

Big Speech, Small Island: Tobago's Speech Band in Spoken Word and Oral Traditions¹

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Abstract The Speech Band in Tobago is a popular folk, theatrical and oratory art form performed in community-based events, cultural competitions and heritage festivals. However, the art form has been critically omitted from scholarship on the genealogy of contemporary Caribbean spoken word. Despite its significance in the cultural production of Tobagonian identities, the Speech Band suffers from epistemic neglect within Caribbean Studies dominated by Trinidadian narratives and print-centric literary standards. In this discussion, I combine archival research conducted at national heritage libraries in both Trinidad and Tobago and semi-structured interviews with cultural practitioners and organisers. I argue that the invisibilization of the Speech Band is symptomatic of a double marginality: the uneven political and cultural dynamics between the twin islands and the peripheralizing of oral traditions within the Caribbean literary canon.

Keywords: Tobago, Speech Band, spoken word, oral traditions

Gran Discurso, Isla Pequeña: La *Speech Band* de Tobago en Poesía Oral y Las tradiciones Orales

Resumen La *Speech Band* en Tobago constituye una forma artística popular de carácter folclórico, de teatro y oratoria que se presenta en eventos comunitarios, certámenes culturales y festivales de patrimoniales. No obstante, dicha práctica ha sido significativamente excluida de los estudios académicos dedicados a la genealogía de la palabra hablada contemporánea en el Caribe. A pesar de su papel fundamental en la producción cultural y la articulación de identidades tobagonianas, la *Speech Band* padece una forma de negligencia epistémica dentro de los Estudios Caribeños, campo que continúa dominado por narrativas trinitenses y por parámetros literarios anclados en la primacía del texto escrito. En este análisis, integro investigación archivística llevada a cabo en bibliotecas nacionales de patrimonio tanto en Trinidad como en Tobago, junto con entrevistas semiestructuradas realizadas a practicantes culturales y organizadores. Sostengo que la persistente invisibilización de la *Speech Band* es indicativa de una doble marginalidad: por un lado, las dinámicas políticas y culturales asimétricas entre las islas gemelas; y por otro, la relegación de las tradiciones orales dentro del canon literario caribeño.

Palabras Clave: Tobago; *Speech Band*; spoken word; tradiciones orales

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Grande Discurso, Pequena Ilha: A *Speech Band* de Tobago na Poesia Falada e Tradições Oraís

Resumo A *Speech Band*, em Tobago, é uma forma de arte popular, teatral e de oratória apresentada em eventos comunitários, competições culturais, e festivais de tradições de patrimônio cultural. No entanto, essa forma de arte tem sido criticamente omitida dos estudos acadêmicos sobre a genealogia da poesia falada caribenha contemporânea. Apesar de sua importância na produção cultural de identidades em Tobago, a *Speech Band* sofre de negligência epistêmica dentro da área de Estudos Caribenhos, dominada por narrativas de Trinidad e padrões literários centrados na cultura impressa. Nesta discussão, combino pesquisa de arquivos, conduzida em bibliotecas de patrimônio nacional tanto em Trinidad quanto em Tobago, com entrevistas semiestruturadas realizadas com praticantes e organizadores culturais. Argumento que a invisibilização de *Speech Band* é sintomática de uma dupla marginalidade: as dinâmicas políticas e culturais desiguais entre as ilhas gêmeas e a periferização de tradições oraís dentro do cânone literário caribenho.

