

UCLA
CSW Update Newsletter

Title

A Magical Herstory

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9zq163q9>

Author

Logan, Alysia

Publication Date

2007-02-01

A MAGGICAL HERSTORY

by Alysia Logan

***What's she looking for now,
and why can't she get it?***

– Maryse Conde, *Tree of Life*

Those were the questions asked when a great-granddaughter wanted to know about her family history. Why did she want to talk about the past, they wondered. She had every worldly possession one could dream of. But, the possession she craved most was of the spirit world. It was the knowledge of her ancestors' stories that she needed. And, possession of the spirit world is priceless.

Women are the primary storytellers and culture keepers for African families across the Diaspora. This is made apparent through the literature, food, music; it is all encompassing through religion. If it weren't for the women in the African Diaspora, many of our stories would never be told. If it weren't for the mothers in our communities, many of our traditions would have been forgotten. If it weren't for the sheroes in our collective lineage, our gods would have never been raised again and our powerful and strong sensual female deities like Osun, Yemoja and Oya would have been all but forgotten.

Our African heritage—West African, in particular—has been carried on by a single common thread from the Continent through the Caribbean and to the Americas: the woman's capacity for memory and her need to share. Whether that sharing is through childbirth, worshiping or storytelling, it is this courageous act that fortifies generations to carry on the traditions of a place most have only heard of and never experienced with their own



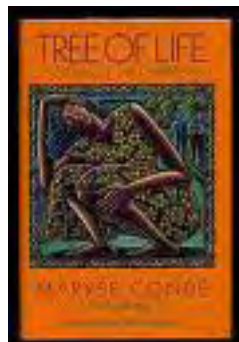
senses. It is through these magical herstories that our culture continues to thrive.

Maryse Conde (left) displays this very pattern within two of her novels in particular, *Tree of Life* and *I Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*. Even with the Salem Witch Trials

and slavery at her door, Tituba couldn't help but share her wisdom with the white and black population alike, "What is a witch... Isn't it the ability to communicate with the invisible world, to keep constant links with the dead, to care for others and heal, a superior gift of nature that inspires respect, admiration and gratitude?" (p. 17) What's even more fascinating is Tituba's relationship with her ancestors, also revolutionary spirits. Her main caretaker, Mama Yaya, a conjure woman, raises Tituba from a young age after both her mother and father are brutally killed at the slave master's hands.

Because of Mama Yaya's reputation as a witch, she was sent away from the plantation to live in the woods, which is where Tituba gains all of her mystical knowledge. It is here she learns to talk to the ancestors and help their descendants bear the weight of the physical world. It is also here where her powerful path is set on its course. It isn't until she meets her husband that she begins to desire the world outside of the ancestors, even after they warn her several times against the inevitable danger in taking up with her new man. Although her husband is her downfall, he is also the reason that Tituba leaves her life of solitude in the woods and voluntarily steps into the world of slavery, setting the stage for her story to be told.

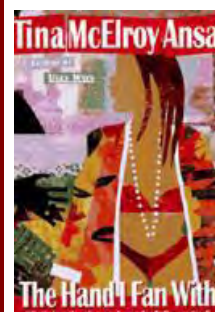
What the New World calls magic is actually memory intertwined between the spirit world and the world of the physical. Maryse Conde attacks the disappearance of worshipping one's ancestors through *Tree of Life*. Coco, the great-granddaughter of Albert and the narrator of the novel, takes up the challenge of retelling her family lineage to give her self-empowerment and identity. She takes into account everyone's individual stories, allowing them to unravel at their own pace. Since Coco is the storyteller, this is her version of



the facts. That is also the function of the oral: to recreate what is truth to fit the moral of the story.

Coco's role as the storyteller suggests that the Louis family is on its way to reparation with the spirit world. Through Coco's story, the living and dead ancestors are acknowledged and respected, therefore building a bridge for forgiveness to take place. The magic of the oral is the ability to weave together memory and fact to present the entire, balanced story of the storyteller. The wonderful thing about the oral is that it is not "written in stone" and can be refined at any point in time, and at the will of the storyteller. Magic is the glue that connects stories to reality, the living to the dead. The paths of the ancestors must be told and respected in order to keep the family lineage intact and remembered. Like the offerings to the gods, the ancestors must be valued in the same way.

