

Anthro-poets from East Port-of-Spain's Yards: Spoken Word as Arts-based Methodology for Ethnography in Urban Trinidad and Tobago¹

amílcar peter sanatan with Fayth Seaton, Sean Singh, Deneka Thomas and Zariel Thomas

Abstract This multimedia presentation features the performances of four spoken word poets from East Port-of-Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. During the period December 2024 to February 2025, we designed and facilitated a virtual spoken word workshop that applied arts-based pedagogies for ethnographic research. Through ethnographic observation and note-taking, poets and collaborators produced place-based analyses of social hierarchies, solidarities and inequalities in their communities in the form of spoken word. The literary and ethnographic imagination was articulated from the immediate environment of the yard, establishing this site of material culture as a central locus for communal and political insight. This multimedia presentation demonstrates the utility of ethnographic and literary insights to explore everyday life and politics in urban Trinidad and Tobago, with the poets serving as research collaborators in this co-created ethnography.

Keywords: spoken word; oral traditions; ethnography; urban geographies; cultural studies

Antropo-poetas de los Yards del Este de Puerto España: Poesía Oral como Metodología Basada en Las Artes para la Etnografía en Trinidad y Tobago Urbana

Resumen Esta presentación en multimedia reúne las interpretaciones de cuatro poetas de spoken word provenientes de East Port-of-Spain, Trinidad y Tobago. Entre diciembre de 2024 y febrero de 2025, diseñamos y llevamos a cabo un taller virtual de *spoken word* que empleó pedagogías basadas en las artes como metodología para la investigación etnográfica. Mediante la observación etnográfica sistemática y la toma rigurosa de notas, los poetas y sus colaboradores elaboraron análisis basados en las jerarquías sociales, las formas de solidaridad y las desigualdades presentes en sus comunidades, articulados a través del *spoken word*. La imaginación literaria y etnográfica se configuró en el entorno inmediato del patio, consolidando este espacio de cultura material como un lugar central para la reflexión comunitaria y la comprensión política. Esta presentación en multimedia demuestra la utilidad de integrar diferentes enfoques etnográficos y literarios para examinar la vida cotidiana y las dinámicas políticas en los contextos urbanos de Trinidad y Tobago, con los poetas participando como colaboradores de investigación en esta etnografía co-creada.

¹ "Place, Power and Words: Virtual Spoken Word Workshop" (2024/2025) is a research initiative out of a larger Kone Foundation-funded project, "Imagining Futures in the Margins of the State: Everyday Politics in Urban Communities in Trinidad and Zimbabwe." The project is a multi-sited, collaborative study led by Maarit Forde (Principal) with Florence Ncube, amílcar peter sanatan and Saana Hansen.

Palabras Clave: Spoken word; tradiciones orales; etnografía; geografías urbanas; estudios culturales

Antro-poetas dos bairros de East Port-of-Spain: Poesia Falada como Metodologia Baseada nas Artes para uma Etnografia em Trinidad e Tobago Urbana

Resumo Esta apresentação multimídia destaca as performances de quatro poetas de poesia falada (*spoken word*) de East Port-of-Spain, Trinidad e Tobago. No período entre dezembro de 2024 e fevereiro de 2025, desenvolvemos e conduzimos uma oficina virtual de poesia falada que aplicou pedagogias baseadas nas artes para a pesquisa etnográfica. Por meio de observação etnográfica e anotações, os poetas e colaboradores produziram análises baseadas no lugar das hierarquias sociais, solidariedades e desigualdades de suas comunidades na forma de poesia falada. A imaginação literária e etnográfica foi articulada a partir do ambiente imediato do pátio, estabelecendo esse espaço de cultura material como um *locus* central para a compreensão comunitária e política. Esta apresentação multimídia demonstra a utilidade de perspectivas etnográficas e literárias para explorar a vida cotidiana e a política urbana em Trinidad e Tobago, com os poetas atuando como colaboradores de pesquisa nesta etnografia cocriada.

