Catching Bullets with Her Ass: Matrilineality and the Canadian Dub Poetry Tradition in the Work of d'bi.young anitafrika

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Introduction: d'bi.young anitafrika's Dub

d'bi.young anitafrika is one of the foremost dub poets working in Canada today. The daughter of the enormously influential dub poet Anita Stewart (a figure whom her adopted name invokes—along with the ancestral, imagined homeland of Africa—as one of two key strands of matrilineal lineage defining her both as person and poetic persona), anitafrika *embodies* much of what makes Canadian dub poets and performers a distinctive subcategory within the wider diaspora of hyphenate Caribbean dub poets. As I argue in this essay, primarily though not exclusively through a close examination of her one-woman play *blood.claat*, anitafrika's most notable qualities as a poet and performer—her radical, inclusive, queer feminist, and anti-colonial voice; her precise attention to linguistic detail, attentiveness to "high" and "low" dialect forms, and insistence on the subversive power of Jamaican nation language; and, perhaps most importantly, a dense and complex web of associations between black women's bodies, motherhood, inheritance, resistance, and voice—mark her and her brand of dub poetics as both powerfully unique and distinctively Canadian.

While anitafrika's national and international profile continues to rise on the back of both her own work and prodigious mentorship activities—her recent anthology *dubbin poetry* spawned a book tour across three continents and will shortly be followed by an anthology of collected plays (*dubbin theatre*) and a guide to her holistic self-care focused artistic method (*dubbin praxis*)—there remains relatively little scholarship on anitafrika as an individual author. Notable exceptions do exist (see Gill; Simpson) but the majority of scholarly engagement with anitafrika's work tends to discuss it alongside that of other (usually Canadian, and often better-known and more frequently anthologized) dub poets (Clarke; Gingell, "'Always a Poem'";

Gingell, "Coming Home"; Knowles). A partial explanation for this relative lack of engagement may of course lie in the communal and interconnected nature of Canadian dub poetry, a feature that anitafrika consistently acknowledges and celebrates in her work, and which I would suggest is foundational to it. But it does mean that the more distinctive aspects of her work—including its continual interrogation of community, lineage, and inheritance, and its blending of the conventions of dub poetry and performance with the *monodrama* format popular with Canadian feminist (non-dub) authors, performers, and playwrights—tend to be de-emphasized. Therefore, while my focus remains firmly on anitafrika as an exemplar of a definably Canadian, feminist dub tradition, I hope also to offer an insight into the distinct poetics that characterize her engagement with this tradition.

Key to this aesthetic, I want to argue, is the relationship between the vocabulary, grammars, rhythm, and style that clearly identify anitafrika as a dub poet, and her affinity for the monodrama as a primary performance vehicle. This is a genre that is of deep significance to anitafrika: she describes her own dramatic works as "biomyth monodrama," defined as "theatrical solo-performance work, written and acted by the same person, inspired in parts by the creator's biographical experience [and which uses] poetry, music, myth, magic, monologue and dialogue (primarily with the audience) to weave the story together" (qtd. in Simpson 345). Her commitment to this mode extends well beyond her own work, with her publishing imprint Spolrusie, having to date published three volumes of its *Dubbin Monodrama* anthology, devoted to monodramas by black performers. Monodrama is thus arguably as important to anitafrika as dub, for related but distinct reasons:

> young anitafrika's preference for monodrama stems in part from her characterization of her work as storytelling, for which she finds a parallel in the role of the griot in West African oral traditions. It is also partly rooted in young anitafrika's own understanding of artistic and personal integrity, which demands

> that her growing self- and political awareness demonstrate themselves in the choices she makes in her personal and professional life. As a storyteller, she is more than simply an actor working from a script on stage. Her performances are about connecting with her audience or "communities" (young anitafrika emphasizes that she belongs to multiple communities) and creating a "sacred space" so that her storytelling becomes a means through which members of the community can address individual and collective issues of importance. (Simpson 346)

The formal qualities of this mode are outlined in Patricia Badir's article "Playing Solitaire," which approaches monodrama from a distinctly Canadian standpoint, implicitly highlighting its commonalities with what I am arguing is a distinctly Canadian form of feminist dub poetry. In common with much Canadian dub poetry, monodrama subversively transgresses and erodes the boundaries between the written and the performed, in that "the private and intimate nature of the monodrama becomes comparable to the solitary yet political acts of journal writing and diary keeping which are forms of personal expression seeking to explore female experiences left out of history, literature and art," yet this intimacy is in continual tension with "[t]he presence of viewing spectators in the context of a live performance [which] introduces a different set of both aesthetic and political questions as the issue of the representation of the private 'I' is brought to the forefront" (Badir 121). As Badir's description succinctly articulates, there are many natural affinities between dub and monodrama—especially the "biomyth monodrama" that is central to the anitafrika method—but, given the monodrama's parallel set of affinities with "solitary yet political acts of journal writing and diary keeping," its lineage can also be traced to modes of feminist expression entirely distinct from dub. Thus the "biomyth monodrama" represents anitafrika's major formal innovation, by which she not only inhabits

the dub aesthetic she inherits from her mother and community but also negotiates with and expands that legacy.

Matrilineal Roots

In her introduction to *blood.claat*, anitafrika remembers her own personal matrilineal experience of dub poetry: "the first time I saw my mother perform I was five years old. she was doing dub. the next time I saw my mother perform I was six years old. she was doing a one womban show. I am my mother's daughter. a dub poet. who resides in constant possibility of revolushun and storytelling" (anitafrika and Edwards 7). Here, anitafrika expresses one of the central features bothof her work in dub poetry and of dub performance in Canada more broadly: a mode of storytelling that is also an act of "revolushun,"[1] and that evolves within a matrilineal tradition that both draws from and is distinct from its Caribbean roots.[2] The relationship between mothering and queering the text cannot be overemphasized, given "[t]he fact that d'bi.young is both a conscientious dub dramatist and a dedicated queer mother has revealed a perhaps unsurprising synchronicity between mothering (as actuality and as metaphor) and crafting narrative" (Gill 120).

