

Nanny - warrior woman or man royal?

Nanny of the Maroons' sexuality was questioned by Ronald Cummings of the University of Leeds-UK, asserting that the most homophobic country in the western hemisphere ...

has a "speculative queer genealogy" amongst its national heroes. Cummings called national hero Nanny a 'man royal' (masculine female) in the trajectory that includes butch-lesbians. The evidence given is that the historical and literary accounts of Nanny utilise masculine descriptors. Cummings was invited to present at the Caribbean Studies Association (CSA) conference last week in Jamaica, but he missed his flight so Kei Miller, a UK/Jamaica scholar, read his paper instead. "I swear that Ronald's visa didn't work out just so he wouldn't have to present on a paper that was basically outing Nanny," quipped Miller of the University of Glasgow, Scotland. But Cummings wrote that he was less concerned about labelling Nanny as lesbian and more concerned with her gender-bending characteristics. His paper was entitled Nanny of the Maroons and the genealogy of the Man Royal: constructing a speculative queer Jamaican genealogy. "It is easy to situate Nanny of the Maroons in the genealogy of the man royal," Cummings wrote in his paper. "I am not so much concerned with sexual subjectivity but rather with the subversion and or complication of the systemic gender binarisms that Nanny has historically or more so literary (analysis) enacts." Nanny led the Maroons against the British in the First Maroon War from 1720 to 1739. In 1740, the crown offered five hundred acres of land to Nanny and those she led - called... Nanny Town. It was a huge victory for the former slaves to defeat the British army - then the world's superpower. "Nanny is mentioned only four times in official archives and only in a fragmented and contradictory manner," wrote Cummings, citing previous work done by historian and poet Kamau Brathwaite in Wars of Respect. He adds that her characteristics are mostly known via folklore including stories about her catching bullets in her behind.

Added Cummings: "Thus the historical moment of Nanny's actual existence is less important here than the consideration of the sight and moment of the figurative existence, both the historical and literary (writing)." Cummings found interesting the man royal traits in H Thomas' account on Nanny published in 1890. "Nanny is described as 'ferocious and blood-thirsty more than any man among the maroons'. Thomas also describes Nanny as an unsexed woman," wrote Cummings. "This unsexing serves to mark her imposing bodily comportments which he reads as threatening. It also refers to the masculine female body which he renders in terms of grotesque and hence necessarily outside the realm of heterosexual desire." Cummings also cites "a memoir published in 1788 there is reference to 'the old hag who cast sentence and death among an enforced man and English officer' believed to be Nanny. She is further described, 'She had a girdle around her waist, with, and I speak with encompass, nine or ten egret knives hanging'". Cummings cites Lorna Goodison's poem on Nanny, as an example of the conflict between warrior and woman: "My womb was sealed with molten wax of killer bees for nothing should enter nothing should leave." Cummings wrote. "Nanny maybe figuratively located in the Jamaican genealogy of the man royal. In these cited representations I suggest that Nanny is marked by various tensions around issues of gender normativity and hetero-normativity. Like the figure of the man royal she disrupts the coded system of gender binaries and simultaneously contained within its crutches of representation."

The CSA is an independent professional organisation which promotes multidisciplinary research of the Caribbean. It is an association for regional and international scholars and practitioners. Founded in 1974 by 300 Caribbeanists, the CSA now has over 1100 members.