Palavras-chave: Tobago; *Speech Band*; poesia falada; tradições oraís

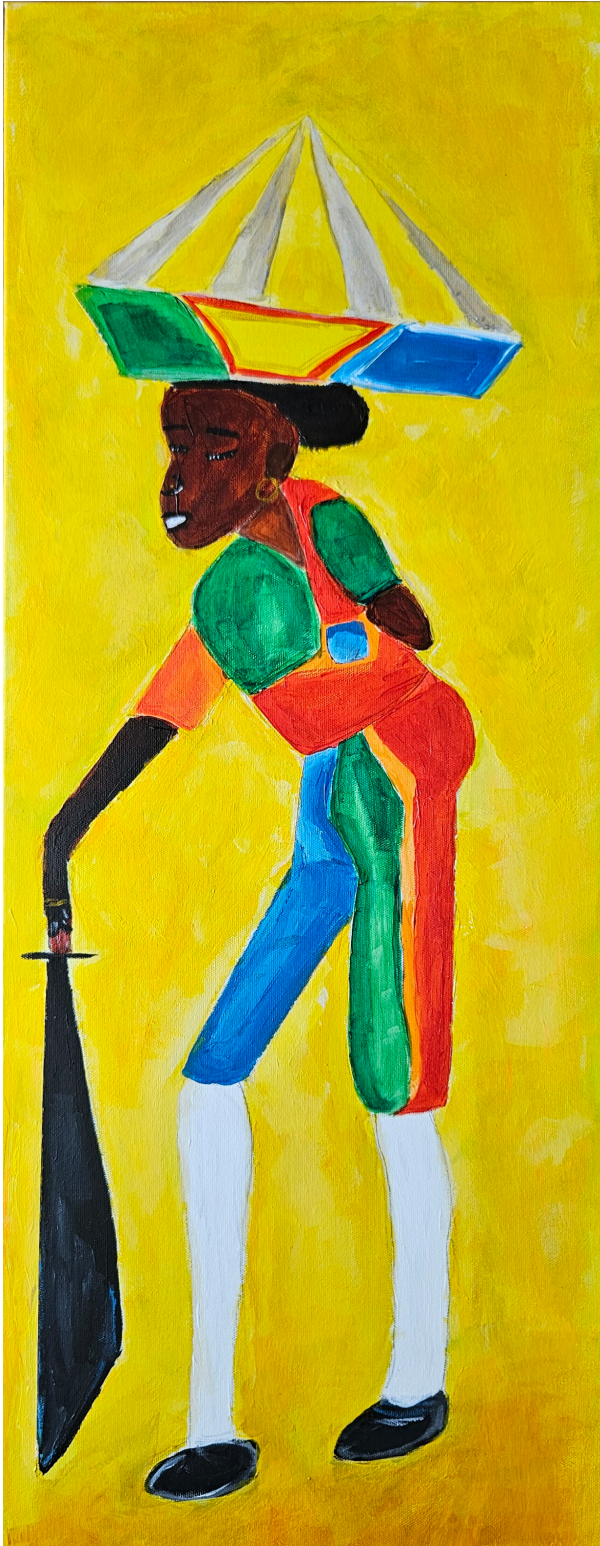
“So, what happened to Tobago and the children who grew up performing ‘Drag your bow, Mister Fiddler’?” A few years ago, I was asked this question before a conference presentation on Caribbean spoken word and oral traditions. Until that point, I made no reference to the Speech Band in my writing and public claims on spoken word. The Speech Band is an essential part of Tobago’s oral tradition, culture and identity. Tobago is one island of the twin-island nation of Trinidad and Tobago in the southern Caribbean. I am from Trinidad. As a colony, Tobago became linked to Trinidad at the end of the nineteenth century. Brereton (2007, 180) notes that Tobago was a “separate British colony, with two brief periods of French rule, from 1763 to 1889, and this history as an ‘independent’ colony, along with the geographical separation, lies behind the Tobago narrative.” For Brereton, the “Tobago narrative” is an island-based identity constructed in opposition to the “Trinidadian Other,” challenging hegemonic (Afro-Creole) narratives of Trinidad and Tobago history by asserting its distinct social development, political cultures, kinship relations and history within the unified state. Trinidad and Tobago became an independent nation from the British in 1962. Tobago has a multi-ethnic and multicultural population, however, the majority of the population on the island is primarily made up of people of African descent. Trinidad is the industrial powerhouse of the pair. Public services and infrastructure are primarily located in Trinidad, though significant investments have been made in Tobago since 1962. Still, there is an uneven political relationship between the two islands. This imbalance has even led to the production of impartial national archives, historiographies, knowledge claims and theoretical frameworks that erase the specific historical context and cultural contributions of Tobago. What responsibilities do writers, performers and scholars from and in Trinidad have to Tobago and Tobagonian cultural identities as we represent national and Caribbean literatures?