At the core of this body of work is a particular formulation of matrilineal inheritance in Canadian dub poetry and performance, embodied both literally and metaphorically by anitafrika, and explored through the use of specific matrilineal figures with cultural, historical and political relevance for black Caribbean people, including Nanny Maroon, Louise Bennett, and anitafrika's own mother, Stewart. anitafrika does not shy away from women's bodies in her work and, in fact, embraces a performatively lewd construction of Caribbean women's bodies as taboo and even unclean in order both to inhabit and to interrogate notions of *slackness*. Slackness, a concept that encompasses lewdness, sexuality, and the proscribed female body, "in

the Jamaican context, . . . becomes essentialized as the generic condition of immoral women" (C. Cooper, *Sound Clash* 3) in a manner that allows for its deployment both in overtly misogynistic contexts and as an articulation of subversive agency.[3] anitafrika's treatment of slackness and lewdness relies on a reclaiming of the female body through language, epitomizing dub's traversal of genres, audiences, Englishes, and place, and its continual contestation of attempts to institutionalize it through the production of its prized, "exotic" qualities to a discomfiting excess.

It is important here to acknowledge a tension that runs throughout anitafrika's work—most notably, perhaps, in the meditations on motherhood and the menstruating and childbearing black body that I consider here—and necessarily therefore in my own reading of it. The tension is encapsulated by the difference between two different terms anitafrika uses to liberate the term *woman* from its patriarchal and colonial inheritances: *womban* and *womxn*. While the *x* in *womxn* is explicitly intended as a queering of a gendered term, consistent with anitafrika's uses of pronouns like *shx* and *hxr*, and her political commitment to trans and nonbinary artists, *womban* explicitly links womanhood to the possession of a uterus and by extension the capacity to bear children. The term *womban* is taken from anitafrika's's first album *wombanifesto*, which playfully links the physical, the gendered, and the political in order to signify the power of dub poetry to speak back to hetero- and cisnormative social mores. If this tension has always existed beneath the surface of anitafrika's work, it has been foregrounded by strands of debate in both popular culture and feminist scholarship that have developed since the works discussed here were written—and indeed since I drafted the initial version of this essay. This intervening period has seen the question of trans rights become a highly topical issue and a favourite hobby horse not only of right-wing "culture warriors" but also, more disturbingly, of so-called gender-critical feminists, whose cisnormative agenda is pursued in large part by embracing a form of bioessentialism long discredited by more

progressive forms of feminism (Alm and Engebretsen). It is an unfortunate but undeniable truth that anitafrika's generous, subversive, and joyous treatment of motherhood and matrilineality could easily be co-opted into a bioessentialist narrative, and it is therefore imperative that it be read with the womban-womxn tension in mind.

For the clearest articulation of what this tension means for her work, we can turn to anitafrika herself, who, in an interview with South Africa's *Sunday Times*, explains her view on the interlinked forces of colonialism, heteronormativity, and cisnormativity:

> Archaic gender and sexuality roles do not give me room to realise and express my full and dynamic humanity. Not only are they silencing and shaming, they also reinforce and justify inequality, discrimination and violence based on old colonial narratives that form the foundation of systemic racism, patriarchy, homophobia and classism. They are dangerous because they homogenise humanity when in fact we are brilliantly heterogeneous and need political, social and cultural systems that are courageous enough to educate us towards a deeper understanding of ourselves and our world. . . . [My] gendered nouns and pronouns include an "x" in their spelling. This is to challenge the gender binarity of the English language, to be inclusive of all genders and to bring our awareness to how we relate to representations of gender in the book. I want the reader to be aware of how gender is functioning in their own mind and body by creating the environment for them to "bump up" against the words, each time their brain registers an "x" where ordinarily another letter would be. I kept Jamaica Nation Language words such as *dawtah*, *moddah* and *faadah* as is because I believe these spellings are already performing an anti-colonial queering, which includes (for me) the queering of gender and sex. (de Villiers)

What is most revealing here is anitafrika's rationale for *not* further queering "Jamaica Nation Language words such as *dawtah*, *moddah* and *faadah*" on the basis that "these spellings are already performing an anti-colonial queering, which includes (for me) the queering of gender and sex." This rationale makes clear that, for anitafrika, colonialism is an intersectional multi-axial oppressive force that oppresses racially, linguistically, and via the imposition of heteronormative, cisnormative, and bioessentialist knowledge frameworks. To resist on any one of these axes, therefore, is to destabilize the entire colonialist knowledge framework and, by definition, to "queer" race, language, gender and sex simultaneously. Thus, while anitafrika's *womban* finds expression in the enthusiastic embrace and reappropriation of black motherhood, colonial-era stereotypes of black female physical features, and taboos around women's bodies (notably menstruation), she is, according to anitafrika's own schema, always-already queered and thus inherently opposed to bioessentialist and cisnormative constructions of womanhood. It is therefore arguable that *womban* functions both as a subcategory of *womxn* and as a kind of "strategic bioessentialism" that accomplishes its "anti-colonial queering" in part by embracing matrilineality over patrilineality.

anitafrika's work reinscribes contemporary politics onto work that explicitly draws from a matrilineal lineage stretching back centuries. As Stewart's daughter, anitafrika pulls from her roots as a Canadian, Jamaican, African, woman, human, and delivers performances that use tradition in their explorations of where that tradition has changed or needs to change. In her own efforts towards revolushun, anitafrika created the Watah Theatre, her "attempt at providing a sacred space for Black people to introspect, heal, and co-create lived experiences that nurture our loving humanity while challenging systemic oppression through the cultivation of wholistic performing arts" (anitafrika, "Black Plays," 27). In her article "Black Plays Matter," anitafrika is continuing the work of other black artists by taking the space that is necessary to make art happen. Anitafrika is enabling the creation of what she calls "Black artivists" ("Black

Plays" 27), those "African-Canadian theatremakers, arts-educators, and mentors who are able to innovate future projects that further cultivate equity, justice, fairness, and accessibility in Toronto and Canada's arts and social service sectors" (28). In anitafrika's own work, it is the body and examining constructions of lewdness that allow for the *artivist* to craft her own revolushun: "As Black Power and other movements have done in the New World, African-Caribbean feminist poetics turns the object of prejudice into an object of pride—in this case, pride in the body" (Casas 11). I argue here that this transformation of the object of prejudice into an object of pride is precisely what anitafrika achieves so strikingly in *blood.claat*, reinventing a potent slur aimed at the (black, Caribbean) female body into a celebration of this marginalized group.

