuminate the enormous efforts that feminist praxis has mounted to dismantle and reconstruct the power dynamics embedded in the concepts of objectivity, epistemology, and methodology. Reaffirming embodied knowledge and marginalized ways of knowing, the Black feminist imagination builds on this legacy. My particular study explores the juxtapositions between the works of the imagination – art, literature, film, music, and other compositions – and empirical historical research, between the historical narrative and the contemporary imagining of history, between the lives lived then and those lived now, between the lives lived “over here” and those lived “over there.”
The last point is an imaginative reworking of the African Diaspora, which, as Brent Hayes Edwards notes, focuses “on issues of connection and collaboration among people of African descent.” In rendering the Black feminist imagination through a diasporic lens – as this work covers the Caribbean (Chapter 1), Europe (Chapter 2), Africa (Chapter 3), North America (Chapter 4), and the Diaspora at large (Chapter 5) – I aim to expand historical consciousness across eras and geographies. For what else is a haunting but a disruption of time and space?

From my own experience of the Diaspora, I am both fascinated and frightened by the concept of haunting, which complicates my love of history and the way it is framed within both a U.S. and Caribbean context. I often listen with an eager ear whenever my mother tells stories of her encounters with “jumbies” – the term used for ghosts on the island of Nevis where she is from – or of her own mother’s fear of such spirits. Such cultural beliefs reflect the primarily African tradition – intermixed with indigenous, European, and other immigrant cultures – from which they emerged in the Anglophone Caribbean.

However, I also have a number of relatives who are Jehovah’s Witnesses who believe that ghosts could only be deceitful demons and evil spirits, applying a biblical definition in which such entities reflect the rigid binary of good versus evil. These different responses to the ghostly encounter (spiritual rejection on the part of some family members, the relative comfort of a few if the encounter involves a loved one, or the abject terror regardless of whether the encounter includes someone who was once loved) also frame my own feelings. I would prefer to not have any encounter at all but would nonetheless accept any intuitive and uncanny lessons such spiritual interventions might reveal without my having to witness an apparition. In the wake of the electronic revolution, in which we have lost much of our pitch-black night due to light pollution – and, thus, few encounters of jumbies still take place, here in the U.S. or in the Caribbean – we are slowly losing our sense of connection to both material and spiritual planes: no accessible view of the milky way, no deep sleep uninterrupted by digital noise and constant glow, no spiritual stillness. To engage the past requires deep learning, deep connection, and deep dreaming.

My only “encounters” with ghostly figures often take place in dreams, sometimes, including those historical figures that I have researched. Sara Baartman (ca. 1789–1815) – about whom I had written in my first book, Venus in the Dark, and whose skeletal remains, seared in my memory, were once housed at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris as a scientific specimen before they were returned and buried in her native South Africa – had appeared to me in a dream, depressed and resigned, on the bicentennial anniversary of her death on New Year’s Eve 2015. I was willing to later mark this milestone with a reimagined Black (Women’s) History Month anniversary celebration at my university, similar to the symposium that I had organized in 2013 on the occasion of the centennial anniversary death of Harriet Tubman (ca. 1822–1913) on March 10, 1913.

Interestingly, I did not dream of Tubman as I had with Baartman. Instead, she spoke to me while I was feeling terribly ill on the day of the symposium. As
resounding as any cymbal, I heard what I imagined to be Tubman’s voice: “Keep moving!” Somehow, that voice spurred me onward, and over the course of the day, I had gotten better, felt healthier, and was completely energized by a well-attended event at day’s end. And I didn’t need to envision her pointing a pistol at me to urge me on to freedom. Her voice simply insisted: You got this!

I have no interest in determining whether such encounters can be empirically measured. What strikes me is the imagination that we employ to empower ourselves with knowledge of the past. And as a Black feminist interdisciplinary scholar, such an imagination can fuel the spark for further empirical knowledge. What began as a simple desire to mark Harriet Tubman’s anniversary turned into my listening to an encouraging historical voice, which then led to a years-long research agenda, tracing her presence in the present – pop-culture narratives, Internet discourse, art, literature – and the past through archives and historical sites.

