shee tongue cut out: slavery, gender, and resistance

Ana-Maurine Lara, *Kohnjehr Woman* (Washington, DC: RedBone, 2017); 71 pages; ISBN 978-0989940528 (paperback)

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The publication of *Kohnjehr Woman* makes Dominican American poet, novelist, and anthropologist Ana-Maurine Lara one of the rare Dominican poets to ever fully address the enslavement of Africans in the Americas.[1] Lara stands, too, as one of the few to consider women's enslavement from a queer perspective. She does this through her fictional narrative character Shee, an enslaved woman from Saint-Domingue who, after having poisoned a French slave-owner, has her tongue cut out and is sold to planters in Virginia. As in other neoslave narratives published either in the Caribbean or in the United States—for example, Marie Vieux-Chauvet's *La danse sur le volcan* (1957), Évelyne Trouillot's *Rosalie l'infâme* (2005), and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987)—Lara's *Kohnjehr Woman* recreates the violent past of enslavement by giving voice to those who experienced brutal family separation, rape, and physical torture.[2] She re-envisions this past through images of resistance, self-empowerment, and overwhelming love in the midst of all.

As a poetry collection that blends lyrical and narrative forms, *Kohnjehr Woman* reads like a novel. It is divided into three "books" with highly suggestive biblical titles: "Book of Samuel," "Book of Sarah," and "Book of Rebecca." Each poem is told from the perspective of one of five enslaved characters—Samuel, Old Nate, Rebecca, Sarah, and Shee—who recounts his or her plights: a mother sold when her baby is born; a broken, dying father pleading with his son to accept his fate; an enslaved man whipping another; an enslaved man forced into rape by his master; a mother imploring her young daughter not to menstruate so as to delay an inevitable sexual assault; or a daughter hoping her own rape will prevent her master from selling her away. Among them, Shee, the Kohnjehr Woman who came from "Sandoman," stands out. She first appears in "Passing (*Samuel knows Shee*)" (11). From the Latin *conjurare*, Lara's term *Kohnjehr* (conjure/r/d) evokes the 1791 Bois Caïman ceremony in which a collective oath taken by enslaved rebels initiated the collapse of an entire system of colonial violence.[3] Bound by this vow, conjurers are not ordinary plotters. In Saint-Domingue, "to conjure" is also to summon spiritual entities to assist rebellious designs. Here, speech power spirals into magical spells against the enemy. Most concretely, as in the case of François Mackandal in the 1750s and of Shee in Lara's collection, this means invoking another's death through the administration of poison.[4]

The cutting out of Shee's tongue is, of course, meant to punish her, but it also thwarts the power of her speech. This silencing resonates with the long misogynistic practice of deauthorizing and dismissing female speech, this time through physical mutilation. In the Western tradition, for instance, the image of the muted woman can be

traced to the Greek mythological figure of Philomela. Raped by her brother-in-law, Tereus, who then cuts out her tongue so she cannot tell her story, Philomela "speaks" to her sister through a tapestry she embroiders with images of the rape.[5] Across the Haitian revolutionary literary corpus, this violence echoes what happened to Joseph, a character in Vieux-Chauvet's *La danse sur le volcan*. Slave-owners in Saint-Domingue cut out Joseph's tongue to punish him for teaching the writings of antislavery thinkers to his pupils. In the wake of this mutilation Joseph makes tortured, unintelligible sounds when he tries to speak.

In Lara's collection, Shee's mutilated tongue is in stark contrast to the multiple voices arising from the other characters. The sounds Shee makes represent what could have emerged from a mutilated mouth. As Lara points out in a note to the reader, Shee's words take meaning when read out loud: "[They] pass through our body, to invoke. They are not a dialect. They are the sounds of a broken tongue" (n.p.). Further, I might add, reading aloud how a person with a broken tongue would speak helps crack open these sounds' opacity. It is part of deciphering Shee's language. For instance, the title of the poem "Meenawtsawry," when sounded out, is "Me Not Sorry." This indicates how, throughout the poem, what at a first glance may appear as gibberish soon emerges as the language of unrepentance:

> huat yu wanmee tutehlyu
> datmeesawry
> . . . .
> . . . .
> mee nawtgawn chenjjjj
> . . . .
> kaws eet hent mee datgawt
> dehlesh rowund meetuhng (12)

