"we tellin' stories yo": An Interview with d'bi.young anitafrika

Interview conducted live on stage at Paintbox Bistro by Paul Watkins in Toronto, ON. (8 August 2013)
Transcribed by Paul Watkins

PW: Just absolutely amazing [referring to d'bi.young's performance before the interview]. Thanks for agreeing to this format. So, I thought I would open up by asking a few questions that I have here and then maybe open it up to the audience and hear what they want to ask because I think that that's just as important if not more. Dub is a malleable term and it continues to elude a neat and rigid definition. As a form it privileges reggae music, but in dub and in your own work we hear all sorts of musics come in: calypso, r&b, hip-hop, African drumming. It's this kind of open-ended, improvisational, and extemporaneous… I think it was what inspired Oku Onoura by the music of DJs to coin this term, "dub?" To constantly be "dubbing" over on fertile soil. In your article "revolution begins within," you build on the seminal work of your mother Anita Stewart and you list the principles of dub poetry; you define them as: "self-knowledge, orality, rhythm, political content and context, language, urgency, sacredness, and integrity." And you talk about how they […] comprise "a comprehensive eco-system of accountability and responsibility between you and your audiences." As such, dub poetry has the power to connect disparate communities, different people, this dubbing over and this fragmentation into lines of solidarity.

And so, I wonder how dub, improvisation, and music more generally, you didn't have a music backing, per say, but your performance was incredibly musical, I think we can all agree upon that [… cause you] to think through […] a dub poetics.

d'bi.young: I think the amazing thing about dub poetry is its ability to be simple. You know? As simple as the process of telling stories. So we all tell stories and we all have rhythm within. All kinds of rhythms. We cannot escape the rhythm. We cannot escape our own humanity. What I love about the simplicity of dub is its simply trying to work with our humanity. So […] Oku Onoura, who is credited with having termed the form and really kick starting it […] in Jamaica, there's a myth around him, my mother tells me he is considered to be a kind of Robin Hood of sorts, because he was a thief and he would steal from the post office and redistribute whatever got in the post office in the community. [Audience laughs] And then he went to prison, and it was in prison that he began to write and to chant, also being heavily inspired by a global anti-oppression movement, because you have to remember at the time this was like the early '70s, so what was going on in the world at the time? Apartheid. That was a big, big thing that, globally, people like you and I, you know, everyday people, were rising up, trying to […] be […] a part of an anti-apartheid movement. At that time as well, think of all the colonial countries that were colonies. Let's call them colonies. The Counties where the first people were brought from Africa and then repopulated those countries—forced repopulation, forced labor. Those countries were at the brink of their independence movements, and all of those political movements were linked. So all of that was influencing what was going on in Jamaica on the ground and in the music, and so Oku Onoura was a part of that movement. The same way we look globally right now and there are all these solidarity movements that are attempting to gain independence, that are attempting to stop atrocities or even spread information, so that time period was similar, and dub poetry again, what I love about it is its attempt to make links between people, […its] humanity: the necessity for liberation; the necessity for love; the necessity for equality. The things that we feel in our own bodies… all these anti-oppression movements that are outside of our bodies also live within our bodies. Whatever it is we are struggling with, even if we are simply struggling with trying to find the courage to get up in the morning to go

outside and face all the vibration, right? And we'll talk more about this later, I imagine. But dub is essentially, at its very, very basic level, looking at how […] we connect our humanities, recognizing that ultimately we are already connected.

PW: To take it even more broadly, you brought this up, the notion of storytelling. As Uchendu claims in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, "There is no story that is not true" (141). And as Thomas King affirms, all that we are is stories. In your poem, "we tellin' stories yo," which I used as the title for this event, you say: "when we disrespect the stories / we disregard a herstory our history." History is always kind of created via a series of perspectives, interventions, oral stories, written stories, and I particularly like your emphasis on "herstory." And I want to touch on this aspect of storytelling and see if we can maybe link it into gender as well, or conceptions of gender. Since dubs inception women have always been present right there from the very beginning, bringing new stories and new histories into the locus of the art form. For example, seven out of the eleven dub poets looked at in Afua Cooper's *Utterances and Incantations*, seven of them are dub poets based in Canada, out of those 11 women poets, and so I find that incredibly interesting.