Dub poetry in Canada had its origins in Toronto in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Dub poetry is born out of dub,[4] a musical style that originated in Jamaica, but saw great success as an export to the United States and the United Kingdom. However, where dub has been nominally a male phenomenon in its origins (from the dance halls[5] of Jamaica to the clubs of the United Kingdom), dub poetry has been reinvented as a feminist mode of discourse in Canada. Dub poetry is transnational, a movement between the Caribbean and its diasporic relations, yielding different styles all rooted in the understanding that "[d]ub's aesthetic experimentation was driven as well by various ideological, counter-discursive pressure points from black consciousness, decolonlization, Garveyism, Rastafarianism, Marxism/socialism to anti-colonial nationalism" (Bucknor 255–56). Dub poetry undergoes a shift in culture and intention in its movements between Jamaica and Canada: if dub in its original form is "spontaneous, evolving from the urge to 'nice up the dance,'" the dub poetry that subsequently emerges in Canada "tends to be pre-written and intellectual (often political), and is often performed outside the dance hall" (Sullivan 193). As Phanuel Antwi observes in his article "Dub Poetry as a Black Atlantic Body-Archive":

> Critics of dub note the masculinist tendency of the art form, and this critique is emphasized in ways critics narrate dub poetry's origin. And yet, it is also the case that in Jamaica, male poets were promoting dub poetry, while in Canada, the poets Lillian Allen, Afua Cooper, and ahdri zhina mandiela were influential in championing this movement. In rerouting dub poetry through Canada, this art form, under their influence, gains a new vision and a new history that resonates with the type of embodied feminist politics that Lorde enables: it comes into dialogue with feminist and womanist ideals. (75–76)

Being black in Canada has been, historically, an unsettling experience that is replicated in dub poetry's occupation of the in-between. While Canada has erased much of its black history[6] in its efforts to forget a shameful past, black Canada demands to be seen. This demand is always rooted in community, and while it is important to understand that black Canada operates in and among many different diasporically located communities, Canadian dub poetry seeks to bridge some of those divides through politically engaged interaction, building on dub poetry's lineage as "heir to a range of African and Jamaican communal forms of storytelling and history-making, preaching and political oratory, body performance, verbal dexterity, 'signifyin' (ritual insult games), and 'testifyin' or public witness" (Carr 10).

In the introduction to her edited collection of female dub poets (seven of the eleven are Canadian), *Utterances and Incantations*, Afua Cooper identifies dub poetry's mutability in terms of both form and content as a feature that allows it to engage in thematic and generic explorations between boundaries and proscriptions. Cooper describes dub poetry as "both a poetic genre and a musical genre," asserting that this elasticity "underscores dub poetry's open-endedness, flexibility, vast potential and possibilities" (1). By defying easy categorization within the civil/civic spaces that define and delimit the nature of particular art forms (categorizations

that are not only generic but also determine, for instance, the branches of governmental arts funding for which a particular artwork might be eligible), dub subverts the traditions of civility inherited through a colonial past by compromising between those traditions and that of the *uncivil*: creating a new space that works to incorporate a breach in all absolute constructions of genre, history, and tradition.[7] Cooper states:

> Perhaps, dub poetry's greatest contribution to poetry and art is that through its ambassadors, it has liberated poetry from the ivory towers, and fed it like fish and loaves, to the people. Dub poets have taken their poetry around the world. They read in prisons, cafes, parks, daycare centres, libraries, schools, universities, old folks homes, dance halls, night clubs, theatres, at music festivals, poetry festivals, rallies, marches, demonstrations, and on international concert stages. Dub poetry has established itself as poetic genre that has mass appeal and women have been in the vanguard of this poetry revolution. (4)

Dub poetry thus always operates in terms of rebellion, whether that is through form, expression, or the reinvention of both. In Canada in particular, a dub poetic tradition has developed and thrived "because of the activist and administrative labor of dub artists making spaces for the practice and generating demands for institutional forms of support for the practice" (Antwi 75).

In Canada, this rebellion takes on a paradoxical quality: what it must resist, in part, is the foundational national myth of benevolent Canadian multiculturalism—precisely the system, in other words, that both promotes and *sanctions* (in both opposing senses of the term) the form while *containing* both the black bodies and subversive energies it threatens to unleash, and in doing so seeking to render them safely exotic, pleasurably other in a system of authorized difference.[8] Indeed, part of the paradox of Canadian dub—and of Canadian

"multicultural" literature more generally—is that it is very often more voraciously consumed at home the more it talks of *elsewhere*, the more it promotes the marginal space of the Caribbean to its centre while Canada remains on its periphery: the home-as-other, a distant dream of the past or hope for the future. As Michael Bucknor and Daniel Coleman observe in the introduction to "Rooting and Routing Caribbean-Canadian Writing:"

> Because the Caribbean Canadian cannot suppress the disquieting histories of the middle passage, the black water, and the Taino genocide, it raises the spectres of similar disavowed narratives in Canada—of slavery, of the importation of cheap, racialized labour, and of genocide. The Caribbean Canadian also unsettles the Canadian multicultural myth, which has never been able to incorporate Caribbean culture convincingly—with its racial complexity, dynamic and relational modes of identification, assertive public performativity, and the radical politicization of its feminist and activist communities—into a sedate story about Canada's multicultural maturity and sophistication. (vii)

Dub poetry's popularity in traditional literary spaces in Canada thus relies on a tenuous relationship with the nation's narrative of Canada as a benevolent space, even as it undermines this mythologizing process. Dub poetry in Canada is both rebellion and will: an attempted disruption in the face of inequality and injustice, even if that means resisting the system that supports its distribution. However, if multiculturalism is insidious, using celebration of difference to manage that difference[9] while simultaneously maintaining inequities and disparities between those who are central and marginal to its grand narrative, then Canadian dub has learned to be equally duplicitous: to resist its own management by multiculturalism through an ambivalent articulation of nationality and performance that self-consciously exploits these institutions.

