



From Boys to Men: The Road to Healing

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Land Acknowledgement

The University of Toronto

We wish to acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years, it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

Acknowledgements

— Anthony Gebrehiwot

First and foremost, I would like to thank my best friend, the number one person in my life, and the reason this project was possible—my mother. There is no one who loves and believes in me as much as she does. Through her spirit, her grace, and her sacrifice, I have grown to embody the values that she has passed on to me, values that allow me to tell my stories. I would also like to thank my father, who helped me grow from a young boy into a man, always doing his absolute best given the circumstances. My father is blessed with an incredibly kind spirit, and his generosity towards me and others taught me how to move through this world in support of the people that I love.

One of the main reasons I decided to create this body of work was because I have often heard reflections about men from my womxn friends. From our conversations, I learned that the men in their lives needed to do better. Dating, they said, was difficult, and maintaining friendships with other men proved challenging because of how men were conditioned to relate to womxn. It was alarming how often I heard them say, “I wish more men were like you, Tony!” or “Dating is the pits!” I believe that art takes inspiration from life, and I want to thank my friends Natalie Guimond, Khadijah Powell-Kelly, Nyaomi Boogs, Asia Clarke, Britta Badour, Maulee Armstrong, and Xolisa Jerome for guiding me towards realizing this project. It is through you that I learned how to be a better man and how to show up for the womxn in my life. It is through you that I discovered that this project was a necessary labour of love that I could share with the public.

It is no coincidence that the contributors to this publication are also significant people in my life. d’bi, when you appeared in my life, I immediately felt that you were a force to be reckoned with. You greeted Randell and I with humility and well-contained energy. When the cameras turned on and it was time for you to reveal yourself, that energy filled up the room and I was blown away. I knew that you were someone whom I needed to be around. In 2014, Randell and I took a risk and decided to put up a GoFundMe to participate in your artist residency,

Yemoya, in Hawaii. It was the best decision I made; not only was it my first time on a plane, it was my first artist residency. During that time, we became closer to each other and to ourselves. It was through you that I learned what it means to be a person and an artist of integrity. You laid the foundation for how to deliver art from your soul to the world, and I often think of you when making important decisions about my life and my practice.

Randell, who knew when we met outside of the Malvern Family Youth Resource Centre how much our lives would change but also integrate? I am thankful that you believed in yourself and started what we all know now as RISE. I didn't know what community was until I walked into that room in Malvern in May 2012. We've grown together, travelled together, lived together. I'm an only child but you are my little big brother. By being yourself, you've helped me refine my leadership abilities, morality, integrity, and work ethic. Thank you for being such a great giver, leader, human, and artist. You have inspired so many people in this city, including myself, and you have set the bar for our generation in Scarborough.

Kachely, we have not known each other long, but when we first connected, it felt like an instant alignment. We were both reading *The Will to Change* by bell hooks and we were on the same page when it came to co-creating the "Meditations on Masculinities" conversation space. Of all the things that I've done over the past twelve years, it has been one of the most fulfilling. Thank you for helping me build out this public program and for your contribution to this publication. Your words moved me to the core, and I hope that we can find ways to collaborate in the future.

Asia, thank you for all the conversations that led to the development of this project. Through your own life experiences as a black womxn it became clear to me that there was a need to create dialogue around this subject. Thanks as well for the energy that you put into writing the artist statement for the exhibition. No one at the time understood where I was coming from better than you, so thank you.

In addition to Kachely, I'd like to thank everyone at the Doris McCarthy Gallery for making all this possible. It's been an absolute pleasure working with you all on this collaboration. Ann, thank you for guiding me throughout this process. I am incredibly grateful for your support. The DMG truly makes radical efforts to shift the status quo regarding how galleries operate, collaborate with artists, and present artists' works. Whenever I hear an artist is considering working with the DMG, I insist that they do because these past two years have changed my life and my attitude towards working within galleries.

