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# Black Plays Matter: Watah Theatre, Creating Safe Space for Black Artists in These Dangerous Times

by d'bi.young anitafrika

*Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.*

—Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light*

*Apparently there is no predator human beings are the highest on the food chain but for me that's not true no way cause everyday I am hunted by the white man.*

—d'bi.young anitafrika, OYA

Last week, a sister artist and I were driving in Peterborough, Ontario, on our way to a performance. As we crossed over a hill, we saw two police cars parked on the left side of the road with their flashing lights on. Six police officers were scattered around the cars. My heart began to pound. In an instant I had surveyed the countryside to assess exactly how isolated we were. There was no one else around. I fumbled with my phone. How quickly could I find video-record, and where would I put the phone to record the scene about to unfold? Images of lynchings, beatings, shootings, and other (police) brutalities of Black bodies flashed through my mind. Panic! Panic! Panic! And rape! Could they, would they, also rape us? The car slowed down as one of the officers signalled us to stop. We stopped. An officer peered into the car while the others stood back watching. “Had anything to drink today?” I kept the phone out of view. My friend answered, “No.” One of the other officers then said, “The sticker on the front says 2010.” My heart jumped! They have found a reason to ask us to exit the car. I searched for the record button. “Check the other sticker on the back,” the peering officer replied. I found the record button. “The one on the back says 2015.” I pressed the record button. “OK,

you are free to go.” The breath rushed back into my body. The tears subsided into my soul. WE WERE NOT MURDERED BY THE POLICE!

Often, this is the experience of traumatic stress disorder that comes with being Black and womxn (and male, queer, and/or non-normative in every way) in this world. Images of Black bodies before, during, and after racist, misogynist, classist, and ableist violations proliferate in the media. Not only do we experience violence first hand, we are also consistently vicariously traumatized, and so live in a state of psychological, emotional, and social terror; these are the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade and ongoing colonial, racist, militarist, state-sanctioned systemic oppression. On Turtle Island (Canada), the plight and status of Indigenous peoples, Black peoples, womxn, people of colour, people of different sexualities, genders, and abilities are experiences marked by oppression and exclusion. Theatres in Toronto that receive substantial funding are still largely white, male, and heteronormative. The Watah Theatre is my attempt at providing a sacred space for Black people to introspect, heal, and co-create lived experiences that nurture our loving humanity while challenging systemic oppression through the cultivation of wholistic performing arts. It is a culmination of years of rigorous mentorship from my elders: Anita Stewart (a pioneer dub poet and my mother), Amah Harris of Theatre in the Rough, Dr. Winsom Winsom, ahndri zhina mandiola (founder of b current theatre), Verle Thompson, Itah Sadu, Star Jacobs, Lillian Allen, Angela Robertson, Djanet Sears, Layne Coleman, Kelly Thornton (Nightwood Theatre), Iris Turcott, Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, Albert Schultz (Soulpepper Theatre), Richard Rose (Tarragon Theatre), Playwrights Canada Press, Black Theatre Workshop, Obsidian Theatre, and Ilana Landsberg Lewis (the Stephen Lewis Foundation). My elders taught me that in the absence of what I need, I must create from what I have.

Watah, previously “anitafrika dub theatre,” is a theatre company that specializes in the professional development and mentorship of primarily Black artists and also welcomes artists who are People of Colour, First Nations, and/or LGBTQQIP2SAA. Founded in 2008 and incorporated in 2014 as a non-profit company, the organization cultivates artists as mentor-leaders of integrity. Radical arts-engagement sits at the core of Watah’s commitment to provide artists with tools for self-actualization, create relevant art, and uncover crucial mentorship skills for each one to teach one. Yearlong residencies that culminate in a production of the plays written by the artists, ongoing publication of the resident-artists’ work, and the staging of groundbreaking new theatre are the foundation of Watah’s season. Watah contributes to, supports, and develops the legacy of Black theatre in Canada by cultivating and sharing a unique African-Caribbean-Canadian theatre aesthetic, heavily informed by the radical performance tradition of Jamaica’s dub poetry and dub theatre. The company insists on challenging systemic barriers that exclude Black theatre artists, thereby giving Black arts practitioners a local, national, and international platform to showcase and celebrate their work.

