

Q2Q

QUEER CANADIAN PERFORMANCE TEXTS

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PERFORMING QUEER MARRONAGE: THE WORK OF D'BI.YOUNG ANITAFRIKA

HONOR FORD-SMITH

In d'bi.young anitafrika's *word! sound! power!* a young poet is arrested and tortured by the police on the eve of a Jamaican election. As her interrogators work to extract information from her about a plot to incite revolution, she fights to find the resources to withstand the torture. In her dissociative response to the physical abuse, she makes a journey to the heartland of maroon¹ communities, which symbolize the interior of ancestral Black decolonial struggles from which multiple forms of resistance, including guerrilla wars, were waged against enslavement in the African diaspora.

As in this example, d'bi.young anitafrika's performances and writings remember, celebrate, and interrogate enduring and plural Black and Caribbean radical traditions while also dramatizing a quest for courage and the strength to survive, love, struggle, and hold space in the midst of extraordinary violence. Her work seeks out what is incomplete in past emancipation projects and rehearses ways of extending these—telling stories, amending experiences, and inserting questions into the gaps and fissures of past struggles. She frequently draws on maroon narratives of resistance, underlying ideas of Caribbean decolonization and she reworks these so as to queer insurgent Black identity and women's struggles, and to inspire work for emancipation in the present. The result is

1 Maroon communities were and are autonomous communities of free Africans that established themselves throughout the Caribbean and the Americas. They came into being alongside plantations and in many cases were linked to earlier forms of Indigenous resistance in the Americas. During the long period of enslavement, maroons carried out sustained and often armed resistance to slavery and colonial domination. Jamaican maroons won land grants from the British, but like the Garifuna of St. Vincent they too suffered deportation. Such deportation saw them transported to Canada, and from there to Sierra Leone in 1800.

work that contributes to what Ronald Cummings has called “queer marronage,” a term he uses to theorize a layered and often transnational process of resistance and liberation that requires engagement with “multiple flows, infinite crossings, unstable crosscurrents and its transgression and renegotiation of multiple frontiers of belonging.”² d’bi.young anitafrika combines choreopoem, drumscore, mime, dance, monodrama with trickster tales, ritual, and role shift to extend marronage beyond conventional borders of geography, and to insist on social formations that transcend and subtend the borders between nations and identities. In this way her work begins to enunciate imagined transnational communities of liberation.

Born in Jamaica in 1977, anitafrika moved to Canada when she was fifteen. Her account of her artistic development begins with the influence of beloved Jamaican performance poet and nationalist figure Louise Bennett, whose poem “Pass Fe White” appears as part of the play *androgyné*. Over her long and singular career, Bennett consistently gave voice to the vernacular thought of Black working class women. She combined popular and often satirical performance poetry with a critique of social pretension while advocating for the Jamaican language, social progress, and national unity. “Miss Lou was who I wanted to be!” anitafrika explains. She also traces her formation to the work done at the Jamaica School of Drama,³ where much cultural exploration took place under the leadership of Jamaican director/writer Dennis Scott, between 1976 and 1982.⁴ Her mother, Anita Stewart, who was a student there, was the only woman in Poets in Unity, a group of poets whose work, like that of Mikey Smith and Oku Onuora, evolved out of reggae rhythms and was marked by strong social critique. As a child, anitafrika came along for performances and rehearsals—observing and learning from all that was taking place.

The theatrical style of the school stressed physicality, symbolic minimalism, and an aesthetic of scarcity that jettisoned glitz and bling in search of a theatre that would eschew First World excess in a search of a decolonized

2 Ronald Cummings, “Queer Marronage and Caribbean Writing” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Leeds, 2012), 6, <http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/3385>.

3 The Jamaica School of Drama is now part of the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts located in Kingston.

4 I taught and directed at the Jamaica School of Drama in this period. Anita Stewart performed in a production of *Request Concert*, by Franz Xaver Kroetz, which I directed, and she also performed with Sistren in *Ida Revolt inna Jonkonnu Stylee*, which was part of an exchange of Caribbean popular theatre artists in 1985. See H. Ford-Smith, “An experiment in popular theatre and women’s history: *Ida Revolt inna Jonkonnu Stylee*” in S. Wieringa, ed. *Subversive Women: Women’s Movements in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean* (New Delhi: Kali for Women), 147–64.

mode of address. Here, ring games, riddles, songs, and rhythms from rituals like Nyabinghi, Shango, and Pukkumina frequently became structuring dramatic metaphors in performances of everyday social and political challenges. The Theatre Group for National Liberation creolized versions of Brecht’s learning plays while the Jamaican women’s theatre collective, Sistren, created autobiographical and documentary scenarios of working class women’s lives. Trinidadian director/writer Rawle Gibbons began work on his Orisha plays, and experimented with stickfighting and carnivalesque traditions. The dance and music of sacred traditions like Kumina and Revival, hitherto secret and marginal, found their way into educational settings, improvisational events, and productions of plays by Walcott, Scott, and Soyinka. They even interrupted the flow of Shakespearean iambic pentameter and Greek classics. Poets like Oku Onura, the late Mikey Smith, members of Poets in Unity, and others could often be found rehearsing their performances, chanting to the drum and bass rhythm that was the essence of reggae, adding elements from Burru and Rastafari. Oku Onuora first coined the term “dub tieta” (dub theatre) in his search for a popular performance form that would join the theatrical to the performative sonic reality of reggae. ahdri zhina mandiel, who mentored anitafrika in Toronto, launched dub theatre in Canada with her womanist performance poem *dark diaspora in dub*.⁵ mandiel, along with Jean Breeze in Jamaica and Lillian Allen, Afua Cooper, and others, transformed a largely male-dominated poetic form into a womanist performance experience that could move between theatre, dancehall, community, and yard. mandiel’s studio b current was the place where anitafrika began to combine performance and poetry.

