

jumping in heart first:
an interview with ahdri zhina mandiola

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the interview was conducted by a series of e-mail exchanges beginning in march of 2005, and parts of the conversation have been re-ordered, added to, and otherwise modified as we went along. out of respect for the point that mandiola makes in the interview about the use of capital letters as reinforcement of oppressive hierarchy and to avoid the unpalatable and indefensible position that i was attaching more importance to my ideas and name than to hers, in editing the interview, i avoided the use of uppercase letters in all sections of the interview, except where quoting from a source that used capitals. i have also preserved mandiola's e-mail abbreviations because they are characteristic of her writing style.

sg: you work in what a eurocentric view of the arts might see as different artistic media—poetry, theatre, music, and dance—but in an afrocentric tradition i think these are seen in a more integrated way. how are your artistic activities related? can you please tell us about your training and/or self-education in these areas?

azm: i see/feel myself as a poet . . . not an arena i chose: felt i was snatched away from a science/biology focus during my fresh uni year at york university into writing & performing/working out issues & ideas about world/people existence thru this medium. i liked/like creating poetry, but am also in constant resistance.

creating art in/on other mediums is just an extension of this endeavor. i like to think that i splay poetry on whatever canvas i can access & maneuver.

nonetheless, as a child i was a great dancer & this is the only area in which i have actually had formal training: jazz/african/caribbean styles in my early adult years. all other self-education comes from watching/asking/reading & jumping in heart first.

sg: you've also worked as a filmmaker and reportedly have sometimes been tempted to turn all your energies in that direction. what is the particular allure of film or video for you, and why have you remained involved with other artistic activities?

azm: the allure of film/video is being able to almost manipulate each & every view re: artist & audience engagement. only what's shown & heard is felt & experienced.

i don't immerse myself in film/video bcos i find the process of creating in these mediums can actually cut one off from self & other life/artistic engagement, which i cannot imagine at all. i write/i dance/i direct/and anything else because this is all coming at/to me in different ways, in different times.

sg: how have jamaican, and more broadly, caribbean and african or other oral traditions contributed to your work? would you please comment on the use of the praise-singer in the play *honouring the word*¹ when you respond to this question?

azm: i think my earliest & most profound influences are the cultural/artistic experiences from my youth growing up in jamaica. i clearly recall dancing to ska musik in its heyday/late 50's-early 60's – was born in '58 & i credit my love of jazz today to these early memories; ring games/traditional & popular musik (mento/calypso/rocksteady/reggae) informed my dance & singing acumen; throughout my school years we were required to recreate & formulate theatre formally as class activities & informally on the playground. all of these forms embody the orality of the caribbean thru these decades; i made the connections after creating poetry for a while—late '70... i recall first meeting miss lou² in '79 in toronto & realizing that what i knew & admired & sought to emulate in her was already integrated in my artistic being: the poem “ooman gittup” in *speshal rikwes*³ is a tribute to this discovery.

my integration of a broader african & diasporic aesthetic comes with engagement & amalgam of african americanism—like praise word, which we utilized in *honouring the word*—with the africanism i have been exposed to thru collaboration with continental african artists/musicians/storytellers/writers

¹ *honouring the word* excerpts 16 africanadian plays and names as many africanadian playwrights as mandiola, alison sealy-smith, and djanet sears could identify as they worked to create this dramatic showcase for the celebratory and stock-taking 2003 africanadian playwrights conference. the work opened the conference 22 april 2003 and was subsequently published in *canadian theatre review* 118 (spring 2004): 1-123.

² miss lou is the name under which the honourable louise bennett-coverley, o.m., m.b.e., dip. r.a.d.a., d. lit. (hon. york university) has performed and published her work. in every dimension of her work as a poet, actress, folklorist, dramatist, storyteller, and broadcaster, miss lou has used the speech of everyday jamaicans, that is, jamaican creole, or what she has called “dialec’,” thus lending social prestige to the depreciated vernacular of her people. tributes to her from jamaicans in every walk of life have poured in over the years after strong initial resistance to what she was doing. lillian allen's praise poem to her, “tribute to miss lou,” in *women do this every day* (toronto: women's p, 1993) hailing her as “wi shinin star” (43) and “a light” (46) to her people, is indicative of the affection and honour with which miss lou is regarded.

