Nanny of the Maroons and the Mythology of [my]Self

Marva S McClean, Dr.
Nanny of the Maroons and the Mythology of [my] Self

Marva McClean

Routes to Identity

As the eight year old narrator of the play on the Morant Bay Rebellion held at Oracabessa Primary School, I recounted Paul Bogle’s militant march into Morant Bay where he staged one of the most significant rebellions in the island’s history. While the focus was on Paul Bogle, it was a precursor to stories about our national heroes, an annual performance that paved the road to my discovery of and relationship with Nanny of the Maroons. I was in awe of Nanny’s position as Jamaica’s lone national heroine. In time, this fearsome, dark Ashanti warrior, female epitome of power, became for me, the archetype of the Jamaican personae, a mythic representation of myself.

Even at that tender age, my heart pulsed in rhythm with the excitement of the battle. I felt joyous that a woman had the courage and the strength to defy an army consistently, so much so that the history books described her as a thorn in the sides of the British. Her story opened up for me a world of possibilities; she presented the other side of the mirror of what it meant to be a woman, the otherness of female — majestic, militant and black. While I lived examples of prudence, hard work, courage and nurturing through the actions of my own mother and grandmother, “dis likkle pissin’ tail gal” (as my Aunt Tete so colorfully referred to me), became excited by the story of battle and subterfuge that Nanny represented. And so as the years progressed, Nanny became a speaking document of the West Indian female persona, an allegory of what it means to be a black female growing up in Jamaica and later, a woman of color in the Americas.
The history books recount Nanny as a freedom fighter up in the mountains of Nanny Town, a soldier who fought and beguiled the British until her courageous death in the 1750's. The legends of my childhood carried in tall tales, nighttime stories, and school yard remembrances, tell of Nanny as beautiful, with bewitching eyes that flamed with the fires of freedom; a mythological figure, who had the power to change her shape, and travel with the birds soaring into the air. Both the history and mythology converge to convey an image of a multifaceted individual whose multiple realities defied the dichotomous gender roles assigned by society. She was both warrior soldier, “more man than Adu” (Campbell, 1988) and intuitive spiritual leader, in touch with the pulse of her people and the rhythm of the land. Then, as now, Nanny’s story remains a central part of the mythology of the West Indian experience, a living example of one who countered what might have been the discontinuity of our history, one who stared down the social injustices of her time with fierce determination and keen militaristic ability to establish a cosmology of agency, a blueprint for action that still guides us today.

*The Power of Myth*

Historians continue to argue about the factual details concerning Nanny’s life, including the time of her death, whether or not she was married (Campbell, p.51). It is not the facts of these minor details that matter, it is the substance of Nanny’s experience, the significance of her contribution to the shaping of the West Indian identity and the bequeathing of a cultural legacy that transcends borders to infuse the mind and spirit of a people with the knowledge that we have a rich legacy on which to draw. Nanny’s experience was layered, allusive, fragmented, and rich. And we know for sure that, “her powerful and pervasive influence [must have] helped to shape the
policy of the Windwards” (Campbell, p. 52). Her story offers directions on how we may deconstruct and reconstruct our history to find elements that become the threads we weave together into the formation of self.

Since our journey on the Middle Passage to various locations in the Americas our survival has rested on the power of memory keeping. We have used language to evoke the memories and shared inheritance of our culture. These remembrances played a pivotal role in the survival of our African ancestors during the horrendous four hundred years of slavery. Today, these stories are vital to us, the memory keepers, who have a special responsibility to continue to weave the patterns in the tapestry that tells of our struggle to carve out a destiny of independence.

Myths, like other forms of storytelling were developed to explain a people’s world, how they came to be, and their place in the universe. Indeed, a country’s stories and myths provide a striking confirmation of the essence of its vision of itself and of the world, and especially, the future of its young. Through memory keeping and storytelling we are able to counter the discontinuity of our history and traditions that Eurocentrism has sought to impose on us. These have proven to be effective strategies to bring the generations together and perpetuate our culture. Our stories allow us to travel in many directions, through metaphors and symbols and to connect with a world beyond the narrow confines of geography and man-made boundaries. The legend of Nanny is one that stimulates the imagination and transports us to that revolutionary world of our brave ancestors.