And so I wonder if you could maybe touch on your role as a storyteller? What does it mean to be a storyteller for you? Are we all storytellers? I think to a degree we are, right? Is there a level of activism in storytelling? Obviously, it is important the type of stories that get told, right? And I also wonder if you could somehow link that to gender and storytelling, or the conception of gender. As an academic I don't really believe in the concept of gender, nor as a human being do I really believe in the concept of gender. You have a song called "gendah bendah" as well where you play with some of those conventions. There's a lot there, but if you could touch on some of that.

d'bi.young: I'm with you. I like that you said, you know, being able to think outside of gender, that that's a part I feel of what our responsibility is that we recognize that *ALL* of this is a construction, right? I think it is important to recognize that, not just to say, "oh, it's all constructed," you know so… it's important to recognize that because within each moment we are choosing how to move within, how to support, uphold, or challenge the constructions. In each moment, the way in which we think about ourselves within the construction, the way in which we present ourselves within the construction, the expectations that I have of you within the construction, the expectations you have of me within the construction. At every moment we are functioning and making agreements with, and rejecting or challenging the construction. So that aside, the stories that we tell, the stories that we believe, the stories that we've been told: all those are also part of the construction. We are all storytellers. Right? Because everything that you communicate to me and I communicate to you is a story that is going through a particular set of filters. So I guess when I think of myself, and I think of gender, and I think of what I'm doing, I think of what stories am I telling myself; what stories am I expecting from the people around me; and what stories am I telling them? And are the stories that I'm telling myself […] helping me to become who I envision myself to be able to become? And then are the stories that I am listening to […] helping me to become who I envision myself to become? And then I have to ask who am I envisioning myself that I am going to become? [Audience laughs] When I ask myself that question—like I was saying about the slow down business and the path, you know the path goes all over the place—when I ask myself now, who am I expecting, wanting to become, it's slightly different from 5 years ago. Right? It's slightly different from 10 years ago. Because the first time I began doing poetry who I expected to become was like some cross between a sci-fi cartoon-make-believe-superstar. [Audience laughs] Because that's what you do if you have talent. And then Mecca, the holy land is Hollywood: cars, and big fancy stuff, money, money, money. [Audience laughs]

PW: Maybe all there is change. Maybe the only constant thing in life is change.

d'bi.young: Right, right, so then we grow as we learn, as we become clearer about our own path and our own development, then it shapes. It's like molding. We mold ourselves. We're molded, but we also mold ourselves. And what I've learned from the community—and the community is a big, big thing—because the community has raised me. What I've learned from the community that narrative—that one that I just told you about—is one narrative of many, many, many, many narratives. It is my job to decide which narrative I am going to believe and which narrative I am going to follow. Thank goddess, good heavens, I had the community to help me construct and reconstruct my narrative and I've been able to become a storyteller in the way that I envisioned, and to get what I understand to be the riches, which look slightly different, but which are profound, oh my goodness, I would never trade it up, never. Ultimately, the process of questioning the narratives that are going on in our bodies, the questioning part can only happen from us. Nobody else can question it. So, yes we live in all these constructs that are very problematic some of them, yes it so hard to have to go out and fight you and [d'bi. makes fighting sounds]; however, I know you understood that. [Audience laughs] However, even the way that I choose to interpret the challenges that I have inherited, whether those challenges are racial challenges, gender challenges, sexuality challenges, the ways in which I deal with and negotiate those challenges are still my responsibility. Even though there are systems that have been constructed that I have been pushed into. Even with that reality, ultimately, we are born alone and we are going to die alone. We're all gonna die, so I gotta ask myself, I can't control how I'm going to die, but what I can do is, moment to moment, I can be working on refining my definition of liberation. And in refining my definition of liberation, a part of that work is and can be the activism work that we do in all the work that we do, but that has to be grounded in and supported by my own questioning of the narratives that exist within my own body. That I cannot blame people or systems for the narratives that I hold within my own body: the violence that I hold within my own body; I've got to deal with that, the anger that I hold within my own body, cause ultimately no matter how angry I am at the system or at an injustice this anger is not killing the system or the injustice—it's killing me. [Audience applauds] It's killing me. I think liberation is about survival. I figured it out, right? [Audience laughs]. I figured out that the only liberation is love. That's a really hard one because anger, when you have so much to be angry about, you walk down the street and there are people on the street and you notice enough resources are there, and you get a bomb dropped on dem head, and like what make you want to drop a bomb on somebody's head; there's so much to be angry about, it's like why is humanity so like the universe—so full of chaos, you know? Why? Because it is a part of the universe: it's chaos. But within that chaos I need to locate myself as a storyteller within that chaos. And actually the chaos that I'm fighting is a chaos inside my own body. That's the chaos that I'm fighting around gender, around all of those narratives. If I can deal with that chaos within my own body then I can have an incredible amount of energy to then do the work that is going to help to transform the world.

