
Book Review: Lanita Jacobs-Huey. *From the Kitchen to the Parlor: Language and Becoming in African American Women's Hair*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. 180pp. Price: \$24.95

Contemporary literature is recognized for the development of themes that have not been considered very literary because they don't respond to the aesthetics criteria of the male canon or the predominantly White discourse. Among these themes, the exploration of the female reality, especially the Black African woman, is prominent.

Among these themes, the sexual hue has portrayed women as objects of desire, abuse, reverence, but marginalized by the color of their skin. However, there are very few works about the reality of the Black American female that are actually semantic labels of their world. Hair is precisely one of the subjective symbols of the African American that deserves the attention of the canon because it constitutes a semantic label of race and identity. The Black American female is labeled as Black because of her color and her kinky hair.

Among Black American writers, ethnographer Lanita Jacobs-Huey emphasizes the importance of hair to a Black woman in an original manner in the first word of her introduction: "Hair" (p. 3). This noun is followed by the affirmation: "It may seem like a mundane subject, but it has profound implications for how African American women experience the World."

Jacobs-Huey dedicates her work, which took her six years to complete, to explore the meaning of both language and genre to the African American woman. It is a contemporary social discourse that postulates the aesthetics of the Negroid through the exploration of different symbols. She uses language, genre and hair elements to give testimony of the contradictions of being a Black American woman in a society where white people defines what is beauty, and formulates the literary, social and economic rules, among other criteria of the established ideology.

The book explores two focal themes in the formation and validity of the identity of the African American woman: hair as an esthetic affair and hair as a political statement. These polarities are compiled in the sentences: "Hair is just hair" and "Hair is not just hair" (p. 4). Hair becomes the manifestation of the ideology of the African American woman when she decides to leave it in its natural state or submit to painful or costly treatments (hot comb, hot

irons, use of chemical straighteners, etc.) in order to respond to an ideal that acknowledges only the white women's idea of beauty. Language and hair become the means for the representation of the self and for its negotiation in the world, a process known as "becoming" (p. 5).

The exploration of the hair value for the African American woman is presented through a diversity of optics in six of the seven chapters of her work. The first chapter exposes its comments towards the interaction between clients and stylists in the beauty parlors of Oakland, California and South Carolina. In this chapter, Jacobs-Huey's mother's beauty salon has its own space. It was the author's first direct contact with the Black women's struggle with their hair and blackness. The second chapter compiles the dynamics that are developed in the seminars and hair shows in the diverse cities of the U.S. and London. She reveals how the stylists have adopted the medical language as their own in order to validate their work as a medical profession. They do that by affirming: "We are like doctors; we diagnose and treat sick hair" (p. 24). The third chapter presents how the job of beautifying hair possesses spiritual and religious properties for the members of the Cosmetologist for Christ Organization, a divine group that provides a "Jesus' healing touch" and can generate a significant monetary income. From there, the treatments are then accompanied by prayers, benedictions, testimonials and songs. The fourth chapter transports the space reserved for the ethnographic study to Black Comedy Clubs. Here the debate is resumed with the question "It that your hair?" (p. 72).

The next chapter, chapter 5, is directed towards the internet to explore the ramifications of a cybernetic debate that enriches everything previously exposed about the construction of racial identity and its authenticity through the use of language and hair. The main idea is that it's better to decide for going natural, which signifies seeing one's proper beauty. The issue is recapitulated in the question "How do you wear your hair?" from the AFROAM-L hair debates (p. 89). The sixth chapter presents the differences between the ideologies of the white woman's hair race and the African American woman's, while denouncing the difference and difficulty of knowing the hair reality of the African American woman. The difficulty extends to both the white and African American woman, since society has not recognized beauty in the texture of the latter. It is reinforced that the African American woman binds her hair with social experiences, genre and her racial conscience.

The final part of the book, chapter 7, is a reflection of the author's commitment to other scholars as "native anthropologists." Upon finishing the book, we find ourselves with the

identity development trajectory of the African American woman stemming from her kitchen (bathroom, rooms and other spaces within the house) leading to the beauty salons. This trajectory's focal point is the treatment of hair as an essential element in the development of womanhood and the projection of the self. Nothing escapes the author's eye.

From the Kitchen to the Parlor: Language and Becoming in African American Women's Hair allows the reader to recognize that one of the main strengths, if not the principal one of Jacobs-Huey's works, is that she is both author and witness of the acts narrated in the book. She actually partakes of that history because she is also an African American woman. She presents and documents the results of her observations, interviews, recordings, among others, but always recognizing that each participant has her own voice. The other voice, in reality, is also hers. In that manner, she validates a fundamental experience in the life of an African American woman: the managing of her hair. The finding of the hair identity becomes the finding of the self. It also becomes a political statement.

The projection of the use of the hairstylists vocabulary is emphasized in order to legitimize their expertise in the process of the beautification of the hair, in the development of the Black American women's mystique or aesthetic: *cosmetologist* versus *kitchen beauticians*, *curly hair* versus *nappy hair*, *wavy* or *fine hair* versus *good hair*, *shampoo* versus *wash*, *curling iron* versus *curler* and *hairstylist* versus *hairdresser* (p. 29). That vocabulary also serves as an instrument of power in the voice that manages it.

With, *From the Kitchen to the Parlor: Language and Becoming in African American Women's Hair Care*, Lanita Jacobs-Huey forms part of the African American women literary tradition, a group that includes Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Terri Macmillan and Gayl Jones, among others. Indubitably, Jacobs-Huey reveals herself as an original voice in a tradition that has gained intensity since the 1970's. Any scholar interested in contemporary linguistic and literary studies should read her work.

Reviewed by Wanda I. Delgado-Rodríguez, *Universidad de Puerto Rico*