³ see *speshal rikwes* (toronto: sister vision, 1991) 38 and 54-56.

sg: what is the relationship between the oral and the written for you?

azm: it's all word—bringing ideas into our conscious being—presented on different canvases. a larger portion of folks are more familiar with & hold dexterity in the oral arena, so this will invariably carry more weight & recognition & comfort space.

sg: do you compose orally and then write things down, write words down and then perform them, or some combination of the two?

azm: the written recording usually accompanies the oral composition & goes directly in2 performance.

sg: do you see the printed versions of your dub performances as independent of the performances, supplements to them, or something else altogether?

azm: all 3!

sg: in the printed “vershan” of the poem “brown sun,” do you intend the words enclosed in square brackets to be read as something like stage directions—i.e. in performance, would you dance a wheel and slap your hands rather than speak the words when the square-bracketed text refers to those actions, or would you both articulate the words and perform the actions?

azm: i don't include or pre-determine the stage “business” for myself or any other who may perform the works, but these square brackets are intended & opened up for any and all interpretations: visual/spatial/oral.

sg: from comparing written to recorded texts, it seems to me that sometimes the forward slashes in a line (e.g. “no news / papers caught in the landing” from “in the canefields”) are meant to indicate pauses of a greater length than those that come naturally between two words but of lesser length than those indicated by line breaks (unless the lines are enjambed, or carry-over, lines). . . .

azm: this is often true.

sg: at other times, however, the slashes seem to be replacing commas in lines like “spring / summer / finding new.” am i reading the slashes accurately, or did you have something else altogether in mind?

azm: again, interpretations can go any place with me . . . as i feel language is a very subjective experience. the only places of restrictions come with the actual path of communicating (one2another).

sg: increasingly in your writing, including your essays, you avoid the use of capital letters. while this unconventional practice is not a new one, reaching back at least as far as ee cummings and employed by a number of feminist writers like daphne marlatt, for instance, i don't think we can assume that the thinking behind the practice is always the same or that it means the same thing in different artists' work. why have you chosen to largely abjure uppercase letters?

azm: since the mid 80's round when i accepted my job of slinging/wielding words, i realized that to recognize and acknowledge the real function of words within our lives would be the best/easiest/most functional way to getting a handle on the task/s. that words were and are simply/tho intricate tools facilitating communication between people is a fact. (and i have had a keen grasp and appreciation of/for english grammar since elementary school days; tho i may have chosen to ignore and or abuse much of this 'acumen' over the past few decades) so i took a hard stare at how we use and represent language—and those languages we most often relate to are placed in the vicinity of english use. especially juxtaposed to dialects/ (post-colonized) nation languages, english was and remains at, or at the very least, near the top of the heap, enjoying importance way beyond need and merit... what makes english more functional as the language of instruction in a class in rural jamaica/or any west african country/or the philippines/or parts of india/or any place outside england and points in north america? i don't think we need to expound on the political/economic/cultural implications, as simply posing the question produces a myriad of other questions and answers.

my point tho relates specifically to how we are taught/and learn to produce and dispense language in disparate fashions. written language (and the reference is always to english within this discussion) has been imbued with and continues to accrue much more stringent rules than spoken. and as i put forward these words intended to represent and convey my thots, i am aware of how carefully i choose these words, even tho in this discourse i am attempting to be conversational... but then my struggles with aligning how i communicate my thots in speech and writing are ongoing. anyway, both written and spoken english have very hierarchical rules about the very hierarchical structure which governs them; often these refer to 'commonness' or 'propriety' and notions of importance. but what really differentiates these ideas/statements, with respect to importance? *i am hungry; the sky is blue; harriet tubman was a hard worker; saskatoon exists on extremely flat ground; do you think paul martin is well-suited to the job of prime minister of canada?* and i must reiterate the differently designated status of oral and written english... as writing increasingly acquired elitist status and exclusive access, the rules seem to have been formulated to reflect this. seems as way back as when latin was actually in use by regular folk? of course i chose this reference as this is the language i hear tell, from which our lowly english was

derived. i wonder and often muse about older languages, say hieroglyphs in ancient egypt?

