

Boston Globe

SPEAKING TRUTH, FINDING POWER BLACK POETS TRY TO OVERCOME A YEAR OF FLUX IN BOSTON

Author(s): Vanessa E. Jones, Globe Staff **Date:** December 29, 1999 **Page:** F1 **Section:** Living

Thema Bryant arrives at Xepa Cafe, a restaurant near Codman Square, clad in the trappings of her day job as a psychology intern at Cambridge Hospital. But the conservative veneer of her orange jacket and sleek black dress fades when Bryant begins to perform at Verbalization, the cafe's open-mike poetry night. With a flip of her long spaghetti braids, Bryant roars her dynamic soul poetry as 30 members of Boston's multigenerational Nubian nation sit in rapt attention

Can you believe someone tried to hold my pen hostage?
I've got hurricanes in my fingers and volcanoes in my soul
And someone tried to stop the storm of my words
With a safety net of illusions.

As spoken poetry has surged nationally in the past decade, African-American communities in various cities have developed their own poetic voices. Films such as "love jones" and "Slam" cast the spotlight on black poetry scenes in Chicago and Washington, D.C. And New York poets like Dana Bryant and Tracie Morris have become top talents.

But Boston's black poetry scene continues to struggle, with venues limited. The vocal standouts these days include Thema Bryant, Askia Toure, Kanasha Herbert, Jamarhl Crawford, U-Meleni Mhlaba, and Tanayi Seabrook, among others.

The artists perform at sessions in Dorchester and Roxbury, where they croon probing words that explore the cultural and social politics of being black in America. "Poetry here for us is more than just for the sake of art," explains Mawakana Ayoka, 30, a poet who organizes poetry events and promotes local artists such as Toure, one of the founders of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and Vernon C. Robinson, who opened Verbalization. "Most of the poets are very political, very conscious."

The problem is finding places to perform the work. In a devastating one-two punch, the area witnessed the closing of Afrocentrics, a weekly open-mike night at the Roxbury club Estelle's, about a year ago. Then Ogunnaike Galleria, a South End art gallery-cum-cultural center, shut its doors last February. The number of spoken-word events hosted by local poets also began to flag, whether for traditional readings or for slam competitions, in which each poet has several minutes to deliver an emotionally charged piece. A panel judges the winner. In addition, Patricia Smith, well-known slam poet and former Boston Globe columnist, reduced her public role locally.

Slowly, now, the scene is expanding. In June, the Strand Theatre started holding readings, built around such themes as AIDS or June teenth, on the second Wednesday of every other month. Xepa Cafe's spoken-word event Verbalization began in November, on the second and fourth Thursdays of each month.

In addition, black student organizations at Harvard University and Simmons College are beginning to hold open-mike nights. Other promoters have transformed the Freedom House in Dorchester and the downtown club Hibernia into temporary homes for spoken-word events.

"Verbalization is kind of the beginning of a resurgence of what was going on last year," says Kanasha Herbert, 21, an engineering student at Northeastern University who regularly attended Ogunnaike events. "It's been refreshing because it's like: OK, stuff is going to start back again."

A voice called forth

"I usually write poems when I'm depressed," says U-Meleni Mhlaba, 25. She speaks over the squawks of Herbert's 5-month-old son, murmured conversations, and the hum of Xepa Cafe's refrigerators. Moments earlier, Mhlaba's short dreadlocks shook in indignation as she discussed an encounter with a white receptionist who had immediately assumed Mhlaba was job hunting. A recent graduate of the University of Massachusetts, Boston, she mixes singing and poetry in English with the Shona language of her Zimbabwean roots.

She unfolds a rumpled piece of paper and reads:

In the absence of my yolk
I am an empty shell
Carcass of a soul
Washed up - dry
No more tears can I cry.

They say Redemption lies on the other side
But will I get there or have I too much pride?

Thema Bryant tells a story of a recent visit to the Cantab Lounge, where she won a poetry slam in November. A poet was riffing comically about a visit to a fishing shop. The audience howled. Bryant just didn't relate. Herbert gets the same feeling of disassociation when she reads at the Lizard Lounge, where she started performing three years ago. The audience there, says Herbert, seems more interested in socializing than in listening to poetry.

Both say that audiences at the Strand and Xepa Cafe seem more inclined to listen to the words. Seabrook, 28, a regular performer at Bob the Chef's restaurant who mixes song and poetry in her work, speaks almost spiritually about the spoken-word event as a "place to share thoughts, antagonisms, dramas and frustrations." As Bryant notes, "It is a community - as opposed to performing, [where] you leave and there's no connection."