Palavras-chave: Poesia Falada; Tradições Orais; Etnografia; Geografias Urbanas; Estudos Culturais

I was stationed in Kingston, Jamaica for the Christmas holidays. The *Place, Power and Words* virtual workshop on spoken word and ethnography was in motion. Meetings were set for early Saturday mornings. Before the first session started, I sent an email with the Zoom link, a WhatsApp reminder in the newly formed group chat, and private messages to applicants. After weeks of marketing the workshop exclusively for East Port-of-Spain residents, I received more re-shares and public commendation for the initiative by non-residents than from interested participants from partner communities. This experience evoked memories of prior place-based community organising efforts, which necessitated direct engagement with residents, fostering trust, and leveraging local human resources to disseminate information effectively.

East Port-of-Spain is a region located on the periphery of the capital city, Port-of-Spain, Trinidad. Inequalities regarding access to basic needs, a colonial legacy of slum clearance and public insecurity reproduce social and spatial inequalities throughout area. Driven by stigma and gang borderlines, spatial and social boundaries undermine equal social, economic and political participation of residents there as “fear and segregation characteri[s]e urban life in contemporary Trinidad and Tobago” (Forde 2018, 439).

Spoken word was selected as a pedagogical tool in the workshop because it is a popular art form rooted in the oral traditions of the Caribbean. Performers communicate in the nation language and Standardised English in “naturally selected registers of the language,” which is “appropriate to particular contexts and situations” (Rohlehr 1989, 2). While spoken word is proudly celebrated in Caribbean performance culture, as an oral tradition, it is widely overlooked as a *literary* genre and remains underappreciated in Caribbean literary criticism (Sindoni 2010, 218). Up until the 1970s, with the popularisation of dub poetry and musical genres such as rapso within and beyond the Caribbean, the critical reception of oral and performance poetry in scholarship was uneven (Donnell and Welsh 1996, 295). Therefore, a core part of my personal artistic, scholarly and political mission has been to advance spoken word’s scholarly recognition as a dynamic, legitimate, and vital genre within both literary and performance arts. Weekly, workshop participants exhibited their competence in writing and performing spoken word. The binary conception of the scribal/oral and literary/performative recasts a colonial division of knowledge and art from popular cultural expressions that are complex and subversive to hegemonic forms and traditions. The deliberate choice to co-create a spoken word arts-based ethnography was motivated by a decolonial politics to redress the “exclusionary nature of the anglophone Caribbean literary canon” (Rosenberg 2011, 349).

Morning birds were noisy in the background of my Kingston room. I waited ten minutes before the first participant logged in. It was Sean Singh. I met Sean a few years before during field work in his community. We discussed his background as a cultural activist and arts director of his performance arts group, “Soul Oasis Cultural Ambassadors” in Belmont and Morvant. Sean lived in Gonzales, a community in East Port-of-Spain. Though often highlighted in the media for instances of gang and gun violence, this area is also the birthplace of public and cultural icons of national development, such as the visual artist and poet, LeRoy Clarke. Sean and several members of his group have performed internationally and at the Prime Minister’s Best Village and the Dimanche

Gras calypso events in Trinidad and Tobago. As we spoke, workshop participants trickled in.

All poets and collaborators were unable to be on camera. Some were involved in childcare responsibilities, one was at their weekend job, another en route to a theatre rehearsal. We were using communication devices in different countries—Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago—for our first meeting. We had different experiences or understandings about the various communities that made up East Port-of-Spain. A sense of collective optimism emerged regarding the workshop process after an outline of the workshop, ethical guidelines, and project outcomes were shared, and participants were informed of their role as research collaborators in the ethnography. Fayth Seaton, from Picton, at the close of the session said, “I work with a group in my community, and I have an NGO that will pretty soon be going into schools.” Fayth and her team provide reading interventions for children, and she was keen to blend spoken word in her outreach strategies. During meetings, we were partially brought into each other’s lives, speaking and sharing over background sounds of our environments and weekend routines.

The workshop was grounded in a framework of anthro-poetry used as a “creative pedagogical tool where research collaborators immerse themselves in their communities and speak to the dynamic, unequal and ever-shifting power relations that undergird their observations.”¹ Ethnographic writing has long been understood as a literary genre (Haripriya 2018). It blends observation, poetics, and the documentation of archival facts and affective fields. This arts-based methodology involved an ethnography of the workshop space as well as ethnographic writing about everyday urban life in East Port-of-Spain by research collaborators. Those in the workshop valued this format. They found that questions derived from field notes and the weekly recording of emotions and understandings fostered the creative writing process. It was important for me, as the researcher and facilitator, to abandon received understandings about urbanity, places in East Port-of-Spain such as Laventille and Morvant, and “expert” knowledge about spoken word and literature. Re-prioritising the need for researchers to theorise and explain, through spoken word and a collaborative ethnography I “allow[ed] myself to feel and be affected” (Stainova 2019, 217).

