

the sankofa trilogy: word! sound! powah!
STUDY GUIDE



the sankofa trilogy

written and performed by d'bi young

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Production photographs by Cylla von Tiedemann

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Tarragon Theatre study guide for d'bi young's *the sankofa trilogy*

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ABOUT THE TRILOGY

the sankofa trilogy TIMELINE

blood.claat: mudgu sankofa (mother to sekesu) born 1957. present day in play is 1972

benu: sekesu sankofa (mother to benu) born 1972. present day in play is 1992

word! sound! powah!: benu sankofa born 1992. present day in play is 2012

blood.claat (part one of the trilogy)

mugdu sankofa, a fifteen-year-old girl from kingston, jamaica, begins her journey into womanhood under the watchful gaze of her granny. With her mother gone to canada, mugdu chafes against the limitations imposed on her by her grandmother's generation - even as she looks to her ancestors for strength. Like her mother and grandmother before her, mugdu attempts to embrace her femininity as she navigates the perennial danger that plagues the young women in her family: pregnancy.

benu (part two of the trilogy)

mugdu's daughter sekesu is a new mother. Painful memories of her upbringing – her separation from her mother – surface with the pregnancy and birth, and collide with her expectations of motherhood. Can she be the mother she never had? There is hope in her daughter, benu, named after the mythical egyptian predecessor of the phoenix, which rises from its ashes.

word!sound!powah! (part three of the trilogy)

It is 2012 in jamaica. Young dub poet benu sankofa is swept up in the violence (based on the infamous 1980 national election). The country is on the cusp of a political coup, and in the heat of the struggle between young radicals and the establishment, benu is accused of involvement in a political assassination. Amidst all the corruption and turmoil, who will stand up for the land they love? benu ultimately finds strength in her maternal ancestors to fight for the freedom she believes in, with her courage and dub poetry as her primary tools.

word! sound! powah! CHARACTERS

| | |
|------------------|--|
| benu sankofa | 20 years old. descendent of the maroons. studies drama at the cultural learning centre |
| bobus | 23 years old. leader of the poets in solidarity group. studies drama at the cultural learning centre |
| peaches | 25 years old. single mother of 3 year old sonny. founding member of the poets in solidarity. studies dance at the cultural learning centre |
| sage | 27 years old. rastafarian. founding member of the poets in solidarity group. former music student of the cultural learning centre |
| stamma | 21 years old. founding member of the poets in solidarity group. studies visual arts/painting at the cultural learning centre |
| constable brown | a cruel and confused police officer who interrogates benu |
| grandmother | benu's grandmother mudgu sankofa. she raised benu in maroon town |
| village gossip | a proud jamaican womban who supports both the pnp (people's nation party) and the jlp (jamaica land party) parties |
| pnp party leader | a politician. he is the current prime minister of jamaica leading up to the 2012 national elections |
| jlp party leader | a politician. he gets assassinated when he wins the 2012 national elections |



An excerpt from the PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTES

when I was 13 years old, after completing my first and only performance in the jamaica *national secondary schools' theatre festival*, I looked up to the sky and made a promise to be the best person I could ever be, in exchange for permission and support to be a storyteller for the rest of my life. I am still keeping that promise and still being given the continuous opportunity to tell you stories. I am a storyteller. my mother is a storyteller. my grandmother is a storyteller. I am surrounded by storytellers. the entire universe pours herself into a cauldron of tales, mixing and molding us into miniature versions of herself.

I always knew I was writing a trilogy; I didn't always know which play was coming next. there were a few versions of part 2 and part 3 but ultimately I ended up with the stories that needed to be told. my first inspiration to write *the sankofa trilogy* was seeing my mother on stage when I was about 5 years old. she was performing a one-womban silent show directed by honor-ford smith at the *jamaica school of drama (now the edna manley college for the visual and performing arts)*. I was fascinated by my mother and her performance and the style of theatre. it made a permanent mark. my second inspiration was trey anthony's *da kink in my hair* which changed my life as a storyteller forever. and my third inspiration was watching yanna macintosh in *the syringa tree* at canstage theatre. in yanna I saw myself. her performance filled me with a confidence I experienced only when watching my mother on stage. she provided a mirror of black wombanhood, beauty, strength and brilliance that I aspired to.