If dub poetry in Canada is about a relationship to rebellion and the formal resistance inherent in the work, then Canadian dub performance is about the use of *space* as a means of transgressing the neat categories on which multiculturalism's strategies of containment rely, and "d'bi.young levies a challenge in and through dub as a bridge between poetry and theatre" (Gill 120). In his article "To be Dub, Female, and Black," Ric Knowles traces the roots of dub performance in Canada through the women who have shaped its origins. Knowles focuses on how these women have reimagined Toronto as a "transformative space" through the "largely masculinist ethos of much of Caribbean performance and the narrow chronopolitics of modernist colonial 'development'" (78). Female artists, he argues, have *reinhabited* Toronto, in order to *be seen*, by reappropriating both the dominant Canadian culture and the Caribbean masculinism that fetter their avenues of expression as black women. Knowles argues that Vera Cudjoe and Rhoma Spencer, as representations of black theatre, and adhri zhina mandiela and anitafrika, as dub performers who have inherited the black aesthetics inscribed by Cudjoe and Spencer, have used the ethos of multicultural Toronto to impress their own diasporic identities on the city in the effort to replicate and recreate in it a space of transgression and revolution that is initiated in their own works. For Knowles, Toronto and dub poetry are wholly intermeshed in the dub project:

> What these women have done to constitute Toronto, already one of the most culturally diverse cities in the world, as heterotopic, transformative space within which they can work at the intersection of nations, sexualities, and performance forms. That is, they have constituted the city as a space that enables them at once to womanize and queer "the revolushun," building on Caribbean performance practices such as carnival, 'mas (masquerade), calypso, pantomime, satirical musical reviews, agit prop, and, crucially, dub, to create

> expansive new performance forms and theatrical hybridities in diasporic space. (80)

This transformational ethos is evident in anitafrika's performance of her Jamaican mother Stewart's poem "begging is a ting," a transplantation and reappropriation that in its retelling speaks of the failure of the system to account for the reality of poverty for racialized people in Canada. anitafrika revisits the multiply located complacency that is the refusal to acknowledge suffering in the face of a hegemonic system that requires a blind nationalism to function, reflecting the ways that the term "'Caribbean Canadian' questions the historical national project that presents Canada as a project of peaceful settlement, because it repeatedly highlights the themes of unsettling confrontation and dislocation" (Bucknor and Coleman vii). The track opens with an address to her "mummy" (anitafrika, "begging"), over a characteristic slow, syncopated reggae beat, acknowledging her dub heritage, her mother's membership in Poets in Unity (and, thus, the relationship between dub poetry in Jamaica and Canada), and her own position as inheritor of a genre in which her mother was a "pioneer." Following this address, the keyboard, guitar, and bass begin to assume dominance over the slow-moving beat. A cowbell chimes discordantly on the offbeat, creating a multiply layered backdrop to anitafrika's vocals. Where reggae most often has the guitar perform on the offbeat, here anitafrika has created a controlled cacophony, mimicking tradition but also incorporating dancehall elements. The result is music that seems defiant, while simultaneously suggesting that harmony is possible out of discord.

The poem opens with the hook "begging is a ting a carry di swing / inna disya time it cyaan be a crime" (anitafrika, "begging"), which anitafrika repeats; the "swing" is a playful melody that contrasts sharply with the politics of homelessness and poverty in Canada. She moves on to describe a city, somewhere between Jamaica and Canada—"walk down town one a

dem days / had to stand up a while and tek a good gaze"—which is "plagued" to the point that poverty has become commonplace. She then presents four examples of poverty, examining emotions and reactions when the middle class is faced with the underprivileged. Anitafrika suggests that beggars have little alternative but to turn to crime, as society has "force dem fi tief," or that institutions whose mandate is to help those in poverty in fact have little access to the needy, since "beggar don't guh church for di fear of di rod" ("begging"). Thus the problem of poverty becomes elided with the surface appearance of benevolent institutions offering "help," ultimately reinforcing the hegemonic maintenance of the status quo. Finally, anitafrika ends with an address to her audience: "you know when you walk around the streets you see a lot of people begging you know" ("begging"). The "see" echoes the "gaze" from the opening, reminding us that looking and seeing are not the same thing. anitafrika requires engagement in her revolushun: she requires that we acknowledge that which is right in front of us, no matter how unpleasant "a ting."

Dub as Matrilineal: Creolized English

In order to examine anitafrika as representative of a matrilineal dub tradition in Canada, it is necessary to consider the broader lineages inherent in dub, as it has traversed the Caribbean and Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. In an interview with Christian Habekost, author of the first book-length manuscript on dub poetry, *Verbal Riddim*, Canadian dub poet Afua Cooper contrasts her poetry with "male-oriented" reggae but also positions herself as "fighting *white* racism and . . . *black* sexism" (qtd. in Habekost 201; emphasis in original). Cooper positions herself against what she perceives as the masculinist tradition of reggae, insisting that this—no less than anti-black racism—is something the female

dub poet must always organize and operate *against*. For Cooper, reggae reflects these sexist constructions through both its form and—more obviously—its lyrics. According to Cooper,

> It's a man's music. A lot of the words and phrases are very male. They are taken out of male language. There is hardly any female language in reggae. If you listen to the lyrics, they cuss women: "She's dis, she's dat, she can't cook, she's committing adultery." They want a slim girl, they don't want a fat girl. . . . A lot of the music that is coming out right now is very anti-woman. (qtd. in Habekost 201)

If reggae can find popularity in a rebellious voice that—in Cooper's view—does not demand an acknowledgement of the implicit gendered oppressions of the musical genre, the dub tradition with which Cooper identifies works inversely, representing resistance through the confrontation of the prejudices of the self. This, then, is a tradition that, "[b]y its fierce revolutionary stance on the value and limits or art to a postcolonial society, . . . also seems to insist on a self-critical, self-aware practice" (Bucknor 258). The inculcation of multiple voices in protest of multiple oppressions is perhaps the key legacy of formative figures such as Cooper from which contemporary poets like anitafrika inherit: while their poetics is born from reggae, it "bear[s] witness to a determination among Caribbean women artists to force the male to become aware of the fact that the system of oppression may be embedded in his own psyche" (Habekost 207).

The accepting and producing of nation language is one of the ways these artists resist the legacy of colonial heritage, regarding "the use of Patois as an act of resistance to the European domination of Caribbean culture" (Habekost 63). Hence, "dub poets are some of the most radical disrupters of standard written English, compared to other Caribbean writers, and for different reasons" (Casas 20). This enables the very language of dub poetry to work transgressively and innovatively to challenge norms and oppressions.