*At Watah I experience the extraordinary and become a conduit for others to experience that too.*

—Halima Nuri, Watah Artist-in-Residence

Watah’s presence in Canadian theatre at this time is crucial. Racism and sexism are rife and rampant here, maintaining their foothold in institutions of “higher education” and “high art,” which continue to portray Europe (and therefore *whiteness*) as the basis of civilization and theatre, insisting that *whiteness* and white theatre epitomize a humanity that Africa, her children, and the rest of the world should emulate (while being excluded). Ironically, this *humanity* has been built on the backs of Black peoples, First Nations peoples, and people of colour, glued together by our blood. Well-funded Canadian theatre companies and institutions continue to reflect this unfortunate narrative with their choices of artistic directors, acting companies, administrative staff, and play productions, which routinely exclude or tokenize Black people.

Watah produces and nurtures (counter)narratives that are not in opposition to whiteness. Even while responding to the insidious unfairness of racism, it is imperative that we do not place whiteness at the centre of the art we create. Blackness does not exist in opposition to whiteness; therefore, the art that Watah creates celebrates Blackness and its intrinsic humanity within itself. Advancing a radically innovative approach to solo performance, self-actualization, creativity, equity, mentorship, and leadership, Watah offers Black artists the Sorplusi Method,<sup>1</sup> an intersectional oppression-aware liberation framework that equips people with the skills to lead non-hierarchically in their communities. Using Sorplusi, artists identify and practise a creative, self-defined process of self-empowerment. Their time in Watah residencies fosters the creation of a significant bio-mythical solo work that emerges from their process of self-actualization.<sup>2</sup> Black artists are then able to connect the dots between self-actualization, art creation, and leadership, locating their Blackness and multiple identities through introspection, accountability, and responsibility.



d'bi.young anitafrika in her monodrama *She Mami Wata and the Pussy Witch/Hunt*, featured at Watah’s Word! Sound! Powah! Festival of Monodrama in June 2015.

Photo by Anthony Gebrehiwot, xvxyphoto.com



Performing Artist Development Initiative Artists-in-Residence in Word! Sound! Powah! *DubOpera* by d'bi.young anitafrika at Watah’s Festival of Monodrama in June 2015.

Photo by Anthony Gebrehiwot

There is a long and rigorous tradition of mentorship in our community. My own artistic presence came about as a result and product of ongoing mentorship. In 1993, upon moving to Canada from Jamaica at fifteen years of age, I was fortunate enough to be a participant in Fresh Arts, programming that was born in the shadow of the Rodney King uprisings in the US and the Yonge Street protests in Canada. The program survived for three years before having to close due to the oppressive policies of the Mike Harris government in Ontario. Fresh Arts shaped my perspective on radical activist training while preparing me for a future leadership role in the arts sector. Watah is aiming to be a similar rigorous space of development for future Black activists. Black people



Za'kisha Brown in her monodrama *Cyclical*, featured in *Black Solo* at Watah's Word! Sound! Powah! Festival of Monodrama in June 2015. Photo by Anthony Gebrehiwot

continue to experience under-representation in well-funded storytelling spaces, as well as experience challenges finding spaces where they can receive mentorship and professional development. As a theatre without racially and economically restrictive selection practices, Watah cultivates a new generation of African-Canadian theatremakers, arts-educators, and mentors who are able to innovate future projects that further cultivate equity, justice, fairness, and accessibility in Toronto and Canada's arts and social service sectors.

*Watah helps me to look within.*  
—Tristan Dryden, Artist-in-Residence

There are six residency programs at Watah; three are cost-free for Artists-in-Residence, two have costs associated with them, and one involves bartering expertise.

The Performing Artist Development Initiative, which offers two residencies over two years, is a cost-free bridge program into professional theatre that provides both theoretical and practical performance training while enabling mentorship between emerging and established artists. The initiative offers professional development to emerging Black artists (aged 18–29) who write and perform. They publish a bio-myth monodrama at the end of the year. Watah's goal is to make this a three-year program by the 2016 season.

The Transdisciplinary Artist Program is a multi-layered artistic experience for emerged and mid-career artists who create

cross-genre works that defy categorization. Artists-in-Residence study the Sorplusi Method and its three applications for a year, the culmination of which is a production and publication of a bio-mythographical work of art. Watah Theatre's staff is primarily exchange-based, as Artists-in-Residence from the Transdisciplinary residency barter their expertise through the Work Energy Exchange program.