...

I am a child of the village. I was raised in jamaica by a village and then in canada by another village. it is to you that I livecate these plays to. *the sankofa trilogy* is for every single person who has contributed to my development as a storyteller. without you I would not be here. as the ashanti proverb *sankofa* says: return and get the knowledge; learn from your past. I am returning to you to get the knowledge and I am learning from those who have gone before me. ase and thank you ancestors, spirit guides, orisha, mommy & daddy, granny & great-granny, family, moon & phoenix, community, tarragon theatre, friends, lovers and those to come.

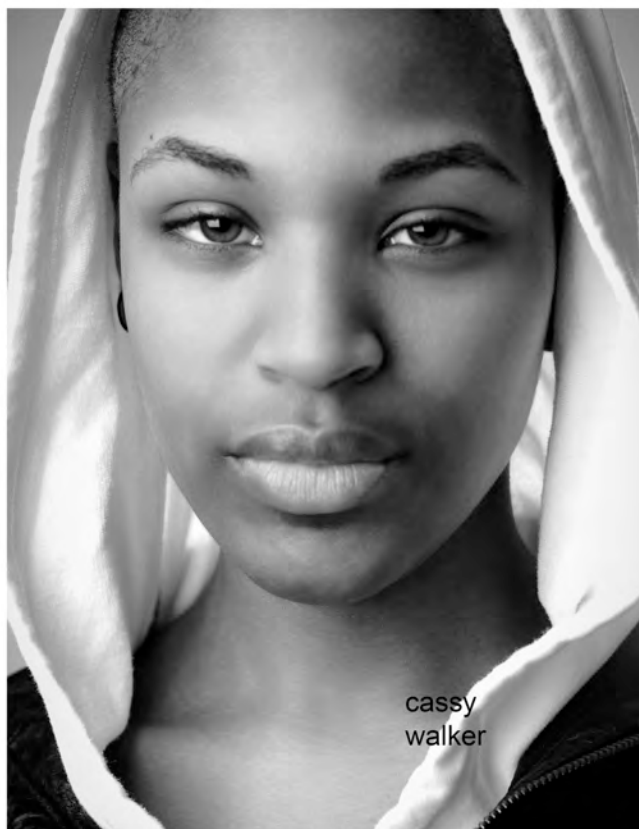
the sankofa trilogy will be published by *playwright's canada press* in january 2012. for the extended version of d'bi.young's playwright's notes please consult the publication.

ABOUT d'bi young



d'bi.young antiafrika (writer and performer) is an afrikan-jamaican-canadian dubpoet, monodramatist and educator who is internationally recognized as a visionary, an innovator and a leader in the development of arts education. her new creative-performance methodology, called the sorplusi method, has been shared with theatre companies, universities, cultural organizations, social institutions and individual artists across north america, the caribbean, europe and africa. d'bi.young has released six dub poetry albums, published two collections of poetry, and was a member of the soulpepper academy in 2006, playwright-in-residence at canadian stage 2009/10 and a member of tarragon's playwrights unit in 2010. she was the recipient of the k.m. hunter 2010 theatre award, and 2007 toronto mayor's emerging artist award. d'bi.young is the founder and artistic director of yemoya international artist residency, and is the curator of badilisha poetry x-change in cape town, south africa. she is currently on a 15-month global tour of her new album, 333, which launches dec 5th at the lula lounge in Toronto, and of *the sankofa trilogy* which is due to be published this winter by playwrights canada press.

PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG THEATRE PRACTITIONER
 cassy walker, *the sankofa trilogy* script coordinator



cassy walker is a self professed jack-of-all-trades with an affinity for meditation, energy healing, storytelling, and blurring the lines between the three. a former storyteller-in-residence at anitafrika! dub theatre, run by d’bi.young, in march 2011 cassy went on to self produce *i:* the product of a ten month long residency at theatre passe muraille, funded by manifesto/artreach’s youth arts pitch contest. cassy’s second biomyth monodrama *sit: the enlightenment mixtape*, was presented at the lab cab festival. cassy is currently a member of the buddies in bad times young creators unit and is presently working on a third one-person show. when not creating new works, you can find cassy at theatre passe muraille working as a box office associate, and acting as the lead artist for the emerging artist group *elephants in the room*. Among other past endeavors, cassy was a chorus member in bcurrent’s production of *wise.woman* (2009) and has worked for the amy (artists mentoring youth) project as both production intern for *step right up* (2010) and as a creator/performer in *force over area* (2008).