i know thru our “discoveries” and “excavations” that priests and scribes and probably artisans were the main folks who had official access and made use of writing and the accompanying accoutrement; but what of the lowly merchant who may have “scribbled” notes in the sand? what of the child who would fashion fantasies in dust? what of the housekeeper who did not trust her memory so insisted on recording quantities and inventory of supplies on a regular basis? was writing, as it served their needs, inaccessible? is writing, adhering to rules taught in school circles (educational or artistic) the only valid means of representing recorded thots and ideas?

with all this said and questions posed, i still have not answered the question, have i? the answer is fairly simple when i think of it . . . i decided in the mid 80’s to delete the notion of hierarchy (as much as i am able) from my vocabulary, from my thots, from my life. the easiest and most efficient way i saw to fashion this and to keep me working at it was in defying that rule of capitals! i hear big sound effects when i actually put out that word. hence within my speech and all my writings i endeavour to represent and communicate what i know to be true: my name is not any more important as representing this/my being, than the designated label of an orange, or a road, or a country, or a ‘higher’ being, or mother’s day. so christmas & jesus & shange⁴ & food & life and god and south africa and china and love and the river Nile and mississippi and latin and greece and goddess and octavia and mr smith and power and cbc and fm and the university of timbuctu and diversity in toronto and so on and so forth til when/ever.

(think my most recently acquired canvas—and am loving it—is email. . . i feel free to use & wield & write whatever language pleases my mind & ears & eyes with no apology, often no overthinkin)

sg: you might be interested to know that when the conventions for writing the cree language in alphabetic (as opposed to syllabic script) were worked out, the transcribers decided not to use capitals, so other people colonized by european imperialism have clearly taken the same view as you. but i have to tell you, the land on which saskatoon sits is not nearly as flat as in some other prairie locales, like regina for instance! we’ll have to find a way to get you out here so you can see for yourself our beautiful river valley and the rolling terrain just north of here.

⁴ ntozake shange is an african american playwright best known for her 1977 work *for colored girls who have considered suicide, when the rainbow is enuf: a choreopoem* (new york: macmillan, 1977). that this work significantly influenced mandiel’s *dark diaspora* in *dub: a theatre piece* (toronto: sister vision, 1991) is suggested by the canadian playwright’s calling her dub theatre piece a choreopoem.

azm: look forward to rolling on the hilands of saskatoon!

sg: to shift tack now, i want to ask about what i think is one of your most powerful poems, “mih feel it,” which you subtitle “wailin fih mikey.” an analogous poem in the euro-canadian tradition might be called a lament or an elegy. i understand that wailing has particular connotations in the rasta culture to which the dub poet mikey smith belonged, and of course bob marley’s back-up group was called the wailers. are either of these observations relevant to your choice of sub-title?

azm: absolutely: this was a pain-filled lament for someone i was just beginning to get to know personally & artistically. i have presented this work off paper maybe 5 times . . . can’t really speak anymore on this.⁵

but here i go: others have reflected on the “rasta” content of my work/writings; tho i dare say the contents yield no higher than any other contemporary writer with my kind & years of cultural influences. i believe in most black cultures worldwide, ceremonies held for people who have passed always involve wailin. the elegy seemed fitting in the manner it came forward... with the title “mih feel it” being a literal homage to the man & his work & style of poetry.⁶

sg: in your book *speshal rikwes*, you acknowledge that jamaican writers and performers miss lou, oko onuora, and linton kwesi johnson have been constant inspirations for you. in textualizing the oral for your print publications, did you consciously draw on any of their strategies or those used by smith or any other caribbean or caribbean-canadian writers) or musicians (marley? tosh? hibbert?⁷) who have prepared their work for print publication in periodicals, books, or album liner lyrics? what decisions did you have to make in bringing the jamaican and jamaican-canadian voice to the page?

azm: am sure i did draw on much from these artists—not sure what the conscious places were tho. had not *read* much of anyone’s poetry til much later—this was a conscious decision since the 70’s. miss lou’s i knew in print since youth days; oku’s written words/especially spelling style were closest to what i held in my head . . . a more phonetic lean than an english resemblance with broken references (like apostrophes).