Dub poetry in Canada intersects with a larger Caribbean womban's tradition, a feminist genre that is born out of the tradition of reggae but—I want to suggest—reimagined through the feminist discourse surrounding two key figures: Louise "Miss Lou" Bennett,[10] one of the first writers to use Creole in literature, and Nanny Maroon, a legendary historical figure who escaped slavery and helped establish a free community.[11] These two women are representative of Jamaican culture in that they helped to shape and conscribe the way in which Jamaicans could see themselves as distinct and empowered. These two women, in many ways, are as much produced by Jamaican culture as they have contributed to it, and dub poetry is one popular production among others that seeks to integrate the articulations of voice and rebellion that these women represent. Born Louise Bennett, Miss Lou began her work in the 1940s and was excluded from the traditional world of literary publishing because of her unorthodox use of language, but "[d]espite exclusion, Louise Bennett took her words—through the medium of performance—directly to the Jamaican people" (Allen 13). Miss Lou is a vital progenitor of contemporary Canadian dub poetry, a part of the womban tradition of Canadian dub poets:

> To represent Jamaicans faithfully on the page, Bennett avoided idealizing them, but she also had to devise strategies for suggesting how they sound, marking Jamaican English Creole (JEC) differences from acrolectal English. These strategies include the use of the vocabulary, idioms, syntax, and speech rhythms of JEC—what Bennett sometimes called dialec(t) or Jamaica(n) language and others refer to as nation language or patwa. Together with allusions to Jamaican oral tradition and sheer delight in sound, they constitute what I am calling Bennett's "see hear aesthetics." (Gingell, "Coming Home" 34)

It is in part this innovation, this capacity for rebirth and regeneration, that gives rise to the *matrilineal* inheritance of dub poetry and performance:

> The sense of home Bennett creates draws Canadian dub poets powerfully, whether they be Jamaican-born, like Allen, Broox, and young, or Canadian-born but of Jamaican ancestry, like baraka-clarke. The evidence is in the way the Canadian "dubbers" speak back to her through thematic acknowledgment, through allusion, and/or through adopting aspects of her see-hear aesthetics. (Gingell, "Coming Home" 39–40)

Miss Lou's influence on dub poetry and performance is profound, with Bucknor identifying "the championing of creole as a 'serious' poetic tool by Louise Bennett" alongside "the impact of reggae music and its emerging technologies . . . and the celebration of a strong oral/performance tradition" as one of three key influences in the development of "the aesthetics of dub" (255). However, while Miss Lou merits considerable further analysis in her own right, it is the figure of Nanny Maroon that arguably provides the greater vehicle for anitafrika's own linguistic and thematic innovation.

Nanny Maroon: Using the Body for Revolushun

Like Miss Lou, Nanny Maroon is a figure whom a number of dub poets—including Miss Lou herself, Afua Cooper, Jean "Binta" Breeze (Coppola), and Cherry Natural (Galuska)—have taken as part of their matrilineal line, their metaphorical grandmother, inspiring works of art that take pride in the weight of history and find redemption in this black female figure. Afua Cooper describes how Nanny, as

> [a]n Akan Jamaican Maroon priestess leader, anti-slavery fighter, Black liberation warrior and strategist, and renowned sorceress, . . . often relied upon, and used words to beat down the British Babylonian slavery system that sought

> to destroy her and her people. Women dub poets see Nanny as an inspirational, and often invoke her in their poetic productions. (4)

The writing of Nanny Maroon is the writing of an idealized history and, inevitably, the idealized self, as the "Nanny we know and narrate is largely the product of the demands of a post-independence Jamaican nationalist discourse" (Cummings 144).

Nanny Maroon's power lies not only in her historical actions but also in the mythos and stories that surround her:

> Although stories told of Nanny by the Maroons are without doubt exaggerated, some are so gruesome that she must indeed have held rather extraordinary powers. She was supposed to have kept a huge cauldron "Nanny Pot," which boiled without the aid of fire, into which were lured to a watery grave unsuspecting British soldiers and Militiamen. She was also attributed with the ability to catch the bullets of soldiers with her posterior and hurl them back at her assailants in an obscene manner. (Tuelon 21)

Nanny's body is a site of historical refraction, depending on who is telling the story, and "Jamaican literary critics counter colonial stereotyping of black women by explaining the bullet-catching story as the popular expression of a specifically female form of defiance" (Sharpe 13); as Carolyn Cooper says, the "allusion to Nanny situates contemporary Jamaican 'oman lib' within a long-established heritage of consolidated male/female defence of cultural and political sovereignty" (*Noises* 49).

Grandy Nanny, as the Maroons named her, was a queen to the Maroons, an inheritor of wisdom and knowledge, along with the spirit animals of the leaders, an inheritance literally acquired in the space between ceremony and Maroon magic, called Kromanti. Legends and histories intertwine where Nanny is concerned. Nanny is most well-known by those outside of

the Maroon community for her cooking pot, which bubbled without fire and drowned British soldiers. However, her most controversial mythologizing comes from her known prowess as a warrior who could stop bullets with her posterior and then fire them back towards the enemy. In some versions, Nanny can even accomplish this task with her vagina, as well as her buttocks, making use of that which the British soldiers lack. Many Jamaican writers have taken up Nanny's heroics in literature. Our own Miss Lou writes:

> From Maroon Nanny teck her body
>
> Bounce bullet back pon man. . . .
>
> Jamaica oman teck her time
>
> Dah mount an meck de grade. (qtd. in Bilby 203)

However, like many critics who valorize Nanny's efforts against the British and celebrate her as a hero, Miss Lou shifts the focus towards Nanny's body, rather than her buttocks, which many have found to be too vulgar to mythologize. Edward Kamau Brathwaite finds that he cannot swallow the vulgarity haunting Jamaica's national hero and suggests that, in fact, Nanny used her hands to catch the bullets, and it was the British who rewrote that act in order to disparage Nanny's character (Bilby 204). The Maroons themselves, whose stories of Nanny are clear that she used her posterior to return bullets to the British, do not embrace Brathwaite's version of events, as they do not feel that the British ever had that sort of power in their own oral tradition. The use of Nanny's body, then, is controversial to say the least, and even Miss Lou is loath to tackle the topic, saying that she "teck her body," euphemistically using the whole to synecdochically represent the part rendered taboo by colonially inherited politesse.