Last, but not least I would like to thank RISE. You were born in 2012 and you changed my life forever. You helped me grow into the man that I am today, and you connected me to every person that is in this publication. I often get asked, "What does it take to craft an exceptional portrait?" My first response is to take portraits of those you have a relationship with. Portraiture needs to be approached with a high level of sensitivity and care. If my subjects and I had not met through the RISE community, I doubt that we would have been able to create the trust necessary to achieve this project's vision. In fact, most of the subjects in these images have said that if it were not for me taking these images, they probably would not have participated. And that means the world to me.

Love,
Tony



Anthony Gebrehiwot, *The Power of a Hug*, 2019, Digital photograph.

Courtesy of the artist. Models: Isiah Baptiste and Kaylyn Rose



Anthony Gebrehiwot, *The Power of a Hug*, 2019, Digital photograph.

Courtesy of the artist. Models: Isiah Baptiste and Kaylyn Rose



Anthony Gebrehiwot, *The Power of a Hug*, 2019, Digital photograph.

Courtesy of the artist. Models: Isiah Baptiste and Kaylyn Rose



A Metamorphosis into Manhood

Randell Adjei

For many young Black men, the road to manhood can be a lonely, uphill journey with no summit in sight. My traverse was often riddled with misinformation and patriarchal beliefs that were embedded into the fabric of my everyday life. I grew up seeing toxic traits presented in my favourite shows and characters in films and on TV. Growing up, I mostly saw Black characters who were either in gangs engaging in criminal activity or wealthy with lots of women surrounding them. Imagine being so young and seeing successful TV characters that looked like you behaving in that way. Needless to say, it was extremely pernicious, especially because I lacked the right guidance to see this as toxic behaviour at the time. Growing up without the ability to discern right from wrong, these were traits I felt I needed in order to be accepted by my peers and liked by the young women I was hoping to impress. Before I even had the opportunity to make sense of it, I was sold on the idea that this would make me accepted and impressive.

These concepts of masculinity were reinforced at school, where my peers were also trying to emulate the same behaviours. My journey as a young boy maturing into manhood was like a tug of war between what I saw all around me and the core values my mother was fighting to instill. This journey required a lot of unpacking, letting go, and transforming to see an impact on my everyday life. Letting go was the hardest. There was a comfort in holding onto what once defined my thinking and who I perceived myself to be.

I am by no means perfect. I am still working and learning—still unpacking those boyish tendencies that don't serve me today. I still converse with the little boy in me from time to time. I let him know that he fell short so the man that I became could climb. The journey from Boyhood to Manhood does not define us. I believe it can design us. The work continues and hasn't stopped. I hope the poem below gives you a glimpse of the proverbial wisdom I've unlocked.

My journey into manhood
Has been a rugged path
It sometimes felt as though
The weight of the world
was on my shoulders
and no one really had my back.

Early on in life
I was taught to keep my emotions locked
Words minimal
Muster the courage to seem strong
Especially when I was not
I was told that my masculinity
Was measured by how dominant I could be
how many women I could get to like me
and that the only way to get my way was fighting.

In the neighbourhoods that raised me
There was no room to be weak
Manhood equated to patriarchy
Then I saw the same messages portrayed on TV.
No one told me it was okay
to express my pain
to be vulnerable
or that my emotions mattered
—that I mattered—
enough to speak my truth.
Toxic masculinity was loud
and the real me was asked to be mute.

I couldn't tell you the number of times
I have heard the words,
"Be a Man" or "Man Up"
The 1st time
I was 11, peer pressured
to pursue a pretty girl at school
as if I was predator hunting its prey
Told I wasn't man enough
Until I got her number and walked away
with a promise I would get in her pants someday.
The 2nd time I heard the words "Man Up"
A group of boys at school pressured me
to smoke and drink
Told the only way I would be accepted by them
I had to do what they did
The 3rd time was an initiation
A physical fight
where I would have to allow them
to beat me up until they knew I was down.
Shed no tears and "be a man," pound for pound
take the blows and withstand the pain.
Except I had to prove my manhood again and again.