⁵ the remaining part of this response was added later in the exchange of versions of this interview.

⁶ smith’s island records recording *mi cyaan believe it* includes smith’s “feel it,” so mandiela’s title is probably a reference to this performance piece.

⁷ peter tosh, the stage and recording name of winston hubert mcintosh, was a founding member of bob marley and the wailers, who later went on to a highly successful, independent career. frederick “toots” hibbert began as a ska musician, but innovated the style that many say he named: reggae. with his band the maytalls, he has continued to record and perform long after the untimely deaths of the more internationally known marley and tosh.

in arranging the works for print my main consideration was how to facilitate folks who did not have the language in their heads or who did, but had never considered/encountered representations on paper . . . how would i best transform the english standard we may all have been exposed to or have a working relationship with, in2 sounds which are recognizable. wd say i achieved some success; most hit the mark . . . yet i am constantly disappointed that the title doesn't/hadn't always been translated as intended & today i wd actually re-spell "rikwes," maybe tendering the english resemblance with "reques."

sg: are there challenges in textualizing orality that are unique to the canadian context?

azm: yes, especially now that there is a wider spread in the mixing of the accents/language among 1st & 2nd generation caribbean-canadians. i feel the challenge most prevalent in my recent writings, where i struggle to keep the mixture as it comes rather than manipulating it for reader ease.

sg: are there readily identifiable differences between jamaican orality and that of jamaican-canadians?

azm: yes; mainly evident in syntax & inflection. the j-c mix invariably holds a distinct canadian speech (including specific/regional vocabulary) flow, with a unique mixture of cross-the border/urban black/and urban canadian speech as well as the ever upward inflect & questioning on ends of sentences which distinguishes a typical "canadian accent."

sg: what do you understand to be the political and ethical implications of textualizing jamaican and jamaican-canadian oralities? are you, for example, in any way concerned that the recording of what some could apprehend as "broken english" or an inferior dialect rather than jamaican nation language might reinforce negative stereotypes in some readers' minds? how do you avoid invoking the long-standing connection between the quaintly comic and dialect?

azm: the invocation is almost unavoidable; so evident in theatre works which invariably invoke nostalgia among caribbean- & other canadian folks.

for me, anything that works against the concept of nation language is a negative.

if printed words do not effectively represent orality, then we miss our mark; so representing 'broken english' in print wd be pointing to a non-functional language; i am not familiar with any such language . . . and the truth is, languages which combine english structures are usually generated as functional requisites.

sg: is the use of jamaican nation language now broadly accepted by caribbean readers, or are there still strong vestiges of disapproval for “bad english” in literature? i am mindful of the exchange that v.s. naipaul reports in *the middle passage*.⁸ apparently after he had published his first books in which characters—but not the narrator—speak in trinidadian english, he was accosted by a woman on board a ship carrying him back to the west indies who insisted, “They must be does talk so by you; they don’t talk so by me” (74). have you ever been similarly confronted about your language practice? do you think such attitudes are now decidedly minority opinions if not altogether dead?

azm: i’ve never been confronted about the writing of the language—outside of folks not being sure about pronunciation . . . and i think the folks who actually read works in nation languages—not ‘the masses’ who still carry the aforementioned vestiges—yearn for this. most folks with jamaican or other caribbean backgrounds, well-read & schooled, have difficulties reading nation language, no matter how represented.

sg: what do you think are the pedagogical implications of choosing to teach writing like *speshal rikwes* or *dark diaspora* . . . in *dub* in courses where Caribbean students are either a significant presence, a minority presence, or absent?

azm: spreads overstanding & appreshi/lov/ation mongst all mentioned groups!

sg: has *dark diaspora* . . . in *dub* ever been remounted by a different director, and if so and if you saw the production, were there any changes that you found particularly striking?

azm: it has not . . . i still yearn to remount with different performers/excluding myself.

sg: have you seen others perform any of your poems from *speshal rikwes* or anthologized in *utterances and incantations*?⁹

azm: not really . . . as the “performances” i have been privy to were riddled with trepidation due to my presence.

⁸ see *the middle passage: impressions of five societies—british, french and dutch—in the west indies and south america* (harmondsworth: penguin, 1969).