androgyné, the play included in this collection, like *dark diaspora*, was originally billed as dub theatre. It is one of anitafrika’s earliest pieces and contains the characteristic poetic commentaries of her later work in both *The Sankofa Trilogy* and *The Orisha Trilogy*. But unlike the trilogies, *androgyné* is a play of debate. It stages a dialogue between two women about their relationship, their conflicts around eroticism and friendship, and around reconciling ideas of radical Black identity with queer love. Structured through dialogue, games, and poetry, it tells the story of the evolving and contentious friendship of two young women who come to live in Toronto from Jamaica. The play tackles the topic of internalized homophobia while exploring effects of homophobic community violence. Fear of violence, radical rejection, and isolation structure the possibilities of these two women’s lives, but so too do their desires to live joyfully beyond repressive heteronormative confines. *androgyné* is similar to anitafrika’s other plays in

5 a.z. mandiel, *dark diaspora . . . in dub: a dub theatre piece* (Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1991).

its use of language, its playfulness, its naming of ancestral forerunners, and its movement between geographic spaces and temporalities. It shifts between Toronto and Kingston; between urban suburb (Scarborough) and inner city yard (Kingston); between remembered childhood past and adult present. These movements call attention to the ways in which the spaces of here and there, region and diaspora, are intertwined in each other's formation. In subtext they also call attention to the ways in which Canada's formation as a nation is always already implicated in the colonial practices that forged what we now call "the global." It challenges mainstream narratives of the whiteness of the Canadian nation by centring the stories of communities of colour.

androgyné's present action takes place in Canada, but it unapologetically privileges Caribbean Canadian and, more broadly, diasporic audiences with its movement between Jamaican and English, and its references to formation at home and in Toronto. It deploys orality, and clearly references the feminist poetry of mandiel, Audre Lorde, and Ntozake Shange. In doing this, the play creates a space of queer marronage from which to assert the existence of alternative ways of being and knowing while asking how it is possible to advance radical justice and radical love. The play answers its own question by portraying struggles taking place in women's movements in the Caribbean and Canada. *androgyné* blurs the boundaries between politics and art as it is about the everyday nature of struggles being waged by activist organizations such as Black Lives Matter in Toronto, the Tambourine Army in Jamaica, and Red Thread in Guyana, who fight gender violence in the Caribbean itself.

While there is a long tradition of scholarship on Black and Caribbean performance traditions in the Americas, it is still far more common in Canada for genealogies of performance and politics to normalize and centre the legacies of the European and North American avant-garde rather than to explore contributions from the context of plantation geographies in the Caribbean, or decolonial cultural struggles across the planet. Forms such as carnival, kaiso (calypso), comic reviews, Jonkonnu, dub, dancehall, or sacred ritual performances of the Black diaspora remain bracketed off as "special topics" within Eurocentric discussions of performance, so that it is still possible for scholars, students, and practitioners to avoid contact with the multiple foundational performance traditions of Black diaspora as a part of their creative and intellectual formation; to see these as "other" rather than intrinsic to geographies of knowledge production through performance.

d'bi.young anitafrika's work challenges all this from outside the academy. She builds on a specific tradition of Caribbean work and on the works of artists like Vera Cudjoe, ahdri zhina mandiel, Sistren, Bennett, Shange, and others to

develop a particular theatrical approach. Ric Knowles proposes that mandiel, anitafrika, and Rhoma Spencer of Toronto have created "a heterotopic, transformative space within which they can work at the intersection of nations, sexualities and performance forms."⁶ Such a space is enunciated through the resonant presence of anitafrika's embodied performances, and through the sonic space invoked by her use of orality, music, song, percussion, and vocal experimentation.

anitafrika also teaches her approach, most recently through the Watah Theatre school where she mentors young artists and performers, creating and consolidating knowledge made in and through performance. In the midst of joyful and committed resistance to colonial violence of all kinds, students learn to study and perform the raw material of their lives, to place the body at the crossroads of multiple traditions of communities of colour, working class, and Indigenous communities. Her studio is a place in which the presence of decolonization and the transnational becomes an act or practice that transforms space. She draws on Audre Lorde's notion of biomythography, urging students to create "poetic interpretations of their own lived experience drawing on myth and folklore."⁷ She also teaches her Anitafrika Method, comprising the principles of self-knowledge, orality, rhythm, political content and context, language, urgency, sacredness, and integrity. Students learn to be accountable and responsible to communities who are in turn formed by the scenarios that are produced and circulated.

anitafrika's acts of queer marronage place political mobilization, sacred ritual music, the comedic, and the carnivalesque in conversation. She joins radical Black and Caribbean performance into the global cultural networks of meaning-making in the urban setting of Toronto. She borrows the orature and performances of older decolonizing struggles and mixes these with the calls of contemporary movements such as Black Lives Matter. In so doing, her work calls attention to the absences in the known archive of performance and the Black radical tradition. Her work performatively creates scenarios for liberation that move beyond nation, enunciating an inclusive decolonial Blackness and a living, breathing, transnational woman-affirming community.

6 Ric Knowles, "To Be Dub, Female and Black: Towards a Womban-Centred Afro-Caribbean Diasporic Performance Aesthetic in Toronto," *Theatre Research in Canada/Recherches théâtrales au Canada* 33.1 (2012): 80.

7 Knowles, 93.