In the spoken word videos of this publication, collaborators confront issues of violence, fragile urban infrastructures and the importance of familial and communal networks. Through spoken word, they explored moral ambiguities, articulated their hopes, and transparently communicated their varying perspectives and assumptions about the social environment they were observing. Notably, poets and collaborators situated the geographies of their poetry and grounded their metaphors in the immediate, material environment, specifically the urban yards around them. They drew on the mundane, everyday technologies like plastic buckets or recalled sensory details of food prepared by family members in the home. This yard spatiality inherent in their work spoke to both a “communal intimacy” (Radović 2016) and a political standpoint, demonstrating how engagement with material culture and embodied experience within shared urban spaces becomes the foundation for ethnographic insight in East Port-of-Spain. The virtual workshop transformed from a pedagogical space to communicate the poetics of interior worlds to a virtual communal space for relationality. Furthermore, ethnographic poetry considers “insider-

¹ Application of the concept “anthro-poetry” as reflected in the course outline for “Power, Place and Words: Virtual Spoken Word Workshop” (2024/2025).

outsider tensions” (Maynard and Cahnmann-Taylor 2010, 7) in the cultural study of marginalised communities. In this multimedia presentation, viewers will have the opportunity to experience poets and collaborators use of metaphor, anaphora and other literary devices because “[e]thnographic poems must not only reveal worlds from our research but also devote careful attention to the craft of poetry itself” (Zani et al. 2019, 185). At the end of the workshop, we all revisited our communities with “new” ethnographic eyes, communicated hopes, dread and futures in our own voices into a larger tapestry of East Port-of-Spain’s yards.

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amilcar peter sanatan is an interdisciplinary Caribbean artist, educator and activist. He is from Trinidad and Tobago and currently works in Helsinki, Finland. sanatan is a PhD student in Cultural Studies at the University of West Indies, St. Augustine Campus. His public leadership and research amplify the youth-child-gender equality nexus of development, decolonial urbanism, and literary publics in social change. He promotes co-imagining and co-creation of development in the Caribbean and Americas region. He co-edited two special issues in academic journals on Caribbean gender and cultural studies.

Sean Singh

Gonzales

Bam bam bam

Morning greeting creates mourning of a mother

Is tough love
for the tribe standing
until the URP cheque is fed
then, they rip each other

Check?
Check how many bodies that were buddies
they embodied the required love

Is Gonzales where Guns a live

Old man Frank sweet cane patch
houses a semiautomatic rifle
in case ants get wild

In Gonzales where the guns a live

Road blocks are orchestrated
by automated triggers
“I doh know da car”

In Gonzales where guns a live

Where Miss Pearl avocado tree
strongly suggested to be invested by
the pied piper whose echoing sounds
make some cover their ear

In Gonzales where guns a live

Breathe

Exhale

Coast, corner clear

Hands clapping
early Sunday morning was welcoming
vibrating a difference

pulsating resistance

a reminding existence
drum shots beat
the sound of the gun shots
meet to pray, the doors shut
tight at night
when your eyes shut
stenched spranger buss
he white shot

Shot shot shot
in the hole

Shut shut shut up
look down
them fellers coming up
man yuh station

Police in their station cock up
glock armed, triggers cock up
absent law still grab and lock up

After the trade from a land so far-fetched
bullets with man name mentally etched
This is not a fete in here this is....unfair

The ammunition did not get the memo
woman and children are not to be touched
but it touchy

Because the bullet points are the bullet points
with the bullet's point to gain bullet points
so is bullet bullet bullet, that's the point

It pointless

We need to start stopping
and stop starting the thinking about it

That's yuh brother
he mother
their sister

Whoever
we all in danger
'cause all the ghost yuh take
'cause all the ghost yuh take
you is not the true collector
we just sacrificing one another

for an over glorified perimeter

At night
after overcast days
actors going off script-ure

Raining sad songs of hopelessness

Sean Singh is a cultural ambassador and social entrepreneur from Picton and Gonzales in East Port-of-Spain. He is the founder and artistic director of “Soul Oasis Cultural Ambassadors” (SOCA), a community-based organisation that has produced several plays, musical and cultural events. Singh has written and performed calypso, composed music and has won the award for Best Written Script in 2020 at the Best Village Competition organised by the Ministry of Sport and Community Development. Singh has performed regionally and internationally, including in Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Venezuela, Wales and Japan.