⁹ afua cooper’s *utterances and incantations: women, poetry and dub* (toronto: sister vision, 1999) is an anthology of international women’s dub and related poetry in which mandiel’s poetry is strongly represented.

sg: in an essay called “an africanadian theatre aesthetic trek,”¹⁰ you report the usual strong school doses of the playwrights to whom you would have been predictably exposed during the “sound colonial education” that derek walcott has talked about west indians receiving, namely the greek tragedies and the plays of shakespeare, as well as reading the americans arthur miller, eugene o’neill, and tennessee williams. then you talk about the traditions of jamaican yard pantomime that took place in the post-christmas period. will you please tell us what elements of this performance tradition were particularly important as shaping forces of your own work?

azm: pantomime—jamaican style—has traditionally & deliberately utilized local cultural material: ring games, pop/traditional musik, annancy-story style, local dance vernacular (both formal & pop), dialogue & poetry. these coupled with the formal musical structure & ‘serious’ theatre form have informed my comprehension of dramatic composition from an early age, even when i didn’t know i was “interested” in working within theatre. so i really grew up more intimately acquainted with theatre than i previously realized.

sg: the importance of louise bennett-coverley’s work for the development of dub and other caribbean poetries has been widely documented, but in the essay you also mention mass ran¹¹ alongside miss lou. as not so many outside jamaica will know him as know miss lou, could you please tell us something about him and why you thought it important to mention him too? what are his distinct contributions to jamaican performance history?

azm: mass ran/ rannie lewis was miss lou’s collaborator on & offstage for decades. i grew up hearing them both working in radio broadcasts & on the jamaican comedy circuit & in pantomime . . . while miss lou published works (daily articles & sound-offs in the daily *gleaner*) and hosted the famed children’s show *ring ding*, mass ran was known as actor/comedian & radio personality. both disturbed nuff shit in their time; both well-known & loved by jamaicans at large.

sg: you have previously identified a distinguished group of african and black diasporic playwrights as nurturing your soul, but singled out the work of the african-american playwright, actress, and director vinette carroll as particularly enthralling to you. she was a groundbreaker in being the first african-american woman to direct a show on broadway, but are there other things about her work that made you feel like you’d found a soul cousin?

¹⁰ see *canadian theatre review* 118 (spring 2004): 69-70.

¹¹ the jamaican english word *mass* is an abbreviation for *master*; mass ran is thus master rannie lewis.

azm: vinette carroll's work was like pantomime to me! i gravitated toward her work without even realizing why, until much later on while analysing my own style & desires.

sg: some poets who have been identified as dub poets resist the term—I'm thinking of poet-performers like jean binta breeze, linton kwesi johnson, and mutabaruka—and you refer to yourself as a “dub aatist”; do you think the term dub poetry is a useful one?

azm: i have never referred to myself as a “dub poet,” tho i wd identify some of my works as resting in the form. in its early generation, i think the term “dub poet” was useful: got folks to look at & assess the language and style with little or no comparing against english or other standards; folks used the music as a frame of reference. as the creators moved away from the heavy or sole reggae “base,” and especially with the need to identify the incorporation of other jamaican musical forms, *dub* proved limiting—especially since the expansion of the meaning of dub (imprinting as different from/or opposed to instrumental “vershan”) did not ketch on. anywhichever, i am still looking to the expansion notion, hence the “dubb aatist” moniker: as an artist, i imprint on many mediums!

sg: do you think there is anything that distinguishes canadian dub from that of jamaica, other caribbean nations, or britain?

azm: really just environmental/content differences; as well as a bit more incorporation of themes & styles from our neighbours immediately south.

sg: would you identify your work as either feminist or, as alice walker would say in referring to black women's work, womanist? what in your opinion has made canada a locale where feminist/womanist dub could flourish?

azm: not sure what both mean in this time . . . and have always not wanted any labeling.

i think philosophically & thematically the works are very pro-woman, pro-revolution, pro-growth & health & harmony.

canada as a locale where feminist/womanist dub could flourish???
this may be due to our ability to achieve levels of independence not necessarily tied to economics & class.

sg: you have published both your books so far with *sister vision press*, a publisher which bills itself as dedicated to black women and women of colour. did you find other canadian presses uncomprehending of and/or uninterested in your work, or what made you want to publish with this press?