Q&A with cassy...

What is your role in this production of *the sankofa trilogy*?

i am the script coordinator! this requires me to sit diligently in every rehearsal and preview and keep track of all the changes to the script [through the whole rehearsal/development process]. i'm like a custodian of the script, so to speak. the task becomes all the more challenging working with someone like d'bi, who does so much beautiful improvisation from night to night. it's then my job to transcribe the extra juicy and most consistent improvisations, and input them into the script. my audio recorder tucked under my seat during previews is my bestest friend.

How did you come to work on this project?

out of the blue one day, i got an email from andrea [Tarragon's Literary Manager] asking if i was interested in being the script coordinator for *the sankofa trilogy*. it definitely helped that d'bi specifically requested that it would be a bonus if the script coordinator was familiar with the jamaican language. someone working with the obsidian theatre company had recommended me. ironically, i've known d'bi for four years. i met her back when i was only doing spoken word. i had applied for a program she was directing with 'art starts', and we've been connected ever since. so it was quite hard to say no to the opportunity to work with d'bi in a way i had never worked with her before.

What has this experience been like?

it has been absolutely overwhelming in an amazingly beautiful way. i've learned so much from watching d'bi work on her feet. having the opportunity to watch her so closely has significantly shifted the way i look at storytelling and, in turn, the way i tell my own stories. simply by being as she is, she has affirmed the choices i've made as a storyteller, whether it's not having a single director, or not choosing to be bound by a script. this experience has also been a crazy crash course in discipline and organization. not only has it been an honour to work so closely on her script, but it has been an honour to work with such brilliant people at tarragon, the musicians and the production crew alike.

KEY CONCEPTS AND PRINCIPLES IN THE WORK OF d'bi young

DUB POETRY

- A form of performed poetry from Jamaica that consists of spoken word over reggae rhythms.
- Voice and words are used to create a music within the poetry, so that even unaccompanied, dub poetry has its own rhythm.
- Predominantly concerned with politics and/or social justice, commonly voiced through a commentary on current events. It is often of an overtly political or social nature.

EXAMPLE: *dis is a warning*: an excerpt from *word! sound! powah!*

dis is a warning

tell dem seh dis is a warning
 we nuh care weh yuh cum from
 it's a new dawning
 tell di people of jamaica revolushun's rising
 look to di east and di west
 it deh pon di horizon yes
 tell yuh fren tell yuh moddah tell yuh cousin
 we're a new generation we nuh fraida nuttin
 we want we liberation from capitalist prison
 don't call mi west indian
 because I am an afrikan
 dis is a warning
 dis is a warning a warning a warning a warning a
 warning

misinformation dem a chat bout
 filling di youts dem mind wid crabblehouse
 education system waan rince out
 a pure lie dem a tell tell tell
 yuh guh to school 5 days of the week
 relearning di fiction of his-story
 written from di position of dem victory
 but a pure lie dem a tell tell tell
 suh won't yuh step inna mi class
 and mek mi tell yuh bout di past
 a new lesson for today
 save the people of tomorrow

a time fi wi decolonize
 oomaan and man seh we must realize
 is a broken legacy we a legitimize
 when we keep our eyes closed and act surprised

di likkle fellah pon di street
 him a pack a likkle neat oozie
 a ghetto yout wid few options
 him seh gang a him family
 watch him guh out in a blaze of glory
 yuh membah when we used to play inna di dirt
 and as bwoy we used to lift up dem skirt
 dandy-shandy hide and seek
 spin di bokkle get a kiss pon di cheek and flirt
 now yuh seh di youts dem a cum yuh haffi splirt
 open up fire 'everyone bite di dirt'
 wid him big ole gun him wanna have fun
 him don't know that him time soon cum

tell dem seh dis is a warning
 we nuh care weh yuh cum from
 it's a new dawning
 tell di people of jamaica
 revolushun's rising
 look to di east and di west
 it deh pon di horizon yes
 tell yuh fren tell yuh moddah tell yuh cousin
 we're a new generation we nuh fraida nuttin
 we want we liberation from capitalist prison
 don't call mi west indian
 because I am an afrikan
 dis is a warning!
 a warning!
 a warning!
 a warning!
 a warning!

