

NELLIE

Reynald Altéma, MD

Nellie-Anne Armstrong, a chubby, bubbly, short, freckles-faced brown woman with a short Afro, was a college student and had a love affair with storytelling as far back as she can remember. In a sense, it was a perfect gild of the lily, a combination of a flair for good vocabulary, an innate ability for clear elocution, and an insatiable curiosity frenzy. These qualities were a blessing and a bane, depending on the circumstance. “A nice conundrum to have” would be her trademark quip to explain this dilemma. She commonly went by the name Nellie.

At the beginning of the aughts, she was attending college on an academic scholarship at a conservative school in Tennessee, an inconvenient union from the get-go since the idea of “freedom of expression” in that milieu implied “acceptable speech, the voicing of opinion toeing the line of the prevailing norm.” Her interpretation of the terminology relied on her understanding of the First Amendment, guaranteeing one’s right “to say what is on one’s mind without any fear of retaliation.” A marriage in heaven, it certainly was not. For the first time in life, she learned the necessity of self-censure during class discussions since teachers didn’t take kindly to a liberal perspective. For practical reasons, since her family was poor and she was the first to attend college, she resigned herself to take the middle road and avoid controversy until she could escape the toxic environment. She bore it and grinned her teeth but didn’t enjoy it. She was an English major with a minor in History.

The fault line came into sharp focus when she developed an inkling that the author of a popular nursery rhyme, “Sleeping Time,” could be someone other than the accepted Anglo-Southern belle Catherine O’Shaughnessy. The discovery was part happenstance and part sleuthing because her inquisitive mind never takes a break. During a conversation among some elders after a church service, she overheard this exchange:

“So, I heard you have a new grandbaby. Do you get to babysit much and spoil them?”

“Girl, that girl is so cute! I can’t wait to hum to her our version of “Sleeping Time,” the real Mckoy.” She continued, “I done told her to bring her over whenever she needs some help.”

Curious, Nellie approached the lady, “What do you mean by the real Mckoy?”

“Child, you don’t know? I guess not because it’s an open secret among us. “Sleeping Time” was written by my great-great-grandmother. I have the manuscript at home. That’s part of the family heirloom. Come to my house sometime, and I will share it with you.” No other catnip had a greater success. Therefore, Nellie did accompany the lady, who was too happy to discuss this matter with a newbie, so to speak.

“In them days, it was dangerous for a Negro to be literate. The commonly sung version includes only one stanza. It has two. She was a smart woman and figured that white society would accept it only if it sounded like one of them composed it.” She went into an armoire and pulled a folder with a sallow hue and several sheets of paper that had long ago seen their better days as torn and discolored by age as they had become. The lady’s hands were shaking by nervousness. “This really belongs to a museum,” she said with a broken voice. Nellie’s chest was under assault with a constant thump as she reckoned witnessing a historic moment. A moment, a Sunday afternoon, in a small 2-bedroom house with a large veranda with several rocking chairs on a warm April day, one week after Easter. A leafy street. A cat that kept coming to rub itself against her leg as if attracted by this new body scent. Nellie immediately inputted all these details into her noggins for future reference. How could she forget the strong aroma of collard green and ham hocks wafting

in the air? Or Mahalia Jackson singing a rendition of “Amazing Grace” during a Gospel music show on the radio?

“You might as well stay and share this meal with me. I always cook for an army and won’t pass an opportunity to share it with a guest.” There began Nellie’s numerous visits to Antoinette Brosius, and she collected a trove of information. Antoinette Brosius was loquacious to the hilt, and she loved to cook. She insisted on preparing Nellie a week’s worth of meals at each meeting. That was a marriage made in heaven. Antoinette poured out the family’s historical secrets, engaging someone of the same ilk in long conversations while sitting on the veranda with the cat resting either on her lap or Nellie’s. Nellie decided to do the research and finally publish her findings at an opportune time.

Once her graduation date was set, the time arrived during her senior year. The local paper published it one week before the ceremony as an Op-Ed.

THE LIFE OF THERESA GRANVILLE Nellie-Anne Amrstrong

We are all familiar with this nursery rhyme and have sung it countless times to an infant to lull him or her into sleep while rocking on a chair.

Sleeping Time

*It's time to go to sleep in good ole Tennessee
I have played, have been nice, and none sassy.
Now that I know my ABC,
The world is mine to see.
I can travel by foot or by sea
I can count beans, sheep and be merry,
So let me rest and be blessed by the fairy.*

Few of us, however, realize that the whole nursery rhyme includes a second stanza as follows,

*Now I know my ABC
I can now foresee
Being able to pull a QED
And make whoopee for me and Dee.*

The author of such a nursery is credited to be an Anglo-Saxon descendant, Catherine O’Shaughnessy, a velvety name beckoning a good pedigree. The name alone conjures the image of a blue-eyed and possibly blond person, Southern belle. I am sorry to inform America that the reality is not quite as expected. The evidence says otherwise. Let’s announce to the whole world a verity known among the African American community for umpteen years. What exactly is the evidence? A lifelong local resident, Antoinette Brosius, shared her family’s documents with me. They clearly document that her great-great-

grandmother, Theresa Granville, a former slave who used to sing it for her master's daughter, was the author. Hand-written documents that include the two stanzas and other writings are solid proof. Theresa Granville had a beautiful voice, and her singing regaled everyone who heard her perform. She had learned to read and write by following the instructions of the mistress who taught her own children. Being self-taught is not an unheard-of phenomenon. Frederick Douglass not only self-taught reading and writing but became a renowned orator in the nineteenth century. Theresa only sang the first stanza in front of Caucasians. She had become part of an underground movement to teach slaves and then ex-slaves the world of reading and writing. She wanted to open their eyes and allow them access to information. This is the background to understand the second stanza. She was a very literate woman, and she read extensively. This was not so common in those days for African American or Caucasian women. If truth be told, many people proudly repeat, "We like to preserve our way of life." They seem to forget that the way of life of yesteryear meant no access to education and no right to vote for Caucasian women. What was true about Caucasian women applied to African American women by a factor of ten. I doubt very much that modern Caucasian women would like to go back to those days.