As they say, "Boys will be boys,"
but patriarchy leaves many young men without a voice
Silenced to perpetuate toxic traits that damage and destroy
The self-confidence and morals of so many young men
A classic case of the chicken and the egg.

The traumas that have lived within the bodies of men like me
are the cause and effect of societal beliefs
that perpetuate sexism and misogyny.
These traumas are deeply rooted into our psyche
branching into neurons where habits form
and behaviours take fruit
Hopefully more men can wake up and escape the loop.

The awareness of these traumas set me on a path
to be a better husband to my future wife
and one day, a better dad.
I want to be the example I never had.

Many of my lessons on what it meant to be a man
came from examples of my father
Him, too, a victim of patriarchal principles
and equipped with emotional armor.
It was a privilege to witness
Learning from his mistakes pushed me beyond the limits.

My father barely showed any emotion
He demanded respect before he gave it
Walked as though the world owed him something
Lived up to no one's expectations but his own
His definition of a father was one that put money into our home.
My father believed his provisions were more than enough
But all my mother and I wanted was his love.

The only time I ever witnessed my father cry
Was when his mother died
And I'll never forget it
It was the only time I was ever let in
to truly see him
beyond the armor and thick skin.
It was one of the most beautiful things I'd ever witnessed
It taught me no matter how old, we are all somebody's children.

The only other emotions I witnessed from my dad were
anger, laughter, and frustration
In a world that gave him little room to maneuver
and no tools to cope
I choose to use these lessons as a soil of hope
A foundation in which I can grow and expand
Wisdom I can teach my unborn sons about being a man.

In this world, we rally to protect women and children
But men are expected to protect themselves—that's a given
As if we too are not someone's child
Worthy of being protected from the double-edged sword of patriarchy
A privilege we were told to uphold but not abuse
A tug of war between our societal values and our truth.

I do not regret the path to get here
despite the roadblocks and stubbed toes
the road was eventually clear
Like the concrete that birthed the rose
As I see the future generations
I am invigorated with hope
Optimistic enough to believe we are getting close
Close enough to see it in my friends that have climbed the ropes
That the journey into manhood
takes compassion, kindness, and a wider scope.

Anthony Gebrehiwot, *A Soft Touch*, 2019, Digital photograph.

Courtesy of the artist. Model: Moel





Anthony Gebrehiwot, *A Soft Touch*, 2019, Digital photograph.

Courtesy of the artist. Model: Moel

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

d'bi.young anitafrika

[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.¹

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,² 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 decolonial³

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.⁴ The method is a reflexive,⁵ practitioner-centred, Black-queer-feminist framework and pedagogy⁶ 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,⁷ Black liberatory pedagogy, Buddhist meditation practices, polyvagal theory, cognitive neuroscience, and trauma theory, with a focus on supporting practitioners in navigating experiences of colonial trauma⁸ and historical oppression⁹ 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."¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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 monodrama¹² *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.¹³

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 shx¹⁴ navigates sexual trauma, consent, and hxr

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 mandela, 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.claa*t 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."¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

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

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.”¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

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.”¹⁹ 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

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 colleagueship. 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.²⁰

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 Mami 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:

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.²¹

"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."²² 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.²³

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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Anthony Gebrehiwot, *Reflections*, 2021, Digital photograph.

Courtesy of the artist. Model: Jono Campbell





Anthony Gebrehiwot, *Reflections Pt.2*, 2021,
Digital photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

Anthony Gebrehiwot, *Eye of the Storm*, 2021,
Digital photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

Model: Jono Campbell



From Boys to Men: The Road to Healing

— Asia Clarke

Anthony Gebrehiwot is a passionate photographer and community leader whose creative lens re-vision's photography as an ongoing dialogue of social change between subject and society. Seeking to communicate without language in an intimate and vulnerable way, he uses photography to portray the vocabulary of race, masculinity, history, perception, and vulnerability. His latest series, *From Boys To Men: The Road To Healing*, is a visceral display of Black masculinity. It exposes the necessary labour of unpacking learned behaviour attached to childhood trauma. Combining contrasting landscapes, Black bodies, and raw human emotion, Gebrehiwot explores the affective power of Black bodies in confronting the viewer's humanity and empathy. The photographs, arranged in a non-narrative configuration, aim to destabilize the distinctions between past, present, and future. Gebrehiwot's unique visual language extends across temporal sensibilities, tracing the thread of trauma to the root. The photographs' colours, textures, and emotional expressions are imbued with metaphor, encouraging the viewer to place themselves within the poetry of masculine fragility.