d'bi young's 'BIOMYTH MONODRAMA'

For d'bi, **monodrama** is theatrical solo performance work. One actor/actress performs a piece of theatre that can incorporate monologue and/or multiple characters (created through changes in voice, body, props, costumes...)

d'bi combines biography and mythology to create a new art form she calls **biomyth**. The **biography** element is the retelling of the artist's own lived experience while the **mythology** aspect of 'biomyth' is the poetic reinterpretation of this lived experience, generally using a mix of folklore, myth, and magic in the interpretation.

The synthesis of biography and mythology creates a poetic space between reality and make-believe.

For d'bi, a **biomyth monodrama** is a mythologized auto-biographical play told by the story's creator/performer. Techniques used include music, poetry, magic/ritual, monologue, and dialogue (primarily *with the audience*).

Creator/performer d'bi young anitafrika says that, in this work, "a western theatrical fourth wall is rarely present as the performer erases the divide between audience and storyteller, real and make-believe."

WHAT MAKES YOU *BELIEVE* WHAT YOU SEE HEAR AND EXPERIENCE IN THE THEATRE?

THE SORPLUSI METHOD

an afrikan-jamaican-canadian derived arts methodology...

The word **sorplusi** is an acronym, developed by d’bi young anitafrika, based on the seminal dub-theory work of her mother, pioneer dub-poet Anita Stewart and other artist-mentors.

The acronym represents eight considerations of creative thought and practice:

Self-knowledge -

continual work toward better understanding of oneself.

Orality -

communicating vocally with your audience or community. *How* something is said shares equal importance with *what* is being said.

Rhythm -

using the rhythm of language (both oral and written) to connect to the rhythm of life.

“Identifying the cyclical ecosystem we are a part of.”

Political content/context -

discussing an issue or subject that is of critical importance to the artist and/or their community.

Language -

how the artist tells the story using a variety of linguistic techniques: repetition, respelling words, creating new portmanteaus (combining words into one, like “biomyth”) or entirely new words, using dialects and multiple languages.

Urgency -

the story told does not need to take place now, but it must address issues that are relevant and immediate to a current audience/community.

Sacredness -

remembering that life is sacred, and bearing witness to the choices we have made that disrespect life, and actively working toward correcting those choices.

Integrity -

the culmination of all the other SORPLUSI principles, all of which are necessary for an artist to live and create with integrity.

...these ideas form a comprehensive eco-system of accountability and responsibility between the artist/storyteller and the art/stories they choose to create/tell, how they choose to create/tell them, and whom they choose to create/tell them to...The methodology challenges the artist [to be] both accountable and responsible ... [to the] communities who gather to witness the art. The artist mirrors society, encourages its self-critique, and inspires its self-growth... – d’bi young anitafrika

For more information, visit the artist’s website: www.yemoya.org

DISCUSSION and ACTIVITIES

The following discussion points and activities are especially applicable to Drama and English classes, but could be adapted to any subject. The concept of biomyth can be explored in other artforms (e.g. painting, sculpture, film, music). The SORPLUSI principles and biomyth activities can help students address issues relevant to subjects including Social Studies, History, Geography, Law, Philosophy, etc.

These lesson suggestions are divided into pre- and post-show, but the pre-show biomyth creation activity could also be done after students have seen the performance.