I have visited her gravesite at Fort Hill Cemetery in Auburn, New York three times – the first time completely bewildered as to its location as I wandered through numerous headstones in a manner similar to when Alice Walker searched for Zora Neale Hurston’s unmarked gravesite,8 the last time during an annual pilgrimage attended by different Black church members from the northeast. I brought my students to the Harriet Tubman Home and to her gravesite in Auburn, and later visited and toured the areas associated with her life in slavery in Church Creek, Maryland, where a visitor center named for her finally opened in 2017. As an interdisciplinary Black feminist scholar, I am interested in engaging both the fantasies we tell of the past and the actual past that needs our diligent empirical research. I especially wish to combine history’s disciplinary approach to women as historical actors and the interdisciplinary approach in women’s, gender and sexuality studies to viewing the same women as agents of change turned feminist subjects.

Those of us who do the research and teach it in colleges and universities are witnessing its impact in the realm of the everyday. I am reminded of a group of Black women activists who staged a protest back in 2017 over the statue of modern gynecology founder J. Marion Sims (1813–83) in New York City’s Central Park, a protest based on the history Black feminist scholars revealed about his surgical experiments on enslaved women in Alabama from 1845 to 1850.9 These women’s names were recorded as Betsy, Lucy, and Anarcha, the last who was surgically experimented upon thirty different times without anesthesia. It is the affect, the imagined feeling of and feeling for Anarcha’s pain that motivated these protests in the present. Until recently, Sims had been celebrated for his medical breakthrough with the speculum, and it was not until feminist historians refocused on the enslaved women, whom he had rented from their enslavers to develop his medical technologies, that the narrative changed significantly.

This Black feminist protest joined with other memorial protests throughout the U.S. South over contested Confederate monuments to the Civil War’s “lost cause” of preserving chattel slavery. Because these monuments were created in part due to backlash over Reconstruction-era gains of the formerly
enslaved and later over challenges to legal Jim Crow segregation, the millennial era is now seeking redress with newfound historical narratives that resist the heroic constructions of pro-slavery enthusiasts. What will erect in place of these monuments that are eventually removed remains to be seen, although it reflects the contentiousness of American historical memory. As David Blight reminds us in his work on Civil War commemorations: “Deflections and evasions, careful remembering and necessary forgetting, and embittered and irreconcilable versions of experience are all the stuff of historical memory.” At least with the Central Park protest, Sims’s statue has been removed and will be replaced by a statue designed by Black woman sculptor Vinnie Bagwell, titled “Victory beyond Sims,” dedicated to the memory of Anarcha, Betsy, and Lucy.

There will be those who say that this new statue should coexist with the previous Sims statue rather than force the latter’s removal. However, the very commemoration of Anarcha, Betsy, and Lucy would compel his memory, but one of violence instead of heroism. This cultural production reflects what Michelle Commander has identified as “plantation counternarratives” that promote “alternative accounts about antebellum life by focusing on the interior lives of enslaved persons and rejecting the dominant, sanitized narratives that gloss over the brutality of the era.” The challenge now is to reveal the truth of these lives in ways that honor their full humanity beyond victimization.

We see such narratives especially in contemporary films on slavery, from Django Unchained (2012) to 12 Years a Slave (2013) to Antebellum (2020) – all produced on the same Evergreen plantation where the enslaved once labored and where these productions have been relocated to the “Hollywood South” of Louisiana’s Red River region (Commander, 32). Antebellum – starring the pop singer and actress Janelle Monáe and co-directed by Gerard Bush and Christopher Renz – is particularly chilling because it reimagines the past in the present, as the storyline opens on a “plantation romance,” unfolding in a continuous shot, which later turns into a plantation horror that relies on the abduction and imprisonment of present-day Black people enlisted to “reenact” a history of slavery that fully supports the southern fantasies of Civil War reenactments. The latter is revealed toward the climactic ending when Monáe’s character Veronica Henley escapes her prison only to find herself in the midst of an amusement park where these reenactments blend into the brutal conditions that shaped her experience of enslavement. Here, history collides uncomfortably and violently with the present. While this movie was universally panned (unfairly in my view), it nonetheless reflects the “wake work” Christina Sharpe has argued as the contemporary Black experience, which is “swept up in the wake produced and determined … by the afterlives of slavery.”

Interestingly, Monáe has constructed much of her persona around themes based on Afrofuturism, a term first coined in Mark Dery’s essay “Black to the Future” (1993) in reference to creative works that integrate Black experiences from the past and present with futuristic themes in speculative fantasy and science fiction. This is portrayed in Monáe’s futuristic cyborg alter ego Cindi