The contemporary spoken word movement in Trinidad and Tobago draws from a multifaceted genealogy of literary and performance ancestries. The lineage originates in the place-based traditions of carnival speech characters, such as the Midnight Robber and Pierrot Grenade, alongside lyrical musical genres such as calypso, rapso, ragga soca and more recently, Trinibad. These elements in the national space are further shaped by the influence of Jamaican dub poetry, reggae and dancehall, as well as the impact of North American and British hip-hop, open mics and poetry slam productions. In spite of annual cultural events and festivals that platform Speech Band performers in Tobago, there is a paucity of scholarly literature on the art form. I navigated the national library systems of both islands to access localised texts that were unavailable in the respective sister-island’s collections. I complemented this archival work with primary field research, meeting with literary event organizers and cultural performers in Tobago to cultivate a more comprehensive understanding of the Speech Band’s significance.

In February 2025, I travelled via airplane to Tobago from Trinidad. I arrived in the morning and hired a taxi from the ANR. Robinson International Airport. I listened to local radio announcers discussing the vibrancy of Trinidad’s carnival on my way to my first engagement of the day. One announcer said, “you really have to see it for yourself, Tobago. . The Trinidad carnival is truly something.” Later in the afternoon, I visited Tobago Library Services in Scarborough. In the Susan Craig James Heritage Library, I was graciously assisted by the senior librarian present. With the exception of a few newspaper commentaries,¹ historical documentation on the Speech Band remains characterized by an archival gap. Documents exist primarily in ephemeral formats such as pamphlets, conference proceedings and reproduced lectures. I scoured the pages of *Drag Yuh Bow Mr. Fiddler* (1987) by Oris Job-Caesar.

¹ See: Rita Pemberton on the history of the Speech Band (2022); Dara E. Healy’s reflection on ‘speechifying’ in storytelling traditions (2022); Healy’s short fiction with Speech Band character (2024).

This collection of public lectures and commentary published in the newspaper, frames Speech Band in Tobago as constitutive of a distinct oral tradition and culture in Tobago. Job-Caesar highlights the oral and folk traditions related to socio-linguistics of the Black peasantry, Bongo rituals, Old Time Wedding performances and folk songs.



“de speech band girl from Tobago” by amílcar peter sanatan. Acrylic on canvas, 12” x 36”. 2025

The Social Organisation of the Speech Band

The Speech Band is one of the “defining features of the culture of Tobago” (Pemberton 2022). It is a theatrical, musical and oratory art form that synthesises West African storytelling and British folk theatre traditions. Speech Bands are found throughout the island, especially in communities such as Les Coteaux, Mt. Thomas, Parlatuvier and Plymouth. Performers wear costumes, perform musical interludes and recite poetry. Performers repeat the refrain “Drag Your Bow, Mister Fiddler!” during their speeches. Speech Band costumes are self-made or crafted by designers who blend multi-coloured satin or velvet for the suit. Suits are adorned with small mirrors, tassels and bells. Speech Band performers wear tall headpieces, featuring sailing ships or cocked hats. Some performers carry wooden swords.

The organisation of the Speech Band is praised for its collectivist orientation. Pemberton (2022) makes the point that the organisation of the Speech Band “illustrates the contribution that each individual role must make to the operation of the unit within the clear lines of authority . . . it underscored the need for effective leadership for the success of the unit.” The Speech Band involves several characters. Spoken in both Tobagonian Creole and an interpretation of “Shakespearean prose” (Hernandez 2004, 3), characters “speechify” social issues, rumours that circulate in villages and individual and communal accomplishments. In many respects, the Speech Band is an appropriation of European theatrical forms. According to Job-Caesar:

In the 12th century in Europe, masked bands paraded the streets during the winter festivals and entered houses to dance and play in silence. By the 13th century, the disguises became elaborate and in the 16th century the bands were absorbed in the Italian carnival masquerading . . . The main feature of the Tobago play, however, with respect to

its linkage to the drama of the Old World, is its adaptation from the 16th century Mummers play which was performed mainly in Northern England and which had its narrative framework, the story of St. George and the Seven Champions of Christendom (Job-Caesar 1990, 22).