PRE-SHOW

Discussion points

- 1) As a class, brainstorm issues that the students feel strongly about. What matters most to you personally? What do you believe matters most to your community (school, neighbourhood, city, country...)? Are some of the answers the same? If you identified a problem in your community that you felt was overlooked by others, what might be an effective way to convey these observations to your extended community (beyond immediate friends or family)?
- 2) Ask students for examples of different cultural mythologies (e.g. Greek and Roman Pantheons of gods, fairy lore, etc.). How does mythology and folklore (of any kind) still resonate today for us and our communities. How is mythology interpreted in art and popular culture today (e.g. film, television, literature, theatre, music, etc.)?
- 3) Discuss d'bi young's use of biomyth monodrama (as described before) to address current issues and personal stories through the use of mythology
- 4) How do the SORPLUSI principles (described in the preceding pages) relate to the goal of effectively addressing important community issues through writing and performance in a way that be understood by any audience?
- 5) The culminating principle of SORPLUSI is integrity. What does it mean to have integrity as a person? As a group of people working together? What is artistic integrity?

Culminating Activity: Build Your Own Biomyth

PART 1: biography

We all have things that matter to us that we want other people to care about too. Think of a matter or issue that you believe is important for other people in your community to be aware of or take an interest in. Can you think of a story from your own life that made you care about/ gave you a personal experience with this matter? Pick a story from your own life that you would feel comfortable sharing with the class or an audience.

PART 2: mythology

Think of a fictional story (from a novel, film, cultural or global folklore, children's book, television etc.) that also addresses the issue or matter that you identified.

PART 3: biomyth creation

Using what you've learned about d'bi young's SORPLUSI principles as guidelines, write a short biomyth monodrama that merges your story with new elements that you invent and draw from other sources.

Extensions

- 1) Students can present their biomyth monodrama (orally) to a group or to the class. They can play with vocal modulation, character voices, gesture and body language, props, costumes etc.
- 2) Working in small groups: each group collaboratively creates a new biomyth by combining their own personal stories on a particular theme to create a new story based in both fact and invention. Possible techniques for presenting this to the other groups include: tableaux (depicting scenes in the story), choral speaking, and creating dialogue through improvising and/or writing in role.

POST-SHOW

Discussion points

1. Can you see how d'bi young has used the SORPLUSI principles in *the sankofa trilogy*?
2. d'bi young portrays multiple characters in her performance. How does she bring these characters to life in such a way that the audience recognizes the change of characters? What techniques does she use (e.g. props, voice, physicality, location on the stage)?
3. What are the issues raised through the performance of *word! sound! powah!* ?
4. How is music used and incorporated in the performance? Is the music an addition or a necessity?
5. Is this performance translatable into other media (film, graphic novel, etc.) or does it have to be a LIVE performance? Why or why not? What makes a LIVE performance different from seeing something on screen?

Activity #1 - revisit your biomyth (extension of pre-show activity)

After seeing d'bi young perform, revisit your own biomyth (created in the pre-show activity). Further develop your solo or group biomyth by incorporating some of the techniques of writing and performance that she uses.

Activity #2 - depicting a character

d'bi young creates characters on stage by manipulating her body and voice.

The following structured activity allows students to explore these techniques without the pressure of presentation. The entire class is led through this activity but students work within themselves.

- 1) Each student chooses a character from their life (this may or may not be from their biomyth).
- 2) Student find a place in the room where they can move freely, and stand with their eyes closed.
- 3) Imagining their chosen character, students create a repeated movement that they feel represents the essence of that character. (Important: this is not imitative, nor intellectual, but rather an abstract, intuitively-created movement.). They can start with a small movement but allow their entire body and face to become involved in the exercise.
- 4) Once students have created a repeated movement, they make a sound that goes with it.
- 5) Once they have a sound, they let this sound become a word.
- 6) The word then becomes a sentence.

- 7) The teacher can walk around the room. When they tap students on the shoulder that student shares their word or sentence.
- 8) Repeat with another character. How does your body feel different in this other character?

Extensions

- 1) Students walk around the room in character (with eyes open!), observing others without dropping their physicality and voice.
- 2) Students encounter other characters in the room, and have short introductory conversations. The teacher chooses when students walk, and when they stop and converse with their nearest neighbour.
- 3) The teacher asks students to continually alternate (on command) between walking as their character and as themselves (and/ or a second character they developed).
- 4) In pairs, create biomyth scenes where two characters meet for the first time.