PW: And this is why stories can be transformative. Also, the other end of the spectrum is listening. It's not just the stories we tell but it's learning how to listen, and its learning how to interpret those stories to make meaning of those stories. And another interesting point you brought up is this notion that we move from the fragmentation of all these various stories and narratives. How do we find community?

I wonder if you could discuss the role of community in your work and in your politics (you're working against a poli/tricks). There seems to be explicitly political content in telling stories that do not get told.

d'bi.young: Everything is political!

PW: Everything is political. If you are not political, politics will come to you, right?

d'bi.young: You can't escape it cause humanity; we can't escape politics […] because we are living in systems. So you can't escape politics if you live in that system. And even if that system is not a North American system, you are living in a setting that let's say it looks very different than this. Let's say, an indigenous setting that has been preserved by some wonderful miracle—it's still a system. Isn't it? I think it's also crucial when we look at the past we don't romanticize it, you know? Because there always have been systems. People have always trod the land and tried to conquer other people, and even though we know that history as we see it in general has been written in a particular way, and written by what we consider to be the victors, but I think we have to question what does the victor mean? If you can kill all the people then you are the victor… question mark. But, we'll pause on that. Looking at the legacy of our humanity, let's say then, you can see that we are not doing any different. We are not. Let's be honest. Let's be very honest. If we look at the legacy of humanity, this process of conquering and holding down certain people in order to gain more and broaden out and spread out and run da show… empire building is not new. So, from my own self when I think empire building is not new, and this process of wanting: mine, mine, mine. I look at my two sons (a four year old and a nine year old) and I see da same thing. My toy, my food, mine, mine, mine. I think to myself what about this is a movement and an energy and where are my responsibilities within it, and where do I do that: mine, mine, mine. I think it's crucial to critique the system, but again I cannot find liberation if my critique is unidirectional. Because who makes systems? Having gone through the sort of politicalizations of Black nationalism, and feminism, queer liberation movement, just moving through to learn about how we each perceive and experience oppression and then getting to this place which is informed by all those other places, all different people suffer for many different reasons. What role do I play within that system? Ultimately, what do I accept, what do I not accept. It has to come back to self. It has to ultimately come back to self. And that the critique that we extend to these systems—that we cannot avoid, everything is political—the critique that we extend out there must also be reflected, and that is where true change begins. When we are able to now look at that system and see the map of it on our own bodies, then we can begin to see where it hurts, why it hurts, how we react to that hurt, and then begin to move into a place of actual liberation which is to relearn how to love and in spite of, and despite of the "fuckery." [Audience claps] It's to relearn that and then give […] that to ourselves and then give that to the community. That's where the community comes in my work. The community has been the mirror that has inspired my own healing process. The community: I'm cradled and always have been. That doesn't mean that everybody agrees with everything I'm saying or anything like that, but the *community*, which is like everybody, because of the way our relationship has evolved, that has been a give-and-take, give-and-take, and a consistent dialogue for twenty years. There's been twenty years in Canada, and twenty years of doing this. Because of that that has helped me to be able to grow, heal, and become this kind of artist. That process, that relationship is so crucial; I think that when we begin to get back into ourselves in a particular way we can foster that relationship.

PW: So Oku Onoura might have coined the term dub, but it looks like maybe d'bi. coined […] "fuckery?"[1]

d'bi.young: [Laughs] No, it's Jamaican.

PW: It's good, I like it.

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[1] **PW** (note): I realized a few moments after saying this that I actually had heard the term in the Amy Winehouse song, "Me and Mr. Jones," which opens: "What kind of fuckery is this?" According to the dictionary *The F Word,* an Oxford English style dictionary which traces the various uses and lineages of the word "fuck," the word "fuckery" is a relatively new term, first referring, as early as 1902 to a brothel. It first appears in print in the way that d'bi uses it, referring to despicable behaviour or treachery, in Stephen King's 1978 novel, *The Stand*.

d'bi.young: Might even be British!

PW: Yeah. Hmm. So, revolution then, it needs to begin within.

d'bi.young: For sure.

PW: For there to be revolution we need to have a revolution of the mind and a revolution of the spirit.

d'bi.young: The heart, yeah.

PW: Love seems to be the prevailing theme here. Before I move it on to the audience here, we've talked about dub poetics, revolution, and community. You are performing in a new dub theatre piece [*nanny: maroon warrior queen*] that you wrote, manage, that you star in, basically you do everything, starting tomorrow, right?

d'bi.young: [Laughs] Me, and Cassy [referring to Cassy Walker in the audience] has actually done everything on this one.