Gebrehiwot's artistic exploration stems from his work with Black/pan-African diaspora communities in Toronto. As the resident photographer at Reaching Intelligent Souls Everywhere (RISE) Edutainment, he has intimately witnessed and documented the creative and unguarded evolutions of poets, musicians, and artists from across the city. Based in Scarborough, he has worked to bring photography to youth in communities through organizations like the NIA Centre, The Power Plant, and Toronto Community Housing. His connection to youth and community, combined with his sustained self-dissection and constant desire to evolve, has helped him to identify masculinity as a focal topic for photographic inquiry. Gebrehiwot's artistic exploration of masculinity stems from community conversations on toxic masculinity, in addition to his own self-analysis of past relationships. For him, the healing of the inner child as a seminal experience necessary to embrace and understand the hardened and misunderstood spaces of the heart and soul.

Through self-inquiry-based photography, Gebrehiwot traces emotional triggers to the root wound. His work shines a light on the space and emptiness in the psyche of the Black man—a void created by suffering, love lost, intimacy refused, and humanity denied. In this series, he subtly evokes triggers including toxicity, possessiveness, dominance, sexuality, the feminine/nature duality, the fear of death, the courage of creative expression, and Black identity politics. He challenges the viewer to look critically at traditional norms of masculinity to reconfigure the rules to make space for healing, ultimately leading to a more open heart. Gebrehiwot offers this urgent work because Black men have many social pressures to overcome and dismantle due to the intersectionalities of race, gender, patriarchy, and class.

The photographs unearth the fear associated with embodying the Black male identity in the context of an ever-awakening social consciousness. As a result, they link various socio-political contexts and histories in an attempt to comprehend and criticize the present moment. They serve as a political commentary on contemporary conversations on race and oppression in the Americas. Gebrehiwot's translation from the intimate and psychological into the bold and intentional demonstrates his conviction that redemption and healing can be achieved through imagery, without being explicit or instructive. He does not wish to prescribe the perfect way to heal. Instead, he demonstrates that the inner child within Black men is always worth holding closely and carefully.

Anthony Gebrehiwot, *Brother's Keeper*, 2021,

Digital photograph. Courtesy of the artist. Models: Joshua Obra, Deshawn Blackwood, and Cameron Rodgers





Anthony Gebrehiwot, *Brother's Keeper*, 2021,

Digital photograph. Courtesy of the artist. Models: Joshua Oبرا and Cameron Rodgers

We All (Need to) Try: On Community, Allyship, and Love

Kachely Peters

The work of male relational recovery, of reconnection, of forming intimacy and making community can never be done alone. In a world where men and boys are daily losing their way we must create guides, signposts, new paths. A culture of healing that empowers men to change is in the making. Healing does not take place in isolation. Men who love and men who long to love know this. We need to stand by them, with open hearts and arms. We need to stand ready to hold them, offering a love that can shelter their wounded spirits as they seek to find their way home, as they exercise the will to change.¹