Nanny Maroon: The Tradition of Vulgarity

Though many have rewritten Nanny's narrative to suit a more prudish audience, "a number of feminist writers have embraced it and reinterpreted it in their own terms" (Bilby 204). And it is the female body's *vulgarity* as a site of potential empowerment that provides the key driver for anitafrika's dub monodrama *blood.claat*. The title of the dub piece is "a jamaican curse word. literally means bloodied cloth. menstrual cloth used by oomaan when they bleed" (anitafrika and Edwards 16), and it is a fairly commonly used word among Torontonian Jamaicans to signify disgust and revulsion. *Blood.claat* has four locations in space and time: pre-colonial East Africa; Toronto Pearson Airport, three years before the present-day events of the play; Nanny Town (before and during its destruction in 1734); and present-day Kingston. The monodrama's present-day movement between Jamaica and Canada, with its echoes of nostalgia for family and home in both spaces, is reinforced by the Jamaican patois used throughout the performance. The use of patois complicates the relationship between misogyny and female agency, best represented by the title, which uses a common expletive to engage with the power of the female body. In the title, vulgarity is paired with agency to reinvent perceptions of women that have traditionally relied on using the female body as an example of ineptitude or a set of unfathomable lewd processes. Like the use of patois, the use of the female body rewrites what was once considered "dutty" (Habekost 70) and makes it revolutionary.

The black, female body disrupts the white heteronormative visual field, and "this troubling presence manifests itself in certain visual works and practices" (Fleetwood 12). Like many artists, anitafrika uses the concept of "excess flesh as a performative strategy" to "[explore] identity and history, and the long mired history of documenting difference through visual technologies" (Fleetwood 110) through her deliberate exposure of the female body in *blood.claat*. The play forces the audience to see mudgu's body as female and bloody, just as the

audience is forced to watch the violence of the monodrama unfold. The performance opens with mama afrika engaging in a feminized ritual of blood and magic, calling to the goddess oyo, the "*gate keeper of the cemetery*" (anitafrika and Edwards 20; emphasis in original), and then introduces the supporting characters, all of whom are played by anitafrika. Our main story then sees our protagonist, mudgu, being criticized by her granny for starting her menses while sleeping, and, thus, dirtying the bed, as granny says, "is shame she want to bring down inside my house" (anitafrika and Edwards 21). Within the performance, we are constantly moving back and forth between two types of blood. The story is a set of reactions to mudgu menstruating, pairing the blood of (male) violence (which is acceptable) with the blood of menstruation (which is unacceptable). This juxtaposition of menstruation with violence is foreshadowed in the opening:

> sorry. sorry. sorry… nevah know that it would come last night granny… mi nevah mean to soil up the bed granny… granny no! (her grandmother hits her repeatedly)… no… I going to wash everyting… no granny I don't want to be nasty. I am going to wash everything clean clean clean… I nevah soil di bed on purpose granny… a sleep mi a sleep and it leak out a mi panty… next time i will know better and do better… because cleanliness is next to godliness… yes granny… cleanliness is next to godliness. (anitafrika and Edwards 22)

Mudgu's language in this passage changes to reflect the nuances of changing agency that "dirty" holds for both her and her grandmother. Mudgu uses the object form *mi* to begin her entreaties to her grandmother, positioning her use of Jamaican Creole towards the basilect,[12] as she attempts to objectify herself to appease her grandmother's anger. After her grandmother hits her, mudgu begins to use more acrolect in her creolized English, switching to the subjective pronoun *I* and eventually inserting the verb *to be* and elongating "everyting" to "everything."

So, as the violence committed against mudgu increases, so does her sense of self decrease.

The next act of violence occurs on mudgu's bus ride to school when the bus driver takes out a cutlass and attacks a man who refuses to pay his fare. The bus driver lets out a stream of misogynist curses as he readies for his attack:

> tttarblack bbbwoy a cccall me ssttamma. pussyhole mmmonkey a disrespect me. yuh mmmoddahh a guh bawl ffffi yuh tonite.
>
> (he gets a cutlass from the side of the bus and aims at the man) tttalk now nuh pussyhole. tttalk now nuh. whe yyyyuh seh? bbblooodclaat. (anitafrika and Edwards 29)

The bus driver's misogynist use of Jamaican basilect Creole is contrasted with his stutter, the criticism of his disability sending him into a fury where he attacks both verbally and physically. The stammer produces a language that is and is not basilect, in that it is refigured through disability. The stutter stretches out the consonants, rather than shifting vowels as an accent would. Where the allusions to race, and even disability, cannot be said without stuttering, the references to "pussyhole" are easily articulated. It is only when the bus driver reaches the end of his diatribe and exclaims "bbblooodclaat" that he stammers while using a female-centred expletive. This is also the only case where the bus driver's stammer stretches out the interior of a word, the "ooo" expressing his frustration and rage before he violently slices the man in front of him. Here, the complication of the creolized Jamaican basilect with the stutter works to highlight the potential vulgarity in Jamaican Creole. The use of misogyny in the language is stretched out and laid bare: the sexism, racism, and ableism are all shocking, which is carefully reflected in the violence of the bus driver's actions.

After the attack, mudgu is covered in blood and cannot go to school, so she goes to her boyfriend njoni's home. Here, while njoni is sympathetic to the violence that mudgu

experienced on the bus, he is less tolerant of her breaking taboo by visiting him while menstruating. Mudgu reacts to the hypocrisy of accepting the blood of violence and rejecting the blood of menstruation:

> (*in anger* and *confusion she searches for the words*) yuh going on as if is the first time that catch pon yuh hands. *so* so so you can touch up mi soil up uniform but you can't touch me. and and and last month when you and steve get into dat fight it was all over you. and which part you think you come from anyways? out of your moddah... mi nevah seh anything bad bout yuh moddah. anyways did first time we do *it* you never did have a problem with *it* being on *you.* (*hisses her teeth*) hypocrite. (anitafrika and Edwards 36; emphasis in original)

Here, mudgu's hesitancy mimics the bus driver's stutter, where mudgu repeats "so so so" and "and and and" in her attempt to construct an argument that analyzes which type of blood is acceptable and which is not. Mudgu starts out hesitant and confused but becomes clearer and more eloquent as she reverts to comfortable and familiar basilect terms. The symmetry between this scene and that of the bus driver, as well as the violence suggested in the former and acted in the latter, foreshadows the fact that njoni will soon be shot, but it is where mudgu's language simultaneously gains clarity and becomes more Jamaican that she diverges from the –isms inherent in the bus driver's speech. When mudgu brings up njoni's mother, it is not to insult either her or him but to articulate the beauty of a woman's body, which is capable of giving life only because of the menstruation cycle.