Fayth Seaton

Sweet Paradise

Stigma, there is stigma
Is it really true?
A sweet paradise has lost its beauty

Enticing mas and steel pan
with vivid magical creations

We don't seem to leverage
our tourism product...Listen up!

Sirens wailing, tires escaping
rain falling, buckets of drops
children playing, mothers crying

Alas, food done
children run to have their fill

Gooaaaaal bai, sweet melodies
talented children need space
Yuh understand?

Yutes need space

It's not about the numbers game yuh know
that secures a space
in the grave

The ole time days:
granny making plum and sugar cake
sweets to fill your belly with love
we thrived for and honesty
they are the ones who provide
community, too bad those loving grandmas aren't here

Violence! *sigh*
Oh dear
Pop pop pop cornnnn

Fayth Seaton is an accounting professional and entrepreneur from Picton, Laventille. She is the Managing Director of her business and a certified chef.

Zariel Thomas

Curses

The cycle that never stops
until the heart stops

We have a dream
is ninety-nine percenters
to be apart of the bigger scheme

I don't think they notice
here, we have the biggest of dreams
despite the least of opportunity

The tongue – a mass weapon of destruction
a spell, cast out of the mouths of the nation

Cursed to repeat the cycle that never stops
until the heart stops

Corner sitting, soft drink drinking, biscuit eating
heel at the end of slipper wearing, weed smoking
pants under yuh bamcee wearing
boxers have a hole so I seeing
gun pulling young men
soon to be child father

We try to speak, but our cries goes through one ear
and passes out the other

We don't want the scraps that you've left us

No child making, being beaten when he frustrated
tears running, Jordan shoe on foot but nothing
in the head, thinking, going to school
never finishing because belly bigging
fighting for man in my school uniform
so, drawers showing, moving
from house to house
'cause nobody wanting yuh

The cycle that never stops
until the heart stops

*We tired, and if allyuh have nothing good to say
then don't say anything at all*

These two-tongued well wishes
when what you really mean to say is:

*These good for nothing, space wasting
them always embarrassing us Black people eh!*

*My child will never turn out like that
you from Laventille
you will never amount to nothing
all them young men and them know is to breed gyal
all them young girls know is to run down man*

This cycle that never stops
until the heart stops

Zariel Thomas is a spoken word performer from Red Hill, Laventille. Thomas was originally from Maloney Gardens in East Trinidad. She recently graduated from sixth form school at St. George's College. Thomas works as a Library Assistant in the National Library and Information System Authority of Trinidad and Tobago. She has extensive experience as a member of "Girl Be Heard," a female-led spoken word company.

Deneka Thomas

Boys Who Never Die

They say he dead but look
how he on the block still
Bent over a game of wappy
Laughter cutting through the night
Like a three-line

They say he dead but listen
His name in the echo of a mother
calling her son home before the streetlight comes on
in every screech of tyres
in the quiet before the gunshots buss open the dark

They say he dead but watch
he in the rearview mirror of a police car
in the shadow that stretch long on the lonely pavement
in the eyes of his bredren who
spray paint their names onto walls
making them landmarks of the community

There is a funeral but
he don't stay buried

He in the smoke rising from a spliff
in the peeling mural on the palour
in the way the east dry river forgets nothing
even if after the city does

The boys who do not die
multiply in memory
in myth

In the way their names stay sharp in the minds
of those who loved them like floods

Making them eternal

Deneka Thomas is a spoken word artist, a poet, arts educator, and activist from Gonzales in East Port-of-Spain. They are recognised internationally for their work on gender issues, LGBT+ advocacy, women's empowerment, and environmentalism. Thomas is the 2018 Grand Slam Champion of the First Citizens National Poetry Slam, and was third place winner in 2019. They have performed and spoken at TEDx Port of Spain, the Trinity College Hip Hop Festival, the Women Deliver Conference, the Nairobi Summit (ICPD+25), and at several other local and international events. Their work has also been published in several literary journals including *Moko Magazine* and *Shade Literary Arts*.