If there's anything that I've learned from bell hooks's works on feminism and love, it is that healing work never ends. From the time we are placed on Earth, our existence is dependent on our ability to continuously learn and grow, while challenging the unjust systems in place. I was introduced to hooks's work as an undergraduate student in my first-year Women and Gender Studies class. A Black woman scholar, feminist, and activist, her to-the-point writing made the foreign world of academia and scholarly articles feel much more accessible. As a Black woman, I found that her writing allowed me to see myself within the space of academia, where there were not many people who looked like me, and, furthermore, made me feel seen as a person. In her writing, she candidly describes the world we live in, discussing the beginning of the feminist movement and speaking incisively about social issues. She describes the power of love and its ability to heal our wounds that we have come to know. Her Love Trilogy helped to revolutionize my thinking, and it is difficult to put into words the tremendous impact that her writing practice has had on my life, and those of countless others.² hooks emphasizes the role that love plays in our daily lives: "When we work with love, we renew the spirit; that renewal is an act of self-love, it nurtures our growth. It's not what you do but how you do it."³ In many ways, her work reminded me of Tony's.

1 bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), 187–188.

2 The Love Trilogy comprises of *All About Love: New Visions*, *Communion: The Female Search for Love, and Salvation: Black People and Love*.

3 bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: William Morrow, 2000), 187–188.

In November 2020, I was working at the Doris McCarthy Gallery when a video highlighting Tony (Anthony Gebrehiwot) and his artistic practice was released by the University of Toronto Scarborough.⁴ At the time, I was reading hooks's non-fiction text *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*, and I was struck by the overlap between his process of self-discovery and hooks's words. In the video, Tony points to his journey of healing from childhood trauma as the catalyst for his series *From Boys to Men: The Road to Healing*. He recounts his vulnerable personal experiences of learning to process and understand his emotions through self-reflection, an empathetic act underscored by hooks in *The Will to Change*. His large-scale images held a tenderness that captivated the viewer. *The Power of a Hug* (2019) stood out to me and many gallery visitors, as it captured a strong sense of brotherhood, affection, and intimacy between two young Black men embracing. Seeing these men hug one another so wholeheartedly was both heartwarming and poignant, as this image is regrettably not often seen in mainstream depictions of Black men.

As hooks explains in *The Will to Change*, "Learning to wear a mask (that word already embedded in the term 'masculinity') is the first lesson in patriarchal masculinity that a boy learns."⁵ *From Boys to Men* removes this mask and instead offers a world where *The Will to Change* is put into practice: where men can truly know themselves, be in touch with their emotions, and love wholly.⁶ Recognizing this overlapping connection felt serendipitous and led me to contact Tony to recommend hooks's book—which I was pleasantly surprised to learn he was already reading—and propose the idea of a new program that the gallery would support. Particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the social isolation that accompanied it, the candor of *From Boys to Men* presented a unique opportunity for the gallery to cultivate a safe and welcoming space for communion. As noted by scholar Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, when gallery spaces respond creatively to the emotional needs of the communities that they represent, creating experiences that focus on the visitors' desires to be seen instead of solely on visitor numbers, they become better appreciated and respected by their communities.⁷ In February 2021, when Tony and I debuted the virtual programming series *Meditations on Masculinities and Love*, the isolation resulting from multiple lockdowns and ever-changing restrictions had taken a toll on people's collective mental health. The program brought together ideas from *From Boys to Men* and *The Will to Change* to create a space for community members to discuss love, parenthood, trauma, healing, and more.

4 "Meet Anthony Gebrehiwot," Vimeo video, 02:43, posted by "Doris McCarthy Gallery," March 1, 2021, <https://vimeo.com/474683730>.

5 hooks, *The Will to Change*, 153.

6 hooks, *The Will to Change*, xvii.

7 Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, "Changing Values in the Art Museum: Rethinking Communication and Learning," *International Journal of Heritage Studies: IJHS* 6, no. 1 (2000): 29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/135272500363715>.

During our first meeting, Tony and I had established that we wanted to create a safe and educational place that would provide young people with a sense of community. In doing so, we hoped to equip them with tools to better navigate the world and begin to heal by giving space to their trauma. Meditations was unlike any other program in the gallery's history in that staff were not present for the actual sessions, giving the reins completely to the artist to facilitate.