We learn throughout the performance that mudgu is a descendant of Nanny Maroon's sister, sekesu, who had a child named mudgu. When mudgu's mother tells her "you are a direct descendant. remember great granny. you have the guidance and protection of all the ancestors. you come from strong line mudgu, and it can handle anything that comes" (anitafrika

and Edwards 47), she is articulating the power of a matrilineal heritage. That is not to say that this heritage is easy or uncomplicated. The coupling of violence and birth with images of blood allow anitafrika to address the complicated relationship that black Caribbean women have had with their own mothers, as mothers, and with their own bodies. To be in possession of one's own body, the freedom to keep one's child, the right to feel unashamed: the black woman has not always had these most fundamental of rights.

At the heart of it, *blood.claat* is a story of motherhood. Both mudgu's granny and mudgu's mother had children at the age of fifteen, and mudgu continues that cycle. However, where granny sees this as a failure, anitafrika uses language and mythology to convey the sense of joy that motherhood can bring. The performance ends with a "*beginning*" (anitafrika and Edwards 50; emphasis in original): the birth of mudgu's child, the pain of labour, but also the joy of motherhood. It is Nanny Maroon who ushers in this delivery, the scene before the baby's birth acting as a re-enactment of the fall of Nanny Town. Nanny looks forward to the future in the midst of the violence that the British are perpetrating:

> I know koromante it is a long time now we in dis new land fighting. but remember, if yuh want good yuh nose haffi run. our ancestors before us sacrifice their blood for us. we are di children of our foremoddahs and faadahs sacrificing our blood for our children. our children will sacrifice their blood. it is only by dis ritual koromante, our children children children will be free. (anitafrika and Edwards 49–50)

In this way, the dichotomy of acceptable male blood (violence) and unacceptable female blood (birth) is replicated in the positioning of the unacceptable violence of British colonizers and the acceptable violence of Maroon (Jamaican) rebellion, which is giving birth to generations of free Jamaicans. Here, blood becomes sacrifice, and this sacrifice is caught up in the matrilineal

freedom that both dub poetry and Nanny offer. The repetition of "children children children" echoes the bus driver and mudgu; however, where the bus driver offered unreasonable violence and mudgu moved hesitantly towards clarity of thought, Nanny's use of repetition both implicitly connotes possession in the absence of the possessive *s* and calls to mind the process of labour, metaphorically giving birth to Jamaica itself.

This tale of Jamaica's birth is the story of the Caribbean Canadian artist, proof that "Canadian identity and Caribbean identity can move beyond their hyphenated partnership that signifies dual, (but not always equally valued) subjectivities amongst diasporic populations" (Campbell 256). The positioning of space in *blood.claat* is part of what makes anitafrika's narrative symptomatic of black erasure and resolute in exhibiting the black, female body, the womban in revolushun. Jamaica and Canada operate in tandem--"Caribbean-Canadian and other hyphenated identity labels operate on the assumption that the two never overlap or bleed into one another" (Nelson 256)--but anitafrika disproves this and has both labels entangle on the page, a palimpsest of identities.

Conclusion: Negotiating a Lineage

As I have tried to show through my analysis of *blood.claat*, d'bi.young anitafrika's work is at once a celebration of and negotiation with a womban-centred tradition of dub poetry in Canada that has exploded out of many confluences of community, culture, and civility. By nature rebellious, that rebellion has been shaped in response to the impulse of civility in the Caribbean Canadian context. anitafrika celebrates her inheritance of a uniquely Canadian dub poetry tradition that balances rebellion with aesthetic beauty, building its rhythms on linguistic play and concatenations of sound, music, and voice that crash like waves upon the listener. As Lillian Allen argues, this is a poetics and a politics that "extends beyond merely creating art; we

take our poetry and our convictions into the community. We organize, we network, we participate, we protest, we celebrate, we build community" (18). Thus, "[d]ub poets have galvanized a movement of Black culture, of Black writers and a progressive culture of resistance in Canada, and have set a standard for political art unparalleled in this country" (21).

This is the community in which anitafrika creates and to which the intertextual elements of her work pay almost constant tribute. By celebrating lineage, heritage, and community—and perhaps, above all, the ways in which these are passed from mother to daughter in a richly nourishing relationship—anitafrika celebrates all the human richness that centuries of slavery and colonialism have attempted to rob black people and cultures of, and which, during those centuries, has often been kept alive only through a spirit of rebellion and revolushun. Her choice of intertextual references—in particular, Miss Lou and Nanny Maroon—pays tribute not only to this spirit but also to an identifiably *Canadian* dub poetry that prizes both tradition and innovation. Yet, while her work pays affectionate tribute to that community and to her matrilineal dub heritage—and community is central not only to anitafrika's art but also to her praxis, to the artists and performers she mentors and publishes—it is in *negotiation* with this heritage that her unique artistic voice emerges. If the themes, rhythms, and traditions of dub poetry provide a colourful gallery of semi-mythologized historical figures and a vocabulary of playful, celebratory lewdness, anitafrika's dramatic work refracts all of these themes—as well as the disparate voices of her various characters—through what Badir identifies as the foregrounded *I* of the monodrama. In this respect, anitafrika both provides a sustained metacommentary on the nature of artistic inheritance and engages in a continual "re-queering" of history, tradition, genre, and voice, ensuring that her work is characterized always by a fine balance between homage and radical, *revolushunary* innovation.

Notes

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[1] Canadian dub poetry inhabits an anxiety between the performance and the page, which relies on nation language or Creole to reflect the politics and rebellion embedded in the genre. *Revolushun* is reflective of larger tropes in Canadian dub poetry in its pairing of politics and wordplay, both acting as stand-in for the orality of Jamaican nation language and *shunning* standard Canadian English as a political act. Revolushun embodies language and politics, as "the clearly nonstandard spelling of words to indicate Jamaican pronunciation is the most forceful prompt to a re-speaking of the text as these transgressions of orthography create words that readers trained to decode English grapholect with its standardised spelling, syntax, and lexicon will find difficult to recognize" (Gingell, "Coming Home" 38). However, revolushun comes with some risk, as "[t]extualizing dub poetry certainly entails the risk of being negatively judged by those inclined to see its use of Jamaican-English Creole, or nation language, as broken English; those insufficiently attuned to an oral aesthetic; and those unsympathetic to the political aims of the work" (Gingell, "'Always a Poem'" 230–31).