*Warrior Women & the Forging of a Communal Consciousness*
I came of age in an era of the Civil Rights Movement in the USA, the liberation of island colonies, and the debilitating impact of the International Monetary Fund. Our teachers guided us in applying strategies of critical analysis of the changes taking place in the world and their impact on my island home, Jamaica. My studies of West Indian history at Excelsior High School, Jamaica, strengthened the conceptualization of the world as a site of struggle. At the 6th form level, we journeyed into critical analysis of our history, the meaning and impact of colonization, and the forging of the New World and our place in it. At the University of the West Indies, this discourse gained urgency with the teachings of scholars like Professor Rex Nettleford and Maureen Warner-Lewis who directed us to be proactive, remaining habitually critical of the society. At the same time, they reminded us of the imperative to consistently and purposefully forge a Caribbean cultural identity. This philosophical perspective has been the foundation on which I constructed the world and remains the lenses through which I view life.

In this tradition of critical literacy, mine was a childhood schooled in colorful metaphors, wise sayings and daunting stories to caution me to think before I spoke, to hold a good friend with both hands and to always, always, tek me han mek fashion. My mother, grandmother and the various aunts and cousins in my life never missed an opportunity to share stories about their life’s experiences, tales passed down by their fore-parents to instruct me about the vagaries of life, the unforeseen future, scripting out an imaginative volume that has companioned me through the circuitous paths that I navigate throughout my journey. Indeed, there were times when it was difficult to discern from these colorful stories, what was real or imagined. What stood out was the intent of the instruction, the life lessons they taught, and the support and reassurance they offered. I became attuned to the value of literature in exploring self and shaping one’s identity.
This initial exposure to the feminist perspective in history and literature was further enriched by a crucial journey into the study of African American literature. These cross-cultural textual interactions revealed a shared legacy with the life and times of warriors like Harriet Tubman, the Moses of her people, and Sojourner Truth, a striking model of antislavery heroism. I also learnt about the lives of female soldiers who fought in disguise alongside the team of Buffalo Soldiers. At a crucial time in my journey I was strengthened by this conceptual framework of black female identity. These warrior women present us with a framework to shatter stereotypes and reject the moral codes and values of a Eurocentric version of history.

Memory Keeping

Today, my work as an educator brings me face to face with young people of all ages who struggle to understand themselves and their place in the society. They look to adults like me to guide them in making sense of this chaotic world. In this postmodern world characterized by ambiguous and changing situations with unclear factors and multiple conflicting interpretations, they are especially in need of assistance in interrogating the changes constantly sweeping their world. I am aware that they have been witnesses to dramatic events and changes such as the end of apartheid and the bombing of the Twin Towers in the United States, and the ravages of Hurricane Katrina on the [black] citizens of New Orleans. Even as the world celebrates President Barack Obama as a world leader, racism and discrimination are often, the defining conditions that children of color encounter at school and in the society. Within the urban classrooms of South Florida, where I work and conduct research, children of color continue to be marginalized; they continue to lag behind their white counterparts and labeled as failures within a system intent on their standardization. I am constantly confronted with the urgent need to find opportunities to open up spaces.
for them to explore their multiple realities, connect with their past history, and forge a strong viable identity of self.

In recognizing the classroom as a political site of struggle, I turn to the imagination to penetrate the history, dig deep into the place where our story begins, and our life emerges rich, colorful and vibrant on a deep river of hope and triumph. The history and mythology of Nanny remains a meaningful site to examine these kinds of cultural meanings. Her story provides us with the tools of counter memory, where we can look to the past for the hidden histories excluded from dominant narratives and unearth new perspectives to resist the grand Eurocentric narratives that give no emphasis to our stories. Her legend is the assertion of human dignity that must be shared with this younger generation, including my own children growing up to be independent young women in Florida.