Charlie Leith, a pioneer of Speech Band in Tobago and performer since 1930, identified fifteen characters in Speech Bands: (i) Show Boy, (ii) Robin, (iii) Lucifer, (iv) Creator, (v) Young Sealey, (vi) Norway, (vii) Wallis, (viii) Hero, (ix) Hero Conqueror, (x) Duke of Wellington, (xi) Valentine, (xii) The King, (xiii) The Doctor, (xiv) My Boy Pompey and (xv) The Commander (Leith 1986, 66). The hat worn by Speech Band performers is a “replica of the sailing cargo ship which transported sugar” during plantation slavery (Hernandez 2004, 3). Traditionally, “all members of the band were male” (Pemberton 2022). This is not surprising given the gender-specific, masculine origins of the characters performed in Speech Band presentations. This pattern reflects the ways in which culture “[naturalises] hierarchies of gender and social class” (Bassi 1997, 318). Performers in the band were once referred to as “Speechmen” (Hernandez 2004, 3). However, Speech Bands today are representative of women and men. Speech Band master trainers such as Deborah Moore-Miggins are widely regarded as custodians of the art form. Across community-based groups, Speech Band performers continually practice, rehearse and perform their craft at different cultural events. The Speech Band features prominently at the Prime Minister’s Best Village competition and the Tobago Heritage Festival.

Marginality in the Nation and Literary Studies

As Alison Donnell (2020, 406) observed, there is a “notable unevenness of opportunity” that persists between small and large island societies in the Caribbean. This imbalance is reflected in the marginalisation of the Speech Band in Tobago by a “Trinidad-centric” scholarly focus that prioritises the cultural archives and canonical writers of the larger island at the expense of Tobago’s distinct contribution to literary studies and the oral traditions. Print cultures are steeped in power inequalities that often exclude national histories and the contributions of social groups in the margins due to an overreliance on formal publishing as the primary validator of cultural and epistemic value. Oral traditions include art forms of cultural expression that involve speech and some scribal literatures. Oral traditions are primarily created and transmitted through performance modalities. Elements of delivery and embodiment are essential to this standard. For too long, oral traditions, which include folklore were “. . . not considered within the realm of literary archives, because it was not considered a relevant literature or even a literary archive in its own right. More specifically, it was excluded from literary archives due to its form of transmission, social-class origin and racial bias” (Wegner and McIntyre 2021, 12).

Oral traditions have long ignited debates on literary “standards,” social class, education and notions of the Caribbean canon. These concerns are not merely theoretical, but they are lived in the regional literary and performance spaces. As a spoken word performer, I have observed and been on the receiving end of dismissiveness and disregard in print-centric literary spaces, though spoken word is widely regarded as one of the most popular literary art forms in Trinidad and Tobago today. Here, Rohlehr incisively calls out the prevailing attitudes that once marginalised oral traditions:

It is only since the 1970s that the term “oral tradition” began to be consistently used in connection with certain developments in West Indian poetry. Before then the debate concerned the viability of “dialect” as a medium for poetry, and was an extension of the troubled issue of the nexus between education, speech, class, status and power. Creole

dialects were thought of as belonging to the semi-literate and poor. To argue, as some linguists did and still do, that Creole is simply another language, neither better nor worse than any other, was to ignore the social and political nature of language. To speak about the vitality and expressiveness of Creole was to sentimentalise warm folksiness without wanting to share in the anguish of its decrepitude, and to display the contempt of a complacent intelligentsia, who secretly wanted to reinforce their superior social status by keeping mass of the people uneducated” (Rohlehr 1989, 1).

