

## A Kumbla Consciousness

Steven Khan

Earlier this year I was writing a poem to deal with my outrage and sense of powerlessness at the abuses of power and privilege in Trinidad and Tobago (T&T). It began, “*Our stories are our Gourds,/Womb of generations’ pain.*” But “pain” was not quite the right word. I asked Shalini for help. I needed a word to encapsulate ideas of dynamic change, infectious entanglements, metamorphosis, amnesia, and the claustrophobia of a world held in tension. *Kumbla*, a word held in tension.

This is how Erna Broder, Jamaican novelist, describes it in her 1980 novel **Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home**: “*A kumbla is like a beach ball. It bounces with the sea but never goes down. ...But the kumbla is not just a beach ball. The kumbla is an egg shell, not a chicken's egg or a bird's egg shell. ...It does not crack if it is hit. It is pliable as sail cloth. Your kumbla will not open unless you rip its seams open. It is a round seamless calabash that protects you without caring. Your kumbla is a parachute. You, only you, pull the cord to rip its seams. From the inside. For you.*”

I liked its rhythm. “*Our stories are our Gourds,/Womb of generations’ kumblas,/Vessels for collecting and reflecting.*” It fit. The word itself was a kumbla for the ideas and images in the rest of the poem. For me, a kumbla has become a metaphor for a mutating contested space, nurturing but potentially imprisoning—like school, like education...like T&T. Structures implicated in each other’s becoming, inviting in, offering safe space, respite, but easily becoming another Euclidean prison. A friend pointed out that kumbla was a *Maroon* word, a remnant of the languages of slaves, who survived by pulling the cord for themselves, taking their own freedom. A kumbla is about survival.

Broder prefaces her description of the concept of the kumbla with the story of Anansi and Dryhead, the King of the Sea. Facing starvation and death, Anansi and Tucuma, his eldest son, take a risk and fish in Dryhead’s waters. After being caught, he negotiates with Dryhead to let him leave with one of his children. He tells his son, Tucuma, repeatedly to “*Go eena kumbla,*” which acts as a code for him to change his disguise. In this way Anansi tricks Dryhead and saves himself and his son. Rhonda Cobham, a Trinbagonian Professor at Amherst College, suggests that kumbla is a metaphor for the strategies and sometimes disfiguring devices used by New World blacks to protect their children as they struggled to survive in this New World. She also uncovers another aspect of the story. Tucuma, she learns, means “*the one born away from home,*” and suggests that although we may not have known it, through these stories we have passed on narratives of survival, “naming ourselves as survivors in the process.”

I am working with the concept now, aiming to loosen the word from its moorings within Caribbean and literary discourse so that it might drift into contested waters and help me to articulate a theory for a Caribbean curriculum. Who, what, and where are our kumbas in education in the Caribbean? I see them in our mas camps, panyards, kitchens, gardens, gayelles, rum shops, and, occasionally, even in that space called *school*; cosmogenic calabashes, wombs of space, that we have anesthetised and tried to sterilise,

unsuccessfully. As Brodber writes later, “*the trouble with the kumbla is the getting out of the kumbla. It is a protective device. If you dwell too long in it, it makes you delicate.. skin white...Vision extra-sensitive to the sun...Weak, thin, tired like a breach baby.*” I fear we have remained too long in ours, given birth to too many delicate douens.

We must embrace all of our ancestral heritages, learn from them, but be prepared to pull the cords that bind, for ourselves. We must develop our Caribbean consciousness, a kumbla consciousness, part of our maroon heritage, a sense of the possibilities for becoming already inherent in the world around and within us. *Jane and Louisa* ends with the line, “*We are getting ready,*” which had been preceded by images of hopeful expectancy. The womb is a central motif in the work of Caribbean artists such as Leroy Clarke. “*To convert rooted deprivations into complex parables of freedom and truth is a formidable but not impossible task*” is Wilson Harris’ hope at the end of *The Womb of Space*. **It is time.** Time to buss open dem Gourds. From the inside. For you. For us.

(Steven Khan is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in the Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy at the University of British Columbia)

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine