

# The Anitafrika Method: Towards a Decolonial Performance Praxis in Black Masculinities Theatre

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[The Anitafrika Method] engages with Black feminist perspectives, which question how masculinities are figured in order to pursue ideas of equality and liberation as an everyday creative praxis. It also offers techniques of analysis to consider how men are positioned in particular roles, whether as sons, fathers, lovers, peers, teachers or mentors. Through the Anitafrika Method, the monodramas which feature in [*Dubbin Monodrama: Black Masculinities in African diaspora Theatre*] aim to tell the story of each playwright [Webster McDonald, daniel jelani ellis, and Samson Bonkeabantu Brown] alongside the articulation of new myths that speak from the playwrights' experience and which challenge notions of Black masculinities.<sup>1</sup>

*Dubbin Monodrama: Black Masculinities in African Diaspora Theatre* is a 2019 Spolrusie Publishing anthology that I co-edited alongside Black-British writer-researcher Christxpher Oliver and that features three vital plays by Black male theatre practitioners: *Who Am I* by Jamaican artist-educator Webster McDonald, *speaking of sneaking* by Jamaican-Canadian writer-performer daniel jelani ellis,<sup>2</sup> and *11:11* by South African-Canadian theatre-maker Samson Bonkeabantu Brown. Each practitioner applied the Anitafrika Method as a fundamental part of their play development process while in mentorship with me. Working with emerging artists across varying creative contexts has provided a living lab in which to grow the Anitafrika Method as a decolonial<sup>3</sup>

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1 d'bi young anitafrika and Christxpher Oliver, *Dubbin Monodrama: Black Masculinities in African Diaspora Theatre* (Toronto: Spolrusie Publishing: 2019), 10.

2 daniel jelani ellis uses all lower case letters in his name. That choice is represented through the article.

3 *Decolonial*—an ongoing process of rupturing the internal and external effects and practices of colonisation and ongoing colonialities on people and the planet.

performance praxis.<sup>4</sup> The method is a reflexive,<sup>5</sup> practitioner-centred, Black-queer-feminist framework and pedagogy<sup>6</sup> of transformation that roots itself in Jamaica’s Dub culture (music, poetry, and theatre). It is an approach to performance training, devising, and self-development that equips the practitioner with critical tools to navigate the entanglement of gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability through a social-justice lens. This approach is further informed by Ubuntu philosophy,<sup>7</sup> Black liberatory pedagogy, Buddhist meditation practices, polyvagal theory, cognitive neuroscience, and trauma theory, with a focus on supporting practitioners in navigating experiences of colonial trauma<sup>8</sup> and historical oppression<sup>9</sup> while they devise new stories that centre their lives and holistic wellbeing.

When I was asked by Eugene Williams, the celebrated Guyanese theatre practitioner and principal of Edna Manley College Drama School, to support final year students (including Webster McDonald) in devising solo performance pieces using the Anitafrika Method, it was a moment of profound cyclicity. My mother, Anita Stewart, is an alumna of Drama School and studied there under Williams’s tutelage in the 1980s. As a child, I attended her dub poetry and theatre performances. My consciousness was gradually moulded by an emerging, decolonial, African-Jamaican dub theatre aesthetic, poignantly articulated by Honor Ford-Smith in her *Small Axe* publication “The Body and Performance in 1970s Jamaica: Toward a Decolonial Cultural Method.” In it, she writes that “embodied performances of humans existing at the margins are powerful and productive because they can challenge dominant colonial representations of experience and teach us to decolonise identity and community in profound ways.”<sup>10</sup>

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4 *Praxis*—the activation, embodiment, and actualisation of theory and practise together.

5 *Reflexive*—critical reflection and analysis of oneself through an anti-oppression lens.

6 *Pedagogy*—methods of teaching and frameworks of educational exchange/knowledge sharing.

7 *Ubuntu Philosophy* “starts with the Africana phenomenological position of, I am because you are. This position communicates that self-reflection and meaning making occur in a social relational world. It is important for us as social beings to understand that we make social meaning of our world through older meaning created by our ancestors.” See Devi Dee Mucina, *Ubuntu Relational Love: Decolonising Black Masculinities* (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2019), 45.

8 *Colonial trauma*—is “the complex, continuous, collective, cumulative and compounding...impacts...of colonial policies and practices.” (Mitchell et al. 2019, 75).

9 *Historical oppression*—the ongoing violence of “chronic, pervasive, and intergenerational experiences of oppression that, over time, may be normalised, imposed, and internalised.” See Catherine Elizabeth Burnette and Charles R. Figley, “Historical Oppression, Resilience, and Transcendence: Can a Holistic Framework Help Explain Violence Experienced by Indigenous People?” *Social Work* 62, no. 1 (2017): 38, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/sww065>.

10 Honour Ford-Smith, “The Body and Performance in 1970s Jamaica: Toward a Decolonial Cultural Method,” *Small Axe* 23, no. 1 (2019): 152, <https://doi.org/10.1215/07990537-7374514>.

In creating the Anitafrika Method, I am attempting to construct a theoretical, performative, and pedagogical space that synthesises and distils the Black performance frameworks of my mentors.<sup>11</sup> Their rhizomatic approaches to theatre-making often centre decolonial Black (queer) (feminist) epistemologies, while embodying narratives of Black identities that simultaneously work to humanise, complicate, and emancipate notions of Blackness—Black feminisms, Black masculinities, Black queerness, and Black economic positionings—from systemic and ideological oppression. I am also attempting to construct a liberatory space where Black and other global majority artists can develop through a pedagogy of transformation. Williams’s generous invitation led me to mentoring Webster McDonald, during which time McDonald created the riveting biomyth monodrama<sup>12</sup> *Who Am I*. I seized the opportunity to inaugurate the Anitafrika Method in a rigorous dramaturgical exchange with a Jamaican, Black male theatre practitioner. In his artist statement, which appears in *Dubbin Monodrama*, McDonald summarises his play stating:

*Who Am I* captures the story of a young Jamaican boy [Shawn] from a working-class family as he grows up. Shawn is bullied repeatedly because of his physical idiosyncratic presentation of ‘femininity.’ Not being able to fulfil the hegemonic constructions of masculinity as defined by the dominant culture, Shawn expresses his internal woes through movement, Dub Poetry, and spoken word with the intention of finding a niche for self-preservation.<sup>13</sup>

McDonald’s idea for his graduating thesis resonated with me, reminding me of my own debut biomyth monodrama *blood.claa*, which I began writing in 2002 and completed in 2005. The story centres on a fifteen-year-old girl named Mudgu Sankofa who comes of age as shx<sup>14</sup> navigates sexual trauma, consent, and hxr

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11 *Elders* is in reference to my mentors who have greatly influenced the Anitafrika Method: Anita Stewart, Owen “Blakka” Ellis, Poets in Unity, Jean “Binta” Breeze, Linton Kwezi Johnson, ahdri zhina mandiola, Amah Harris, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Tracy Chapman, Rhoma Spencer, and Djanet Sears (to name a few).

12 *Biomyth* “refers to the abbreviation of the words biography and mythology. I first encountered the term while reading Audre Lorde’s *Zami*, which she refers to as a biomythography...Monodrama is a theatrical solo-performance [where]...the fourth wall is rarely present as the performer erases the divide between audience and storyteller, real and make-believe. The storyteller–audience relationship is crucial in biomyth monodrama storytelling, encouraging the biomythicist to constantly explore and expand the relationship with themselves, their communities, and their belief and practice in art as a tool for social transformation.” See d’bi young anitafrika, “r/evolution begins within,” *Canadian Theatre Review* 150 (Spring 2012): 29.

13 anitafrika and Oliver, *Dubbin Monodrama*, 16.

14 I place the letter ‘x’ in gendered pronouns to complicate binary representations of gender.

own desires as they mash up against hxr family's power dynamics. This piece was my first devised solo dub theatre work and the beginning of a twenty-year journey in formulating the Anitafrika Method. *blood.claat* laid the groundwork for establishing a unique approach to solo performance rooted in dub poetics and critical performance ethnography. I empathised with McDonald's central character immediately, seeing how the lives of our protagonists were greatly impacted by colonial notions of value based on one's gender classification and performance or social standing. Both Shawn and Mudgu are from working-class backgrounds; both characters step outside of the expectations of their gender performance: Shawn is soft-spoken and caring, and therefore considered by certain members of the community to be effeminate and unwholesome, whereas Mudgu is tough and assertive, and consequently considered by members of hxr family to be stubborn, problematic, and deserving of verbal and physical abuse. "The bodies of our African Ancestors, who were cast into the diaspora as a result of slavery and/or colonisation and the generations born thereafter, continue to bear the trauma of sexual violence but from different vantage points of domination and [raced] [and classed] gender oppression."<sup>15</sup> Both young Black people have their agency and safety robbed through repeated experiences of sexual violence. Here, I found an intersection between McDonald's and my lived experiences and explorations of Black feminisms and Black masculinities, and it is from this meeting place that I offered my dramaturgical guidance. In *Dubbin Monodrama*, McDonald shares the following perspective:

During d'bi.young's dramaturgical process I was taken through a series of questions via meditations, reflections, and internal conversations that illuminated what I wanted to say in my monodrama. I believe that in any successful dramatic work, the dramaturgical process can ensure that theatricalities correspond with the socio-economic relevance that lay within the text. Such was the case for *Who Am I?* The dramaturgical process contributed greatly to the intricate applications of movement, images, language, and music within the show, that make it so thought-provoking.<sup>16</sup>

A year after working with McDonald, I returned to Canada and restarted my Anitafrika dub theatre under the new moniker "Watah." It was around this time that I bumped into an old friend, Samson Bonkeabantu Brown, who shared with me that he wanted to write a performance piece that charted his ancestral heritage and

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15 Notisha Massaquoi and Njoki Nathani Wane, *Theorizing Empowerment: Canadian Perspectives on Black Feminist Thought* (Toronto: Inanna Publications and Education Inc., 2007), 229.

16 anitafrika and Oliver, *Dubbin Monodrama*, 17.

gender transition journey. I invited Brown to study with me at Watah and to use the Anitafrika Method as a framework for developing his piece. I also assured him that the method was grounded in pedagogies of care and all choices would be made to ensure a safe process for him. In his two years at Watah, Brown birthed his ancestral homage piece *11:11*. The piece embraces performance autoethnography through its embodiment of biography, mythology, history, and ancestor veneration. Boylorn and Orbe write that autoethnography is a methodological approach that “reflect[s] the inextricable relationship among culture, identity, and communication.”<sup>17</sup> During Brown’s journey of taking control of his own narrative, the Anitafrika Method served as a framework of critical ethnography by providing space and centring a nuanced perspective of Black trans-masculinity that had been marginalised and made invisible in society. He shares his synopsis of *11:11*, telling us that:

At the intersection between the spirit world and the real world lies a Biomythical Monodrama. *11:11* explores the other side of fear through the eyes of the protagonist (Amandla) — a young, Black transman struggling to obey the Ancestral messages saturating his dreams. The show follows the characters Mum (Amandla’s amaXhosa mother who provides anthropological and historical lessons of South Africa, and more specifically of the amaXhosa people), Pop (Amandla’s Caribbean-Portuguese father), Gogo (Amandla’s maternal amaXhosa/amaNdebele healer grandmother — an Ancestor who appears in Amandla’s dreams), Avô (Amandla’s paternal Portuguese grandfather, an Ancestor who also appears in Amandla’s dreams), and Silumko (who is both the Sangoma and the praise poet). The show examines the roles these characters play in Amandla’s life as Amandla journeys through transitioning from female to male.<sup>18</sup>

After working with Brown, I worked with daniel jelani ellis on his play *speaking of sneaking* in a rehearsal-dramaturgy process that led to the play’s world premiere at the Theatre Centre in Toronto in 2016. In ellis’s words, *speaking of sneaking* “is a theatrical mash-up of dance, poetry, and pantomime which collapses past and present.”<sup>19</sup> ellis’s father, Owen “Blakka” Ellis, was first a student then a faculty member of Drama School, where he taught and worked with my mother during the early to mid-1980s. Blakka was also my theatre

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17 Robin M. Boylorn and Mark P. Orbe, *Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2014), 16.

18 anitafrika and Oliver, *Dubbin Monodrama*, 88.

19 anitafrika and Oliver, *Dubbin Monodrama*, 42.

teacher when I was twelve years old through a community arts education program affiliated with Drama School's rep company. Guided and fostered by Blakka—in a cross-generational way that which transcended gender, sexuality, age, and geographical location—our relationship evolved over a period of 25 years from mentorship to collegueship. This cyclical-reciprocal practice of mentorship is key within the Anitafrika Method; the practitioner is teacher-in-relation to the mentor and the mentor is teacher-in-relation to the practitioner during their creative exchange together. ellis writes about of the method saying:

The Anitafrika Method is a process of uncovering your (true) self in communion with holistic healing. In the context of playwriting and performance creation, the method offers a multidimensional framework for devising and dramaturging. In my experience with Biomyth Monodrama development on *speaking of sneaking*, the method provided a focused guide to getting a thorough and thoughtful understanding of the world being created. The primary function of the Anitafrika Method in the creation of *speaking of sneaking* was to devise new material and dramaturge the forming narrative. The questions, activities and principles of the method were addressed from my perspective and that of the main character Ginnal.<sup>20</sup>

ellis's main character, Ginnal, identifies as a Black, queer, non-binary/gender non-conforming Jamaican, who moves fluidly across multiple gender performativities. During the dramaturgy-devising process with him, I was reminded of my most recent collaboration with his father and my long-time mentor, Blakka, who dramaturged and directed the world premiere of my play *Shx Mama Wata & the PussyWitch Hunt* at Theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto. *Shx Mama Wata* is a biomyth monodrama set in a small Jamaican village that centres queerness by exposing and interrogating homophobic colonial attitudes towards sexuality and gender that have become embedded in parts of Jamaican culture. Working across gender, sexuality, and age divides with Blakka to produce a play was a deeply critical and courageous process. It taught me the limitless possibilities within cyclical-reciprocal reflexive dramaturgy and deeply informed the creative, intellectual, and philosophical process with ellis. ellis's *speaking of sneaking* is critical reflexivity and ethnography in motion, and his precise attention to complicating gender and sexuality norms is evidenced in his play:

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20 anitafrika and Oliver, *Dubbin Monodrama*, 42-43.

*speaking of sneaking* navigates the entanglement of coloniality within the frames of Black masculinities by acknowledging and challenging the notion of a singular expression of Black manhood, a heterosexual Black manhood, a Black manhood inferior to whiteness. Uncle Shem embodies a colonial Black masculinity. As Ginnal's caretaker and father figure, Shem polices Ginnal's gender expression and enforces an aggressively rigid heteronormative masculinity. We see Ginnal perform the 'rude bwoy' persona he has learned from Shem.<sup>21</sup>