Another author who conveys the female link to the ancestral world is Tina McElroy Ansa (right) through her novels *Baby of the Family* and *The Hand I Fan With*. Through her reoccurring main character, Lena, she explores the link between children born with a caul and the spirit world. When a child is



born with a caul on her face, it is considered a sign that this child has special talents, visions, the gift of second sight. These gifts are a blessing from the spirit world, which can at first be very haunting to a child if no one shares the lineage and proper care for these unique children. But once the powers are acknowledged and welcomed, these gifts are a blessing to the entire community.

The rich lineage of female culture keepers in African American heritage crosses over into the cinema as well. In the film *Eve's Bayou* (Kasi Lemmons, 1997), it is the Aunt of main character Eve, and Eve herself who carry the gift of sight. It is also the women within the community that believe in and patronize women with these talents. These gifts, however, never come without sacrifice. In *Eve's Bayou*, the aunt sacrifices her ability to have a lasting relationship with a man. Eve sacrifices the



innocence of childhood. Ansa's character Lena sacrifices true friendships and Tituba ultimately sacrifices her life and her babies.

The West African religions believe in the commune of the gods and the people. The ancestors are also now a part of the world of the spirits that watch over the living. Not only are they a part of daily life through altars, sacrifices, music, and food, they are also petitioned for their power and loved because they balance the world. This balance includes taking care of the living, as Albert's wives within the *Tree of Life* do for him after they have passed on to the spirit world. They also refuse to be forgotten, even it takes getting the attention of the living through pain and death.

Birth and death are both magical and painful processes. Through blood, a new life is born. Blood gives life and loss of it can take life. It is also one way of connecting with the ancestors. Tituba kills her own unborn child rather than having her to be born in the cruel world she knew. Lena has no children of her own, but she aids in a powerful birth that changes her life and reconnects her with herself. The ability to give life in and of itself and to aid in the birth of a new being asserts autonomy and faith in one's chosen path.

Reclaiming a voice is a rebirth of a new person and the death of an old self: "In earlier times, questioning me that way was tantamount to torturing me, since my answer revealed the dark and untented half of my origins...!, I was no longer ashamed" (p. 351). Coco sees her new-found knowledge as strength in her identity that she never before had. Is this not the same strength that her great-grandfather Albert is missing? Is it magic or tradition that he considers taboo? The negation of history leads to destruction of the spirit. To claim pride without acknowledging the oppressor is like asking for death. The communication is what is lacking in this family tree. Without sharing stories and claiming lineage, there will always be something missing.

Liza and Elaise are Albert's saving grace. They, together, are Albert's soul. After death, they both are Albert's sole companions. They are both dead because of Albert's lack

of respect for the healing powers of black people, "You niggers, still sticking to your leaves and roots...That's why the white man walks all over you" (p. 19). Albert sees sticking to tradition as a hindrance of black people. Staying connected to the original culture will allow white people to walk over the blacks, as Albert states. The irony of his statement is that he is the one in captivity to the white man's world. This captivity is what keeps him a slave for the remainder of his life.

It is hazardous to ignore the miraculous power of the spoken word. The authority of the word in black culture is never underestimated throughout *Tree of Life*. Words weave together the fabric of the community. The myths, beliefs, culture, and secrets are passed down via the spoken word. When communication is hindered, so is the retelling of history. Knowledge of one's past is empowering, as Coco declares at the end. She is no longer trapped in the ignorance of not knowing at least one side of her family lineage.

Sacrifice is a common theme in the lives of black women. Even when gifted with the sight, there is no way to avoid the inevitable drama within this path. These are the real queens, with their ability to prevail through seemingly impossible situations, to make a way when there was none, to create a meal out of scraps not fit for human consumption, to give babies to barren wombs: this is what makes herstory so magical, so unbelievable. Her story is the stories of generations past and generations to come. It gives balance to the community and identity to the descendants. However, when these stories are denied, there is magic to weave together the memories of the ancestors with the voices of the living. We continue to listen for her voice through our songs, our visions and our pens.



Alysia Logan is a CSW Research Scholar and the author (under the name L Divine) of the Drama High series of best-selling young adult novels. The third volume, *Jay's Legacy*, has just been published. In these books, Logan seeks to connect her knowledge of African American folklore and oral history and wisdom with contemporary high school experience.