The Sorplusi Arts Fellowship is a joint initiative of Watah and the Sorplusi Institute. It provides an arts and research fellowship for mid-career and established artists who have studied the Sorplusi Method and wish to deepen their artistic and scholarly practice of the method by becoming Sorplusi Method Facilitators.

Artist Shaman Exhibit is a three-month visual arts residency for painters, photographers, muralists, and multimedia artists. During the program artists create works alongside the Watah performance artists-in-residence, investigating the impact of the Sorplusi Method on their work. The exhibit culminates in a solo installation at a Watah Theatre festival.

The Sorplusi MasterClass Intensive is a three-week creation lab that uses the Sorplusi Method to support the practitioner in developing a new work of art, completing an existing one, catalyzing an entrepreneurial venture, or deepening the ability to mentor. All explorations are grounded in the process of self-actualization. MasterClasses run biannually and are open to emerging to established artists and non-artists.

Residencies unfold through three stages of development resulting in monodramas that emerge out of the Sorplusi Method.

The plays are workshopped and featured at three culminating public presentations, then published in Watah's anthology of new Black theatre. Session One—focused on Self-Actualization—runs from October to December. Artists-in-Residence explore the questions, *Who am I? How am I? What is my purpose?* The session culminates in the Mikey Smith Raw Works Festival, named in honour of Jamaica's brilliant, dynamic, prophetic, political dub poet Michael Smith.<sup>3</sup> Session Two—focused on Art Creation—runs from January to March. Artists-in-Residence explore the questions, *What is the relationship between myself and the art that I create? What stories have I been told? What stories do I perpetuate?* The session ends with the Audre Lorde Works-in-Progress Festival, named in honour of the African-Caribbean-American radical feminist lesbian poet Audre Lorde.<sup>4</sup> Lorde's work inspires us to continually undo the fibres of our oppressively conditioned beings. As indicated by the opening quotation, she insists that as Black womyn and Black people we must self-care, as this is a revolutionary act of survival. Watah is rooted in both her ethos and her theories. Session Three of the residencies—focused on mentorship and leadership—runs from April to June. Here, the Artists-in-Residence explore the questions, *What is the relationship between the art that I create and the communities I am accountably responsible to? How do I define the sacred? What does integrity mean to me?* The session wraps up with the Word! Sound! Powah! Festival of Monodrama, named in honour of Jamaica's Rastafarian tradition of truth, rights, and justice.

Each of the three stages of professional development contain modules that are curated by established mentor artists such as Waleed Abdulhamid, Amina Alfred, Raven Dauda, Owen Blakka Ellis, Danielle Smith, Eddy David, and myself. Focal points include African-Caribbean Theatre Aesthetics, dub poetics, voice,


movement, mask, dramaturgy, stage management, set and lighting design, grant writing, the hero's journey, solo performance, and wholistic self-care. Artists work towards creating transdisciplinary monodramas that emerge from their lived experience and highlight storytelling, music, movement, masks, and other theatrical conventions.

*Watah is a rare and sacred theatre where I am welcomed as I am.*

—Raven Dauda, Artist-in-Residence

We witness an increase (or increase in visibility) of global violence against Black peoples. Young Black peoples are targets of police brutality, racist discrimination, homophobia, classism, and systemic erasure. Our city, country, and world desperately need to connect a continued legacy of violent exclusion from equal rights and justice to the challenges Black peoples face in achieving emotional and mental well-being. Our youth are displaced in high schools and the job market, have fewer registrations in post-secondary education, and are thus challenged to make a resounding impact in the arts. For these reasons, Watah exists as a meeting place, a growing place, a healing place.