"I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood."<sup>22</sup> Each playwright imbibes the spirit of Audre Lorde in their biomyth monodramas. Through performative autoethnography, they are creating works that incant the multiplicity, complexity, and dynamism of Black masculinities that are in conversation with not only our intimate families, neighbourhoods, and work environments, but also with society at large. The work produced by these three Black male playwrights challenges racism, classism, misogyny, transphobia, ableism, and other systems of oppression. As the playwright-performer chooses to use theatre to confront issues that affect him on a daily basis, that artistic choice in turn has a social and cultural impact on him and his communities. In other words, his work inhabits decolonial praxis that supports ongoing decolonial transformation. daniel jelani ellis eloquently surmises the need for new praxes and new theatres that centre Blackness in its complexities and magnificence in an excerpt of his artist statement below; the Anitafrika Method is one such decolonial-theatre-making framework.

Historically, Theatre has been colonized into a tool of white supremacist hetero-patriarchy and we are currently in a paradigm where the colonizers and gatekeepers have been challenged to relinquish their power. They herald changes of equity, diversity, and inclusion but remain steadfast in the centre. Black male theatre is important... because it offers a space for healing from these traumas by centring and celebrating us who are in the margins. Black male theatre is radical, drawing from the roots of storytelling and community. To emerging Black male playwrights, I say that there is an abundance to learn and explore. Create what you know and when you do not know consult community. Remember that artistic integrity is an active commitment to honesty and accountability in communion with community.<sup>23</sup>

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21 anitafrika and Oliver, *Dubbin Monodrama*, 44-45.

22 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, New York: Crossing Press, 2007), 40.

23 anitafrika and Oliver, *Dubbin Monodrama*, 48.

**This article is a chapter excerpt from d’bi.young anitafrika’s PhD dissertation entitled Ubuntu! Decolonial Performance Praxis by Black Womxn in Theatre: A Black-Queer-Feminist Autoethnography**

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# Writer Bios

**Randell Adjei** is an entrepreneur, speaker, and spoken word practitioner who uses his gifts to Empower the message of Alchemy. He was recently appointed [Ontario's first Poet Laureate](#).

Adjei is the founder of one of Toronto's largest youth led initiatives, [Reaching Intelligent Souls Everywhere \(RISE\) Edutainment](#). In 2018, RISE received the Toronto Arts Foundation's Mayor's Arts for Youth Award.

Adjei is the author of *I am Not my struggles*, a powerful Anthology released in 2018. Adjei was also named CBC Radio's Metro Morning's Torontonion of the Year in 2015 and NOW Magazine's Local Hero in May 2017. In 2020, Adjei opened for U.S. President Barack Obama at the Economic Club of Canada.

**d'bi.young anitafrika** is an African-Jamaican-Tkarontonian, London-based dubpoet, theatre interventionist, decolonial scholar, and Black-queer-feminist playwright who is committed to embodying liberatory art practices that ritualise acts-of-emancipation from oppressions inflicted upon the people and the planet. The Canadian Poet of Honour, author of 12 plays, seven albums, and four collections of poetry, they were recently celebrated with the Rosemary Sadlier Freedom Award in Canada and also recognised as a Global Leader in Theatre and Performance by Arts Council England. anitafrika's current PhD research investigates how Black womxn theatre makers globally embody theatre to cultivate decolonial performance praxes and pedagogies of transformation. Their research interests include Black feminist thought, African and Caribbean feminisms, Black queer performance practice, dubography, critical/performance (auto)ethnography, Ubuntu philosophy, and trauma studies.

*Dubbin Monodrama: Black Masculinities in African Diaspora Theatre*, co-edited by d'bi.young anitafrika and Christxpher Oliver, contains three contemporary biomyth monodramas from Black male playwrights of Jamaican, Canadian, and South African heritage: *Who Am I* by Webster McDonald, speaking of sneaking by daniel jelani ellis, and *11:11* by Samson Bonkeabantu Brown. These passionately crafted stories speak to displacement, colonial legacies, identity, gender, sexuality, home, recovery, and coming into self through the framework of the Anitafrika Method. The book is available through [Spolrusie Publishing](#).