By foregrounding "masculinities" within the title of the program, we acknowledged that there are multiple definitions of masculinity, whereas "meditations" referred to the persistent deliberation involved in taking the time to actively reflect. To maintain the integrity and intimacy of the program, the sessions were kept small and unrecorded. What initially began as a pilot project in February and March 2021 was extended for an additional six months due to popular demand. As the program came together, Tony emphasized the importance of creating and promoting a safe space for men and non-binary folks where they could speak candidly; to do so, those who did not identify within those specified groups would not be allowed to attend. At first, this news was admittedly disappointing to me, as I had envisioned the program providing a space for everyone to join, including myself, and I had imagined having greater involvement in it. However, as I listened to Tony describe his experiences working in similar programs and spent time reflecting on my role in this project, I quickly understood why that boundary made a lot of sense. Men have historically been unable to express their thoughts and emotions in the same way that women have. I had read this in *The Will to Change*, witnessed this in Tony's explanation of his works, and understood this from my own personal experiences, so why didn't I think of it sooner? This moment served as a reminder of the learning curves that can exist when transferring knowledge into action. It reminded me of the tremendous amount of care, dedication, and sensitivity that is required of programmers to actualize the potential of a program like this. Along with my later facilitation of the last session in the program (which was open to anyone), it reaffirmed to me the importance of practicing allyship on both individual and institutional levels.

For institutions like galleries, art museums, and universities to reach their fullest potential in effectively serving the communities for which they operate, it is imperative that there is substantial and meaningful energy put towards allyship.⁸ In recent years, the word "ally" has become a buzzword as people search for ways to be a better relative, friend, and colleague to their loved ones. However, as the scholars Wendy Ng, Syrus Marcus

8 Wendy Ng, Syrus Marcus Ware, and Alyssa Greenberg, "Activating Diversity and Inclusion: A Blueprint for Museum Educators as Allies and Change Makers," *Journal of Museum Education* 42, no. 2 (March 2017): 144, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10598650.2017.1306664>.

Ware, and Alyssa Greenberg note, “allyship” should be viewed as a “lived practice rather than an identity.” It is one thing to read a book and comprehend what is being said, but to put the words into practice is hard, serious, yet necessary work. Instead of applying the term “ally” to simply identify oneself or stroke the ego of an individual, it is paramount that allyship be practiced with a focus on supporting the collective. It is important for institutions and those working within them to listen and understand the needs of their surrounding community. As Ng, Ware, and Greenburg eloquently put it, being empathetic and utilizing the plentiful resources that many institutions have at hand will ensure that places like museums and galleries can strengthen their “ability to understand and share the feelings of [their] communities” and thus “develop a deeper, more profound purpose to [their] work.”⁹

In the case of *Meditations*, I was reminded of what hooks notes: “The work of male relational recovery, of reconnection, of forming intimacy and making community can never be done alone. . . . Healing does not take place in isolation.”¹⁰ She continues that for patriarchal standards to be dismantled, support systems must be put in place to guide people through their journey to healing.¹¹ I am a firm believer that a community’s support can help cultivate the growth of an individual. Through my journey of helping to develop this program, working alongside Tony and members of the DMG team, I learned that one of the most important things you can do is to listen—not only hearing what someone says, but also actively reflecting on what is being said. At the root of allyship is a love for one’s community.¹² These efforts can significantly change the ways we understand one another, and ultimately these actions have the power to transform the way we operate as individuals, institutions, and as a collective community. Listening to someone means being a part of their community. In recognizing the interdependent relationship between community and allyship, we can acknowledge the significance of their places within larger society. Bearing the responsibility and role of a community member and ally is an act of love, one that holds within it the hope that real, restorative changes can be made in the world. Once embodied, to speak of love is to speak of hope, justice, and freedom.

9 Ng, Ware, and Greenberg, “Activating Diversity and Inclusion,” 144.

10 hooks, *The Will to Change*, 187–188.

11 hooks, *The Will to Change*, 187–188.

12 bell hooks, “Love as the Practice of Freedom,” in *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2006), 248.







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 Torontonians 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](#).