Publishing two yearly anthologies of monodramas through Sorplusi Publishing (an imprint of The Sorplusi Institute), Watah writes Black arts practitioners into their own living-herstories and histories. Their work is canonized, despite the absence of publishing opportunities from mainstream publishing houses. Our inaugural season's culminating publication, *Black Solo: Watah Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Monodrama* (title inspired by Djanet Sears' *Afrika Solo*), features the works of fifteen new playwrights. Each piece speaks its own bio-mythographical



Raven Dauda in her play *Addiction*, featured in *Black Solo* at Watah's Word! Sound! Powah! Festival of Monodrama in June 2015.  
Photo by Anthony Gebrehiwot



SashOYA Simpson in her monodrama *Hurricane Not Stopping with Thunderous Skies Around*, featured in *Black Solo* at Watah's Word! Sound! Powah! Festival of Monodrama in June 2015.  
Photo by Anthony Gebrehiwot

truth as the playwrights experiment with the Sorplusi Method. The magic embedded in these pages is not to be missed; magic that refuses to bend to the brace of systemic injustice by winding itself, like a river, into an ocean of liberation. From Angaer Arop's sky-bound investigations of shadism to SashOYA Simpson's insistence on celebrating the r/evolution embedded in the

midwifery. *Black Solo* is personified in the image of Anique J. Jordan, who appears on the cover of the book, reminding us that we have indeed survived with our hearts and our arts insisting on existence. We are here.

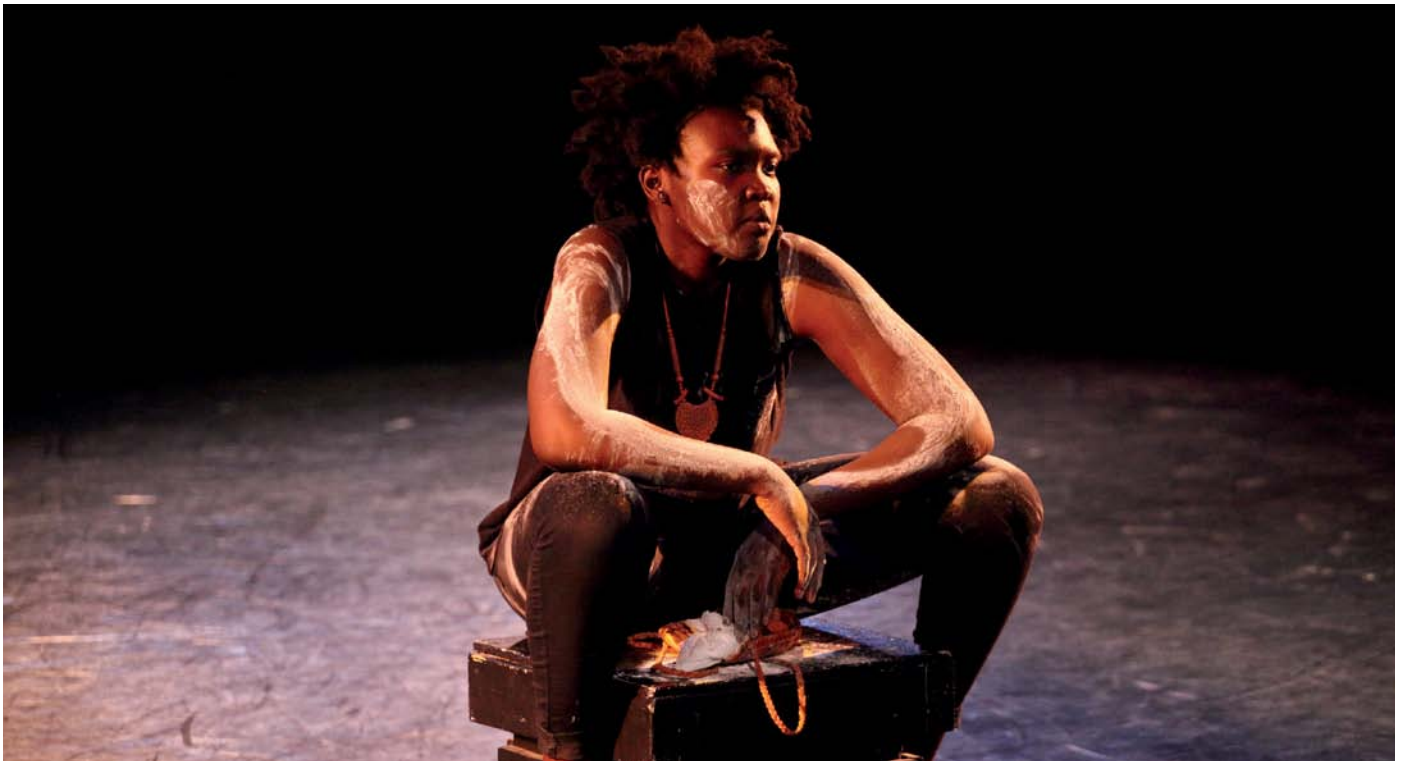
Watah is a living model of Black arts survival emerging out of a long legacy of resistance. In these times, as before, it is crucial that our resistance be both on and off stage. We are committed to holding Black bodies and Black stories lovingly, tenderly, and humanely. We know, as Djanet Sears reminds us on the cover of *Black Solo*, that as with Black Lives, "Black PLAYS MATTER!" To Obsidian Theatre, b current Theatre, It's a Freedom Thing, Theatre Archipelago, AfriCan Theatre Ensemble, Black Theatre Workshop, Piece of Mine Festival, Little Black Afro, and all who remain unnamed: *Aluta Continua!*