PW: Oh wow.

d d'bi.young: And I just try to create.

PW: So could you maybe talk about your process more generally, and what dub-theatre encompasses?

d'bi.young: I should mention Ahdri Zhina Mandiela because she has been a very important part of my growth as an artist and has mentored me, for many, many, many, *many* years. And Ahdri coined the term "dub theatre" and my mom coined the term "dubbin theatre," and so I'm somewhere in the middle. My process, I was saying to Cassy yesterday, "you know that the way I've always created theatre is I have to deal with where I'm at in the present moment." Some people create theatre and create art, dem choose a subject matter, right? And then the subject matter maybe unconsciously is related to where they are at right now, but consciously for them it is not really related. That's one way of creating, but there are many ways of creating. For me, I talk about where I'm at in the moment because art has always been a window through which I look out at myself. And then through that window of looking at myself I'm looking at the community. And I really and truly believe that each of us is a blueprint of humanity. So you can look at yourself and get a good picture; he can look at himself, anybody can look at their own self, and get a really good picture of humanity. Because our humanities are so complex and then so simple. My art has always been an opportunity for me to look with a microscope at something that is gnawing at me, like you know if we look at *blood.claat*, which is the first monodrama, it immediately deals with magic mythology which is in all of the works but at its nucleus it's really dealing with sexual abuse, which is an issue that I needed to deal with from my own childhood. And then *benu*, the second monodrama, deals with a young mother who is going through some very strange illness and that again contains lots of magic and myth, but it was an opportunity for me to talk about being a sole primary parent and having just had my second son and serious postpartum, but without having the language to talk about postpartum, or even having the courage to talk about postpartum and negotiating, well who do I think I am? And then postpartum, like how do those things go together? And using *benu* as a way to come full circle to deal with self. And then *word! sound! powah!* again was a tribute, and they're all tributes to the people in the community, you know. *word! sound! powah!* was inspired by the dub poets, but again an attempt to look at how we reconcile being political and the sacrifices that might come with

that, and what if you don't want to sacrifice? And then what? Does that mean you are not political? Difficult questions to ask, you know, so the lead character she wants to do this poetry thing, but then she ends up having to sacrifice, we think, her life. And then this last piece is an attempt to look at what happens if you are not moving so fast as I mentioned earlier? How does the audience relate to this storytelling and performance? And what if you shift the pace but still talk about the challenging things? I'm talking about oppression, you know? And again, it's an experiment, they're all experiments. This is the first draft of the play, so it's right at the very beginning. It's an infant, and in the show there will be a talk back, as well. And that's how all of them have grown, you know? After the show there's a talk back and it's like what worked? What didn't work? What did you get? What didn't you get? What would you like to see more of? What questions do you have that you want to have answered? And from there it will grow.

PW: So it's living, like history, right? It's always there to find out about and make.

d'bi.young: It has to be alive. This is why I create art, so I can grow, you know? So I can grow and become a better person. It's simple, you know?

PW: I think we've all grown a little bit just listening to your words, your sound, and your power. I think we have time for maybe just a couple questions from the audience. I'm sure there are some pressing questions.

Audience Member: Do you find that dub poetry really brings out the true you, more than a regular poem? Some poets just say what they have to say, but you don't really feel that. Do you feel that dub poetry really brings out the true you?

d'bi.young: I feel like I'm a product of social conditioning in that sense. I feel like possibly if I had grown up only in Canada, I might be doing the same thing but using maybe Standard English forms more. But probably in the same direction, so I think that the dub comes out of the cultural space that I come out of. It's the foundation on which I stand, but then from there it's a launch pad. But then from there I can and have experimented with different things, but I come back to dub because I'm Jamaican and dub is what I know. But it is not a prison. I never experience it as a prison or a box, or something that would prevent me from then trying to do a thing, cause there's a lot of things I do that dub poets don't call dub. And so it go, I can do that. [Audience laughs] I think that wherever we stand, however we choose to classify, I think that it's also important to remember that those classifications are a communication tool, but they don't have to be boxes or any sort. When you look at dub and you look at let's say kaiso[2] and you look at griot tradition and you look all around the world. You look at the Gallic ballad tradition; when you really take them apart and look closely at them, you see the same thing, and the same thing, and the same thing. People telling stories. I have to use rhythm cause it's everywhere, and using the body to engage. I think for those who choose to be in a particular genre do so because that's where they feel comfortable. And for those who feel like they can branch out and try a thing that's also emerging from where they feel they can do that, you know?