"What do you want me to tell you? That me sorry?" Shee asks. "Me not going to change, 'cause it ain't me that got the lash around me tongue." Such is her fierceness that she creates a new language out of the sounds that come from her mutilated mouth. As Shee explains in "Mehkmahn" ("Make Amends"), her tongue was wrapped around these sounds—*they* made her speak *their* sounds, and she made *their* sounds *hers*, reappropriating them and creating her own new language. Her tongue had been cut for speaking too loud, for being too proud, but now she claims these sounds, and now she makes *her* sounds *ours* (71). In other words, Shee's tongue may have been cut out, but she did not lose her voice, let alone her fierce, unbreakable spirit. She *speaks*, nonetheless.

Because Shee comes from Saint-Domingue, I see a French element in this character, one that emerges this time through the crafty construction of her name. *She*, a feminine subject pronoun in English, has been affixed the particle *e*. In French, this serves to declinate verbal past participles into the feminine gender (for instance, in *conjurée* or *rompue*). Combining English and French to create a new, hybrid name does more than bring together two languages and two distinct colonial spaces; it also constructs a new signifier, since two grammatical signs—a feminine subject and, potentially, a feminine object—compose a double feminine. It is thus fitting that Shee embodies female queer love and desire, wagering on life and emotional bonding as modes of resistance against enslavement. As seen in "Mid-Night (*Rebecca learns the truth*)," in which Rebecca

reveals her love for Shee, queer love—an unsuspected and unexpected source of resistance and tenderness in the plantation context—eschews the dehumanizing sexual exploitation of enslaved female bodies (65). "Any act outside of the [re]production of labor is in and of itself 'queer,'" Lara herself has pointed out. "Shee . . . allows for the possibility of a [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] subjectivity that specifically engages in love acts and speech acts outside the narrow confines of a policed heterosexuality."[6] In other words, imagining queer love in this context helps recreate a past in which female bodies could potentially achieve pleasure without contributing to the slave reproduction machinery.

Kohnjehr Woman helps readers think of enslaved women as overcoming the violence inflicted on their bodies, repossessing their bodies and agency, and even creating new languages. Building on the traditions of African American and Caribbean neoslave narratives, Lara's haunting collection extends urgent conversations taking place in slavery studies, Haitian revolutionary literary studies, gender and queer studies, Black feminist studies, and subaltern studies, not to mention linguistics and Black poetry studies.

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[1] This review essay is part of a presentation I made at the first Coloquio Internacional de Estudios sobre Afroamérica, "Negros en las ciudades coloniales de las Américas: Subversión, rebeldía, resiliencia," Casa de las Américas, Havana, 19–21 June 2019.

[2] For translations in English, see Marie Vieux-Chauvet, *Dance on the Volcano*, trans. Kaiama L. Glover (Brooklyn, NY: Archipelago, 2016); and Évelyne Trouillot, *The Infamous Rosalie*, trans. M. A. Salvodon (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013).

[3] The Vodou ceremony held in Bois Caïman on 22 August 1791 is considered to have triggered what became the Haitian Revolution. For one historical discussion, see David Patrick Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), esp. 84–92. Geggus observes that the revolution actually began on 14 August at the plantation owned by Lenormand de Mézy, in a meeting where hundreds of slaves conspired to kill slave-owners. To Geggus, the Vodou ceremony a week later "served to sacralize" a political movement already realized and to mobilize support among a wider network of slaves (91).

[4] Mackandal was a rebel who, along with others, initiated a campaign of poisoning White planters and their families in the 1750s. He was captured and burned alive at the stake but stayed in collective memories as the legend of a *houngan* (Vodou leader) who could change shape and escape authorities.

[5] For one of the many studies on the feminist import of Philomela, see Elissa Marder, "Disarticulated Voices: Feminism and Philomela," in Christina Hendricks and Kelly Oliver, eds., *Language and Liberation: Feminism, Philosophy, and Language* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 149–69.

[6] Ana-Maurine Lara, "I Wanted to Be More of a Person: Conjuring [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer] Futures," *Bilingual Review / Revista Bilingüe* 33, no. 4 (2017): 9, 10 (Lara's brackets), https://bilingualreview.utsa.edu/index.php/br/article/view/277/265.

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