*Watah is a living model of Black arts survival emerging out of a long legacy of resistance.*

Jamaica Nation Language, or from Laura Kelsey Rideout's mirror of anxiety to Tristan Dryden's unfolding complexity of Black manhood. We move swiftly to Vero Diaz's flowering feminism and then to Halima Nuri's uncompromising storying of womben sex workers. Najla Edward's compassionate treatment of depression in Black wimmin breathes truth into Jasbina Sekhon's healing journey through Ashtanga yoga. Raven Dauda is unrelenting in her explorations of ancestry and addiction, while Faduma Mohamed shows us an intimate look at the softness and harshness of autism. Paul Ohonsi's words flow like rain in a river dedicated to redefining father-son relationships, as Clover Fannin spins metaphors that teach us about our sexual boundaries and ourselves. Zak'isha Brown brings humour and playfulness to the collection while chronicling a young girl's rite of passage; her story greets Babette's Burrell's passion for kombucha, which emerges from a passion for

## Notes

- 1 The Sorplusi Method is an intersectional anti-oppressive liberation framework originated by d'bi.young anitafrika that is utilized by artists, instigators, educators, and change-makers globally. The Method cultivates self-actualization, creativity, and leadership in its practitioners. Sorplusi, which emerges out of Jamaica's dub poetry and the Caribbean's popular theatre, was inspired by the seminal dub theory work of anitafrika's mother, pioneer dub poet Anita Stewart, and the dub theatre work of her mentor ahdri zhina mandiola. The acronym S.O.R.P.L.U.S.I. represents the eight foundational principles of Self-knowledge, Orality, Rhythm, Political content and context, Language, Urgency, Sacredness, and Integrity balanced by eight bodies: physical, mental, emotional, creative, spiritual, economic, community, and beyond body. Sorplusi's multiple applications in-



Angaer Arop in her monodrama *Event Horizon*, featured in *Black Solo* at Watah's Word! Sound! Powah! Festival of Monodrama in June 2015. Photo by Anthony Gebrehiwot

clude personal growth, art/theatre-making, health interventions, organization culture-building, transformational justice, and leadership development.

- 2 *Bio-myth* is a term I borrow from Audre Lorde. It is used as the biographical catalyst of the monodramatist's work, which is then mythologized using the Sorplusi Method. Ngozi Paul's *The Emancipation of Ms. Lovely*, which premiered at SummerWorks in 2015, is a perfect example of a Sorplusi bio-myth monodrama. The play, inspired by aspects of Paul's life, fuses the biographical with the mythologized, chronicling the story of Sarah Baartman (a Khoi woman from South Africa who was exhibited in "human zoos" in nineteenth-century Europe under the name "Hottentot Venus") while spinning a web of Black women's empowerment, both ancient and contemporary.
- 3 Smith, born 14 September 1954, was stoned to death on 17 August 1983 for his humanitarian views and voice.
- 4 Audre Lorde, born 18 February 1934, died on 17 November 1992 of breast cancer.

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## About the Author

d'bi.young anitifrika is an internationally celebrated African-Jamaican-Canadian artist. She is the Founder and Artistic Director of Canada's Watah Theatre and has received countless awards, including the YWCA 2015 Woman of Distinction, CNN's Top Ten Poets, two Dora Awards, a KM Hunter Theatre Award, and a Mayor's Arts Award.