azm: they were a new press . . . that was the main attraction; that they could do justice to my “new voice.” also wasn’t interested in beating down closed doors in the midst of other struggles—the main struggle being harnessing and living with this new voice.

sg: what are the advantages and disadvantages of publishing with such a press? do you think there will always be a role for canadian publishing houses whose mandate it is to publish the work of writers from particular racialized/ethnicized groups or women or gays, etc., or are you hopeful that canadian publishers and readers will one day have moved beyond such categories?

azm: i trust that moving beyond these categories will mean integration and some real access; til such times, publishing houses and other companies which focus on specific cultural material must flourish as the creators are always in abundance, & if the producers are not there/available, this leaves the production work in the hands of the artists—never the best scenario.

sg: was it your idea to have the sections of *speshal rikwes* set up as tracks on vinyl records?

azm: definitely . . . this was my tribute to the music which informed my language growing up.

sg: was the glossary, which is very helpful for non-caribbean students, your idea, or sister vision’s?

azm: mine as well . . . it’s all about communicating with as much efficacy & efficiency as possible.

sg: i have read that you have worked with black theatre canada but i’ve been unable to find out what exactly your role was (and perhaps is) there. how exactly were you involved in this toronto-based company?

azm: myself, along with folks like djanet sears, luther hansraj, emerita emerencia, donald carr & others participated in *btc* as an informal ensemble for a few seasons. we worked with & under the tutelage of amah harris/co-artistic director with vera cudjoe. our work centered around harris’ *anansi stories*¹² as well as some general performance & other

¹² according to lorraine d. hubbard’s “black theatre canada: a decade of struggle,” in 1977, dominican-canadian playwright and performer amah harris “began writing a series of plays, based on the Anansi African folktales, which were performed for over seventy-five Metropolitan Toronto elementary schools and the Afro-American Ethnic Festival in Detroit, Michigan (May 1980).” hubbard also writes that “From the spring of 1977 to December 1980, over 35,000 people viewed the popular plays, which used song and dance to demonstrate human cooperation and universal understanding.”
<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/polyphony/theatre_art2.html> accessed 1 jan 2006.

production training/mentoring, and artistic jamming. jamming my poetry in ensemble performance was my intro to the group. i later worked as stage manager, performer, and even admin/office assistant with *btc* from '79 - '82. black theatre canada folded in the late 80's . . . lack of funds & other support. unfortunate as it wd have been a real place of learning for many artists in the city, given that almost all black artists working between 1972 & 1985 passed thru their gates. any theatre or other live performance artists who started out in that day & are still working now have a *btc* story to tell.

sg: in the work we've already talked about, and in creating and maintaining the production company b current and its related festival rock/paper/sistahz, you have been an important builder of africanadian cultural institutions. would you please tell us why you have wanted to do this work and what its costs and rewards have been?

azm: i won't say that i have actually wanted to do this work . . . i've had to! the holes have been gaping & continue to gape & widen; i try best as i can to fill them where i feel competent.

the rewards: a) collaboration with a lot of folks; something i always try to enable & appreciate

b) witnessing the growth & surge of artists & ideas

c) actually building & maintaining a company . . . whew!

d) much respect & acknowledgement/encouragement for keeping on

e) wider profile for a lot of folks

the costs: a) too much time away from my own work

b) dealing with expectations from folks who may not know the work involved, especially being viewed as the perennial producer not the ardent artist

c) not being expected to work (as an individual) with other companies

sg: what did you learn from the experiences of working with nightwood and young people's theatre?

azm: a) resources can/will go a long way to realizing vision

b) established institutions are resistant to change (like most individuals, including myself) and expressed desires for such are never realized with either ease or along the lines envisioned

c) folks will always keep their eyes on their prize

sg: what specifically did you do with those theatres? was any of your own writing produced there?