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge efforts to institutionalise the works on orality in Caribbean literary studies. The University College of the West Indies (UCWI) was established in 1948. By 1950, the English Department began teaching canonical literature primarily from the United Kingdom. As social movements transformed Caribbean societies in the post-independence period alongside the expansion of the field of Caribbean writers at “home” and “abroad,” “English literature” curricula were disrupted and underwent a series of reforms. New literature courses were developed. “West Indian Literature” was first introduced in 1969 and later courses such as “Oral Tradition and Literature” and “Introduction to Orature” (Morris 2005, 2). These courses, from the UCWI, later reconstituted as The University of the West Indies (UWI), marked early efforts to legitimate oral traditions. Yet, the conceptualisation of orality and orature was restricted to its linguistic dimensions rather than being recognised as a performative modality through which a diverse spectrum of practitioners, including both writers and performers, negotiated their craft. For example, *Voice Print: An Anthology of Oral and Related Poetry from the Caribbean* (1989) edited by Stewart Brown, Mervyn Morris and Gordon Rohlehr played a role in anthologising oral literatures within a print literary framework. However, with the exception of selected writer-performers such as Jean “Binta” Breeze, Mikey Smith, Paul Keens-Douglas and Mutabaruka, and recognition of calypsonians such as the Mighty Sparrow and Leroy “Black Stalin” Calliste, to name a few, this edited collection and other initiatives to identify “orality” in the Caribbean did far less to represent the oeuvres of oral poets, dub poets, spoken word performers and other performers of the oral tradition on their own terms. Rather, the poetry and/or poetics of performers were ascribed with literary merit and included into curated collections and courses that were over-represented with poets who succeeded, and produced almost exclusively, in print literary cultures. The authors inadvertently reproduced the “modern/colonial dichotomy between oral and literary spheres of literary expressions” (Gallien 2020, 49) within a political project to assert a Caribbean literary canon.

Caribbean literary studies are not exempt from other intersecting exclusions, such as geographic exclusions. The underrepresentation of smaller countries and literary cultures outside of the so-called “Big Four” (Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica and Trinidad)² are not given equal attention in scholarship. Social tensions between people of the islands of Trinidad and Tobago are steeped in political inequalities and Tobagonian calls for equality, respect and autonomy are meant to redress some of these gaps. There is a prevailing view that several “Trinidadians see Tobagonians (as well as the people from the other smaller Caribbean countries) as small islanders, and thus inferior” (Luke 2001, 44). Notwithstanding the oeuvre of Eric Roach, the national literature of Trinidad and Tobago elevates the literature of one island over the other. Against this background, the Tobago Writers’ Guild (TWG) facilitated workshops for writers and reading circles in 2008 to assert a Tobagonian literary tradition. It was formally incorporated in 2010. The TWG was initiated by Tobagonian authors, including award-winning author M. NourbeSe Philip and

³ Saint Lucia has received significant scholarly and artistic attention as the birthplace of Derek Walcott, the Nobel laureate and accomplished poet, essayist, playwright, and artist. The island’s literary tradition remains robust, as evidenced by work of key figures such as Kendel Hippolyte, John Robert Lee, Canisia Lubrin, Vladimir Lucien and Hazel Simmons-McDonald, to name a few.

former politician and acclaimed Speech Band artist Deborah Moore-Miggins. In 2011, TWG hosted the first Tobago Word Festival. Festival director, Moore-Miggins said that the festival is intended “to develop the skill of writing among Tobagonians and to... to develop the skill of writing among Tobagonians and to distinguished writers of Tobago” (Trinidad and Tobago Guardian 2012). Activities in the festival included writing workshops, children’s storytelling, a spoken word competition and an open mic. The festival has been hosted in partnership with other Tobago-based non-governmental organisations with support from the Tobago House of Assembly.

Building the Stage for Tobago's Speech Band and Heritage

I returned to Trinidad to further my exploration of archives related to the Speech Band. At the public library in Port-of-Spain, a young librarian expressed that young librarian explained that he never heard of... never heard of the Speech Band. Another librarian said, “we will try our best to help and copy anything we can find because this is a niche study.” Quickly, a team of three librarians assisted me in my efforts and guided me to the newspaper archive of the Tobago Heritage Festival. We discussed our shared lack of knowledge about Speech Bands, new insights I gained during my research in Tobago, and the need for students and writers in the national community to return to archives in the heritage library for an enriched understanding of the cultures of both islands. The recommended readings of the librarians brought into focus the way cultural forms are staged in our society.