[2] Canadian dub poetry operates against and in tandem with a Canadian literary canon that privileges European aesthetics even as its poetry continually attempts to speak back to that privileging (see experimental poets like Erin Mouré, Sina Queyras, Christian Bok, Nicole Brossard, Daphne Marlatt, etc.). Dub is international: "The Jamaican-originated dub poetry of Michael Smith, Oku Onuora, and Mutaburuka in Kingston, Jamaica; of Linton Kwesi Johnson, Benjamin Zephaniah, and Jean Binta Breeze in London, England; of Lillian Allen, Clifton Joseph, Ishaka, and Ahdri Zhina Mandiela in Toronto; and of the African Poets in Montreal, is a testament to the enduring presence, cultural impact, and dissonant histories of the African diaspora. Dub as an international phenomenon was given a forum in the 1993 International Dub Poetry Festival held in Toronto" (Carr 9). Canadian dub poetry is a movement that pushes up

against standardized expectations of poetry and performance to blend the two, employing a "panoply of *guerrilla tactics* that poets like anitafrika must utilize to force their *loud* presence into the recalcitrant—and muffling—alabaster canons of English" (Clarke 67; emphasis in original).

[3] Slackness is another site where anitafrika's dub poetry and its dancehall roots find each other in a politics of excess, where "[s]lackness is a contestation of conventional definitions of law and order; an undermining of consensual standards of decency. At large, slackness is the antithesis of restrictive uppercase Culture. It thus challenges the rigid status quo of social exclusivity and one-sided moral authority valorized by the Jamaican elite. Slackness demarcates a space for alternative definitions of 'culture'" (C. Cooper, *Sound Clash* 4).

[4] Oku Nagba Ozala Onuora, of Jamaica, coined the term *dub poetry* and defines it as "a poem that has a built-in reggae rhythm, hence, when the poem is read without any reggae rhythm 'backing' so to speak, one can distinctly hear the reggae rhythm coming out of the poem" (qtd. in Sullivan 193). Onuora only began writing dub poetry after serving time in prison for several botched bank robberies and a prison escape. Thus, dub poetry is born already articulating rebellion, subversion, and the ambiguous space between breaking the law and serving a lawful sentence.

[5] The history of dancehall itself is relevant in the understanding of Canadian dub poetry as a space for the lewd, the "slack," the female body in excess. The theorizing of dancehall, historically, has been contentious, beginning with Carolyn Cooper's *Sound Clash*, where dancehall was examined with a critical gaze as a valuable cultural movement and a "legitimate academic subject" (Stanley-Niaah, "'Slackness'" 175). Since Cooper's seminal work, we have seen other critics engage with dancehall's "politics of what is made visible, excessive, or absent" (Stanley-Niaah, "'Slackness'" 174). In fact,

"[t]he complex, and often contradictory, shapes of dancehall frequently result in double binds when theorising women and locating agency in the music culture" (McCoy-Torres 187), as the dance hall, nominally, participates in the hegemonic norms inherited from colonial violence, and "dancehall's 'crisis' is lodged in disappointment and confusion over the form's political imaginary" (Barnes 104). As Sonjah Stanley-Niaah says, "The dancehall cultural landscape in a postcolonial setting reveals transgressive tendencies, transgressing and rebutting hegemonic discourses in contrast to conceptions of spatial use, practice, one's place, being in place and knowing your place, liberation and agency" ("'Prime Time'" 9).

[6] See Walcott.

[7] The notion of civility—and specifically its use as a tool of both power and subversion—has resonance in both the postcolonial contexts in which dub poetry has its roots (for example, in Homi K. Bhabha's seminal essay "Sly Civility") and in Canada, where Daniel Coleman, co-opting and extending Bhabha, advocates a position that he calls "wry civility" (43). Coleman's work is particularly relevant to the institutional contexts in which Canadian dub poetry is created and consumed due to its staging of a slippage between the civil and the *civic*—exploring the ways in which a particular European set of behaviours associated with politeness and decorum is encoded as a norm within the civic institutions of Canada, imposing upon everything, from the workings of government to education to arts and culture, a teleological structure in which non-white, non-European peoples must always aspire to a deeply encoded European norm.

[8] Multiculturalism works to contain Canada's racialized citizens, even as it celebrates itself for tolerating them. "One way to understand the juxtaposition of Canada's international reputation as a multicultural mecca of intercultural relations and its persistent infliction of social economic inequality and social distance on racialized

peoples is to expose the multicultural project as part of the hegemony-making processes of consent and coercion" (Galabuzi 63). In terms of the racialized artist, "[t]he challenge to the integrity of Canadian literature posed by minority literatures, the threat of its fragmentation, increases the pressure to institutionalize and therefore contain them" (Cho 97).

[9] Multiculturalism as a national policy works to promote a diverse and friendly Canada, a nation that sells its own reputation of open-mindedness, yet manages to remain both bicultural and bilingual always. As Sunera Thobani argues in her book *Exalted Subjects*, "The adoption of multiculturalism enabled the nation's self-presentation on the global stage as urbane, cosmopolitan, and at the cutting edge of promoting racial and ethnic tolerance among western nations" (144).

[10] Miss Lou is a named inspiration to the dub poetry movement in Jamaica and more largely abroad. For more information on Miss Lou's contributions, see Breeze; Johnson; Knowles; and Walker, among other sources on the subject.

[11] I am by no means the first author to identify the unique prominence of these two figures; see especially Galuska.

[12] Although it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss in detail, dub poetry's relationship to the code switching of creolized Jamaican English forms an important strand of its subversive genre traversal. The genre "embraces the whole spectrum of linguistic expression, from the 'basilect' of broad or deep Patois, the 'language of the people,' to the standard level of the 'Queen's English'" (Habekost 69). However, this tension is thrown into still sharper relief in the context of a nation in which a form of standardized English (standard Canadian English, rather than the "Queen's English" that occupies an equivalent prestige level in Britain) dominates to a very high degree. Where reggae, especially roots reggae, always focuses on the basilect, dub poetry moves

consciously between the two farthest points of the spectrum, "dislocating, acting upon, destroying, and (re)creating language so that the Word can unfold its power and the verbally forged resistance gathers momentum" (Habekost 69). This intense and deliberately reflective focus on language is encoded in the DNA of dub poetry.

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