azm: neither company produced my writings . . . actually nightwood did sponsor the b current entry of the *dark diaspora* . . . *in dub* workshop in

the 1991 toronto fringe festival. my time spent with these theatres was developing or lobbying for other artists' work. did a fair bit of directing emerging works by black women thru nightwood's groundswell festivals (still am involved with them in this manner from time to time). with *young people's theatre*, i mostly lobbied for others and also for support of *b current*. *b current* was supported by *ypt* during the 1998/99 season as an associate artist/company—this was the only time in the *ypt* company history that this position was formulated. we received free office space for over a year—shared with the then fledgling soulpepper theatre company. as well, they funneled into the company grant funds received on our behalf from the canada council. this was quite a boost, as this was the time of the formulation of our emerging artists program, rAiz'n the sun.

sg: as a theatre practitioner your work is necessarily collaborative, and I know you have worked both with established writers and directors like djanel sears and alison sealy-smith and younger women like nah-ee-lah and debbie young. is there something about the collaborative process that really feeds your art?

azm: i feel stranded without collaboration; that's probably the main reason for not concentrating on other forms/mediums as i have with theatre; even tho i find theatre oftentimes economically debilitating. my constant search/quest is building a community in which i feel 'at home'.

sg: can you please tell us about the project rAiz'n the sun?

azm: rAiz'n the sun is really my recreation & continuing of a legacy: bringing the ensemble training idea from *btc* days in2 now; formalizing & entrenching a nurturing environment for young & emerging artists/folks who may want to have a career in art creation & production; providing alternate venues for training & practice for folks who have need of such instead of or in addition to the 'regular' schools & classes.

the training ranges from informal salons, to mentoring sessions, to formal apprenticeships in creative & tech teams within *b current* or other companies, structured workshop and intensive class sessions, experiential/hands on work on productions (including *rps* festival fare, mainstages, *raw materials*/the official rAiz'n showcase series) as playwrights, performers, tech support, directors, etc.

of course the appellation is part of the continuing of a legacy: tribute to hansberry's classic.¹³

¹³ in an introductory section of *dark diaspora*, mandela calls lorraine hansberry's 1959 play *a Raisin in the sun* a "mistresspiece" (viii). after an inauspicious preview on broadway, it went on to great acclaim there and thereafter, including winning the new york drama critics circle award for the best american play of 1959. riffing off a line from a langston hughes poem, "a dream deferred," it signalled the blossoming of african-american theatre.

sg: the dedication of your book of poems *speshal rikwes* is to “all the youths of Metro Toronto Schools.” did you write the poems with primarily a young audience in mind? why is this audience particularly important to you? has the book been adopted for use in english classes in the high school system or have some of the poems been anthologized in texts you know are being used in schools? what has the response been when you’ve performed in classrooms?

azm: only one poem, “young girls,” was written specifically with youths in mind; but i did extensive touring of toronto schools/middle & high prior to publishing the works. the response has most often been overwhelmingly positive & uprightly/effusively encouraging. i was sometimes invited to activity days related to english & literacy material, even to art classes. mostly i was at a school bcos i injected myself into the goings-on! and yes, some poems have been anthologized in a few texts.

sg: i’ve never seen you call yourself an educator and yet you seem to me to have both the spirit and some of the material practices that I would associate with skilled teachers. what is your attitude to teachers and teaching?

azm: i actually love the idea of teaching & will continually acknowledge that i do this in almost every way & place i work; yet i find it difficult to focus as an artist if i stand as a teacher. but then again i may just still be running from that place, as i was originally at york to study as a teacher with a biology major!

sg: your cd *step into my head* is distributed by *wrpm*, canada’s only woman-focused music distributors and a collective dedicated to the advancement of women’s performance work within the folk cultures of canada. i know they run camp sis as a way of nurturing the next generation of performers. have you been involved with the camp’s work in any way?

azm: i have not been involved at all; creating theatre limits how many “pots one can have on the fire” in any given period; regardless of willingness & desire. also think that tho we may jive philosophically, working methods are not so compatible.

sg: the title of your cd, *step inside my head*, invites listeners to get inside your embodied thoughts, and in some ways, each of your art forms or dimensions of your artistic practice could be understood as issuing such an invitation. what do you hope people who accept that invitation and try to get inside your embodied mind will experience and perhaps learn?

azm: in what/every/which way they can! even if that simply means appreciating the musicality of the voice . . . we are closer to harmony.

sg: thanks for all the work you do towards creating that harmony, and for answering all my questions!