Asia Clarke is an international development professional, consultant, and strategist who is passionate about re-envisioning futures. She holds an MDes in Strategic Foresight and Innovation from OCAD University. Clarke's major research project, "Grassroots Futures: Identifying Long-term Sustainability Solutions with Grassroots NGOs in Ghana," explores the potential impact of digital economies and other global trends on Grassroots NGOs in Ghana and the communities they serve.

Anthony Gebrehiwot is an award-winning visual artist, photographer, and community leader whose creative lens re-visions photography as an ongoing dialogue of social change between subject and society.

A self-taught artist and photographer, Gebrehiwot founded [XvXy-photo](#) in 2014 focusing on studio portraiture. To date, he has worked with several notable brands including Nike, Royal Bank of Canada, Vice Canada, Absolute, Hudson's Bay, The City of Toronto, and LinkedIn. His work has been featured in over thirty local and international publications including the Toronto Star, The Globe and Mail, PAPER magazine, Elle UK, and Yahoo Lifestyle.

Kachely Peters is a visual artist based in Toronto. A recent alum of the University of Toronto Scarborough's Studio Art program, Peters mainly works with drawing and painting. Delving into themes such as belonging, love, and the intimacy of experience, her recent works have taken a closer look at in-between spaces.

In collaboration with LIWI68's Mark Stoddart, Peters made [THE REVOLUTION BEGINS WITHIN \(2020\)](#). This limited-edition t-shirt fundraising project was created in response to the events of 2020 – a global pandemic, Black Lives Matter protests, and urgent uprisings occurring globally. All proceeds from the fundraiser support TAIBU, a mission focused Community Health Centre located in the Malvern area of Scarborough. Peters continued her community focused work as the [Doris McCarthy Gallery's 2022 Educator-in-Residence](#).

Gratitude

Ann MacDonald, Doris McCarthy Gallery
Executive Director/Chief Curator

'Be a genius of the heart'

Mark Gonzales

It is important that I introduce myself in relation to the various perspectives that inform my activities, including the encouragement and facilitation of Anthony Gebrehiwot's multi-faceted project, *From Boys to Men: The Road to Healing*. I am a settler, a white, cis-het woman, a mother, and the Executive Director/Chief Curator of the Doris McCarthy Gallery which is part of the larger institution of the University of Toronto Scarborough. I am committed to my continual growth and to finding ways to level hierarchies and to share the power and responsibilities that have been entrusted to me.

More than a photography exhibition, *From Boys to Men* is comprised of sustained, loving gestures that mobilize the power of images to infuse conversations with honesty; face individual and collective pain; invite engagement with stories; and find and give rise to beauty. It is a model that charts a path for the Gallery's ongoing and future activities.

Meditations on Masculinities and Love accompanied the photo installation as a series of virtual, closed conversations only for those who identify as Black males. It was lovingly created by Kachely Peters and carefully facilitated by Tony. The conversations were intimate, private, and productive in the rarified absence of institutional oversight or intervention.

I have the honour of working with and learning from artists like Tony who are powerfully applying their creativity toward communal beauty, honour, and healing. From Tony and his collaborators, we at the Gallery have learned to increase our sensitivity toward power dynamics that include structural flaws within large institutions. We are refining our ability to work in parallel with artists, to put concerted energy

into building a culture that recognizes vulnerability as strength, and that in art as in life, questions are often more interesting than answers. Evolution is critical, and anti-colonial actions are vital to the well-being of all. I would like to extend d'bi young anitafrika and Christxpher Oliver's cogent statement by including 'institutional integrity' alongside 'artistic'—"Remember that artistic integrity is an active commitment to honesty and accountability in communion with community."

On behalf of the entire team at the Doris McCarthy Gallery, I offer my wholehearted gratitude to all the creatives and community members who engaged with the many aspects of this life-affirming project. I know that I have come to the other side as a changed person, and I am excited by continued growth and challenges, and by the persistent and beautiful world-making we can all do together.



Cover Image

Anthony Gebrehiwot, *Ebb and Flows*, 2019, Digital photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

Model: Jemelle Williams

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