Open Spaces & Sites of Navigation

Not only does the legend of Nanny recall the facts of history, it also becomes an allegory of the possible course of actions we can pursue in handling difficult challenges. Nanny resisted injustice and through her leadership and militaristic ability, she interrupted the hegemonic construction of power in the colony of Jamaica and played a crucial role in dismantling colonialism in the West Indies. Excluded and hunted, Nanny established a site of citizenship for free blacks. The organization of Nanny Town created a family structure for those daring to claim freedom. This physical site took on symbolic meaning to become psychological space as well. Today, it has become for me, a metaphor for conceptualizing and claiming citizenship regardless of where I may be physically situated.
The mythology of Nanny provides us with a socio-political ideology of resistance to hegemony, a blueprint for interrupting the cycle of domination wherever we may encounter it. Her story provides us with a framework for critical thinking and political activism. Through cunning and guile, she implemented an elaborate system of subterfuge to outsmart the oppressor. She disrupted the hegemonic construction of power in the island at a time when her race was legally deprived of any autonomy. This warrior spirit must prevail today in directing our steps in tackling the newer forms of racism and discrimination that prevail in our communities.

There is ideological significance in the recurring imagery of Nanny taking flight. By tapping into conceptual metaphors of open spaces, movement and flight associated with the legend of Nanny, we are reminded of the long tradition of black people using the creative imagination to soar beyond the limits of our problems and the immediacy of our circumstances.

Working as a curriculum administrator within a large urban school system that is based on the deliberate construction of hegemonic relationships, I find that I must struggle to assert the right of children of color (including those of Caribbean heritage) to an education that honors their background. I am often confronted with the bigotry of those who seek to maintain the status quo and continue to silence the voice of the marginalized. Within this political environment, I succor power from Nanny and invoke her militancy as I work to implement strategies that guide teachers in the engagement of critical discourse and a plan of action that creates detours around the borders of standardization that have been erected.

Through a subtle but assertive program of critical pedagogy, I assert storytelling as a method of critical reading instruction that embraces the cultural background of students into the curriculum and offers hope within this community of practice.
Through folktales, rituals and re-enactments like the ones I participated in at Oracabessa Primary School, we work to traverse borders and open spaces where the mind can flourish and the spirit will soar. This storytelling curriculum has become a deliberative practice that is both critical of existing inequalities and powerful on envisioning possibilities; it is one that that acknowledges the classroom as a political site and the teacher as an agent of change. It informs the children that their language, culture, and identities are valued.

The Journey Continues …

It is our responsibility to our cultural community to search for the truth in the stories and to use rich colorful language to keep them going; to recount the myth. In short, we have a responsibility to fill in the parts that the history books left blank. We must tell our stories including that of Nanny, the feminist warrior, who fought with both the body and the mind. She fought at a time when black men and women were regarded as chattels. How extraordinary her accomplishments were in light of all these challenges! She is our theory in action, a symbol of the enduring qualities of our heritage, a tool to strengthen the foundation for our children.

She belongs to all of us, washed down to us by the rivers of history, the memories of our ancestors, and the psychic connections forged through the journey of the Middle Passage.

As I watch my own daughters become young women within the chaotic environment of urban Miami, I am ever conscious of the need to create a linkage with their past and provide them with a cultural reservoir from which they can fortify themselves and navigate their way through the haziness. I share the story of Nanny, drawing parallels within the context of our current socio-political environment. I tell them these stories so that they may establish strong bonds with the past and strengthen the future that is
already upon us. I hope that through these stories of resistance and empowerment, they find courage and purpose in the portrayal of this magnificent woman whose story points them to the central role of their culture, and their own role as caretakers of the past and agents of change.

The legends say that Nanny's voice is still heard in the bird song of the mountains, and her spirit still soars above the ruins of Nanny Town.

And I know this to be true.

References