In 1984, J. D. Elder, cultural anthropologist who held the position of Secretary for Culture in the Tobago House of Assembly, convened the 1984 Conference on Culture and the Cultural Heritage of Tobago at the Blue Haven Hotel and the Mt. Irvine Bay Hotel. A. N. R. Robinson, then Chairman of the Tobago House of Assembly, at its launch, remarked that the conference, alongside other conferences on tourism, the environment and agriculture, was critical because it increased public participation in Tobago’s cultural affairs and contributed to the formation of the Tobago Development Plan (Robinson 1986, 6). J. D. Elder noted that the conference was critical because it emphasized Tobago’s cultural heritage and cultural identities in national development at the time when Trinidad and Tobago celebrated its 150th anniversary of emancipation from plantation slavery (Elder 1986, 7). One of the recommendations that followed the conference was to action the “urgent need to preserve Tobago’s cultural heritage independently and apart from the Prime Minister’s Best Village competition” (Hernandez 2004, 1). As a result, the Tobago Heritage Festival was inaugurated in 1986.

As early as 1988, commentary in the newspaper raised the issue about the presence of the Speech Band in their review of the Tobago Heritage Festival. Rhoma Spencer (1988, 9) shared a frustration: “It is amazing one of the most powerful literary dramatic art forms—the Speech Band—was not present in this camp or at all in the festival.” What followed after this year were records of the Speech Band as an integral part of activities alongside others such as Courtship Codes, Tobago Ole Time Wedding, and calypso competitions. The Tobago Heritage Festival provided an opportunity for Tobagonians to create and exchange culture through the arts in their “natural environment” (Trinidad Guardian 1989, 13). Since the 1990s, the Speech Band has been consistently featured in the Tobago Heritage Festival; groups competed for prizes and showcased their performances to national and international audiences.

Janae Campbell, a twenty-three-year-old youth activist and cultural performer from Tobago began her engagement with the Speech Band as a student at Belle Garden Anglican Primary School. She remembers the art form as a staple of school competitions and the Tobago Heritage Festival. As a secondary school student, she began performing with the Roxborough Police Youth Club. She participated in Speech Band rehearsals, eventually “writing speeches”

for various cultural events. Campbell recalls that her youth club troupe featured only one male performer. The majority of the performers were young women. At the same time, Campbell is conscious of the subaltern status of the Speech Band within the national imaginary. She said:

We live in this national scope. But, Tobago is the smaller island. You study Caribbean History and Advanced History. In those subjects, the contributions of Tobagonians are dimmed and barely mentioned. It is my wish to introduce this culture more to Trinidad. This art form is indigenous to Tobago.

In a more explicit form of advocacy, Campbell actively promotes the Speech Band through the Tobago Students' Association at the UWI, leveraging the performance to assert her Tobagonian identity and celebrate the island's unique oral traditions.

Conclusion: Recovering the Poetics of the Speech Band

In my experience as a cultural practitioner and researcher in spoken word for almost two decades I do not recollect cultural events where the Speech Band was on stage in Trinidadian events. To The error of omission in scholarship was a knowledge gap that I once held in my understanding of the performance and cultural landscapes of Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean.. Through travelling, engaging performers and being present in the heritage archives, I better understand the Tobagonians' feelings of exclusion when national stages and discourses take for granted their history, identities and cultures. And, I feel a greater sense of responsibility to enhance and expand our sense of place and political imagination to recognise and respect the oral traditions of my society and space in its totality. Jewel Greene-George, current President of the Tobago Writers' Guild, said, "You hear 'Drag your bow, Mister Fiddler!' You see them in the hat, some have a boat on their heads, some carry swords, some hold a bow in their hands. They wear fluffy pants with different colours. Speech Band is right up there with the oral traditions. There is bravado, communication about social issues, dealing with issues of incest and rape, and talking about mischief in the community." The Speech Band is one of the most vibrant cultural art forms of our national culture. *You really have to see it for yourself . . .*

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