Audience Member: I wanted to ask, I've heard some of your poetry before, and tonight. This influence of Nigeria and Yoruba culture, I love it. I'm just trying to understand where that came from?

d'bi.young: When I was in, well coming out of Jamaica, part of how we connect back to Africa is through a black nationalist movement rooted in Rastafarianism. Really and truly, which comes out of

[2] An African-Caribbean (Trinidad) form of storytelling that sounds like dub.

Garveyism and Garvey's connection to the Mau Maus. So you know, there's a real potential and reality of an African connection in Jamaica. But that one part of it, because the other part of it maybe we don't hear about so much is the anti-African movement in Jamaica. And the anti-Africa movement in Jamaica is really a product of the Judeo Christian tradition that comes out of imperialism. That comes out of the British legacy left in Jamaica. It's kind of like we hate ourselves because of that gradation colour bar trying to reach out to the mass and that kind of vibe. So, I feel like every Jamaican you are exposed to all of it cause reggae music is the music in Jamaica. So in the music is buried the very pro-Africa movement. So out of that I think emerges my love for Africa, and then more specifically Nigerian culture is such a very powerful culture. When I think of Jamaica and I think of Africa, I think of the kind of power that Jamaica holds and the way that Jamaicans are in the world, and I think of Nigerians as well. This is for me: that's my experience. It's not a hierarchy position thing. It's just my experience of the Jamaican culture relation with the Nigerian culture. They're two very powerful sets of people. And of course in a large part we are also descended from people of that region. And so for me in a romantic nostalgic sense it's like looking back to where I come from and looking back to my ancestry. But particularly Nigerian mythology and the magical spiritual traditions I find enchanting. Fascinating, and I can't hear enough stories… it always makes me feel like I'm 5 years old again. And so I've just been doing as much research as I can to learn, to learn, to learn. And then whatever I learn I put in the work.

PW: Last question.

Audience Member: So one part of your life I know is a lot of mentorship. And I wonder how that has helped you?

d'bi.young: Mentorship has been a big, big part of my life and that's where community comes in. I'm a product of the JOY program: Jobs Ontario Youth Fresh Art Program, for those who know that program. 1991-1992 as a result of massive, massive social cuts. All kinds of things went down. You have to think about the domino effect. When you have massive social programs that are cut, you have to ask yourself: where the youth then going to go? Where are the youth going to go when there's no after school program? No extra program on the weekend and during the summer. What are they going to do? And then when that is coupled by other social inequities and things pile up. Anyways, massive social [problems] and a few years later wooly-pa ['whole-heap- of'] violence. And the government came up with a bunch of money and very much pushed by community heads like Lillian Allen, Amah Harris,[3] 'nuff 'nuff people rallied and that was the result of their rally. Funding was given and the joy program, the Jobs Ontario Youth Program was created and out of that came Fresh Arts was this dynamic, multiplatform arts program for young people, and I grew up in that program. So I got to do creative writing, theatre, and lots of anti-oppressive work and got a good, good solid foundation. When I was 16, 17, 18, 19, and in those program mentorship was the big foundation, we were taught by members of the community and then taught how to mentor. It's like another product of social conditioning that I am, but I love mentoring because that's where you learn the most. You get two people in a room and you talk; it's called collaboration. When you get rid of that sort of divide: it's collaboration. That's where I grow the most is in those spaces, working with all kinds of people as a facilitator, looking to facilitate a creative process. Cassandra [in the audience] is one of my long time mentees/mentor, and so is Cassy Walker, who is now stage-managing my production. So the beautiful thing about mentorship is that it

[3] **PW**: When I asked d'bi.young for a little more information about Amah Harris in an email, d'bi responded that she "was the artistic director of *Theatre In The Rough*, which ran a youth summer theatre arts program through the Jobs Ontario Youth program. It was a rigorous mentorship program that aimed at developing us holistically using theatre as the foundation."

comes full-cycle. You mentor and then you are mentored by your mentees. It's awesome. It keep me young, fresh, and green too. [Audience laughs] Mentorship is crucial because it also keeps that relationship with the community going. I alluded to that narrative of what happens if you have the talent and then what are you supposed to do. And of course a big part of that narrative is to pull yourself as far away from the community as possible as an indication of how successful you've become. So the antithesis of that is to root yourself in the community and to actually always have access to [the community] and where they have access to you so that you grow, so that the cycle is indeed a cycle. And I've found that it's really the most rewarding way to go.

PW: Àṣẹ.[4] D'bi. Thank you! That was wonderful. Hopefully we can continue this conversation. Obviously, see her play.

[4] A Yoruba concept that signifies the power to make things happen.