The second stanza refers to QED, the mnemonic for *Quod Erat Demonstrandum*. This was her way of encouraging the disenfranchised to aim higher and obtain an education beyond just basic literacy. In modern parlance, learn the facts and be prepared to hold an intelligent conversation and support a point of view. Lest we forget, an educated slave or ex-slave was considered a menace. She had to navigate two worlds: pretend to be uneducated and express herself in colloquial terms to a Caucasian audience and be a learned figure among her peers. She moved up North, attended college, and came back to teach. And write. This is an excerpt from a hand-written essay found among the trove of documents. This will give us a flavor of the hardships she confronted:

Life is complicated. I am irritated by the Aunt Jemima treatment that many ignorant white folks lobbed at me. It's as if intelligence is a color-specific asset. I can get in front of a classroom and talk about the uplifting spirit of Reconstruction and the downer of Restoration. Yet, someone with barely any education can tell me I have no right setting foot in a library...

This is no ignoramus complaining but a cerebral persona griping about the most enraging prohibition: the right to access information, the fulfillment of the need to nurture one's mind when learning doubles as one's oxygen. Stating the obvious seems strange but needs to be repeated. Theresa Granville was an intellectually gifted person who happened to have dark skin. As we understand this paradigm, these are two independent states. She was able to sing well and wrote a nursery rhyme. Many African Americans now win awards for authoring songs,

poetry, and novels. They inherited the intelligence of their forebears but had the doors of education open to them. The idea of Theresa Granville as the author of a popular nursery rhyme ought not become part of a cultural war. It should gleam as a shiny light of the cultural lore, a tapestry that includes all the different fibers weaved together, or one of many dots of a stippled canvas we call a nation. Here is another telling excerpt:

I feel so awkward not being able to add my name to the nursery rhyme that I composed. I submitted it to a newspaper and signed a pen name palatable to the powers that be. Catherine O'Shaughnessy sounds very Waspish; of course, it did pass muster. I will trade my name at the end of the nursery rhyme for more Negroes learning to read and write...

This is no sour-grape-spilling story but a realistic interpretation of one's situation. How would women feel nowadays about being denied access to education, the right to trademark a creation, or to publish just like men? At the end of the day, why should it matter that a talented person can be of any particular background or gender?

Nellie expected and provoked a firestorm. The arrows and daggers aimed at her carried a torrid virulence she couldn't have prepared for. Letters to the editor poured in, and at a ratio of 10:1, the daring apostasy of defiling the memory of O'Shaughnessy stung everyone. The worst part was the rabid criticisms came from those who didn't take the time to read the essay but were obviously expressing an act of faith as if she committed blasphemy against the Gospel. Invariably, they refer to "this act of culture war." The fever-pitch intensity of the uproar, the ferocity of the condemnation, and the overwhelming degree of hatred convinced her to forgo the graduation exercise. She didn't want to chance facing the opprobrium.

But as luck would have it, a diehard, dyed-in-the-wool conservative teacher, impressed with this coup, or a corker of a probe, convinced a colleague to take her on as a graduate student in American History at Vanderbilt U. by faxing the Op-Ed. Years later, as poetic justice, she wrote a best-seller bio about Theresa Granville. She dedicated it to all the doubters who vehemently decried her earlier effort to resuscitate an unsung heroine's memory.

A special dedication went thusly: "To Skitter, who gave me a superb boost in life and helped make this book possible." That started tongues wagging, and pretty soon, the identification of Skitter became the talk of the town. It wasn't long before the rumor mill pointed the finger at Professor Phoebus Adams, commonly referred to as Skitter by his close friends, at the school where Nellie did her undergraduate study. It wasn't lost on anyone that using such a nickname for a member of the faculty could only mean the existence of a "close and friendly relationship."

Gossiping had a field day, and often, folks were careful not to stretch the idea of "close and friendly" to "romantic." No matter, the genie had escaped the bottle. The unspeakable leaked out into an eventual tidal wave of pitter-patter, amplifying the narrative of the conservative teacher and a liberal former student in an amorous relationship. It was a prickly narrative cutting against the grain, illustrating the natural law of the attraction of opposites. That law was revered when extolling the vaunted virtue of true love and reviled when deriding the maddening folly of forbidden but passionate attraction. Nonetheless, the other part of the narrative of a local talent doing good played second fiddle to the stunning revelation of the twain meeting instead of living

separate lives, using divergent paths, while breathing the same air, residing on the same mother earth, and belonging to the same species. Go figure. The fact that neither party deigned to confirm or deny the chatter irked some and constituted an admission by others but pleased no one's curiosity. Somehow, folks who kept their personal lives close to their vest felt entitled to be privy to the privacy of those thrust into the limelight. The story of the interaction between Phoebus and Nellie and society's response would be worth telling.