The venues also provide safe environments for the artists to unleash political, Afrocentric verse. They write odes to the beauty of black women. They celebrate the power of self-expression. They celebrate themselves in a world where African-Americans "tend to be minimized and undervalued," says Tony Menelik Van Der Meer, 45, a professor of Africana studies at UMass-Boston, who owned Ogunnaike.

The political focus reflects the effects of two presences in Boston's black poetry community. Toure, an activist and poet, is a "major mentor for most of the poets in this community," says Ayoka. He has introduced poets such as Herbert to Amiri Baraka and Sonia Sanchez, two other influential members of the Black Arts Movement. And he shares his decades of knowledge by giving the young poets constructive criticism of their work.

Ogunnaike helped to politicize local poets in a different way. During its year-and-a-half in operation, Van Der Meer brought in Sanchez, Toure, and the playwright Ed Bullins as speakers, and screened such films as "The Battle of Algiers" and a documentary about Assata Shakur, the Black Panther now living in exile in Cuba.

Herbert, a St. Thomas native who started writing poetry in the fifth grade, speaks rapturously about Ogunnaike's effects.

"This whole rush of things was making me write poetry all night, all day, not doing my work," remembers Herbert. "I just had all these poems going through my head.

People have dealt with the paucity of local outlets in different ways. Some travel to New York, where they have cemented their reputations by showcasing their verbal skills in such venues as Brooklyn Moon Cafe and Nuyorican Poets Cafe.

"I find a lot of the Boston poets to be eloquent and certainly sharp about the social issues," says Miguel Algarin, founder of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. "They tend to be less willing to speak about the personal issues."

Bryant, who moved here in June from North Carolina, where she's getting her doctorate in psychology from Duke University, meets with about 10 other local poets weekly. They read and criticize each other's work in the comfort of one poet's home.

Herbert, whose poetic output slipped when Ogunnaike closed, now has found inspiration in a different way. In November, she, Ayoka, Van Der Meer, and seven others traveled to Princeville, N.C., a town founded by freed slaves after the Civil War. The town was badly damaged this year by Hurricane Floyd. During a four-day stay, the group helped in the work of rebuilding.

"People often romanticize about being revolutionary through their poetry," says Herbert. "But being revolutionary or being political is a lot more than just writing about it. You actually have to experience it, and having those experiences really enriches your poetry."

Singing to the walls

It's nearly 11:30 p.m., and the crowd has thinned as Tanayi Seabrook heads to Xepa's microphone. A dark, oversized shirt envelops her petite frame and the two thick braids snaking down the sides of her head give Seabrook the look of a little girl. But her maturity is evident when she begins humming, church-like, and breaks into verse:

The ticking comes from inside rippling outward. I am daring to be - to be - daring

I scale chain-linked fences

compare my strut to the slimy

slither of snails

I cough up bowls of words filled to the brim with ecstasy

I imagine myself as I want to be

There aren't many people left to appreciate the performance. The inability to sustain an audience has been the stake in the heart of the black spoken-word scene here.

"If you don't go, if you don't constantly support things, they shut down," says Seabrook, who works as an associate producer on a documentary project for Blackside Inc.

Since its start, Verbalization has developed a corps of seven to 14 poets performing regularly. During its first night, about 60 people squeezed into the cafe. By the Dec. 9 performance, the audience was down to half that number.

The word "intimate" could describe the audience at the Strand two weeks ago, enjoying an open-mike night that focused on AIDS. Although Tasha Mignott, a program assistant at the Strand, says an October poetry reading drew about 60 people, only about 20 occupied the cafe-like environment this time.

Jamarhl Crawford, a poet who has hosted poetry events at the Sugar Shack, the National Museum of Afro American Art, and Franklin Park, last put together a show in February. For him, the projects aren't financially feasible.

Nuyorican's Algarin says consistently good poets can draw audiences. But to thrive, he says, a venue must appeal to a larger community than just African-Americans. "The whites and the Asians are essential. The Latinos are essential. . . ."

But before there's growth, someone needs to own a venue not subject to scheduling vagaries, Algarin says. Van Der Meer has been looking for a new site since February. Spiraling rents in Roxbury and South End have slowed the process, but he promises that Ogunnaike will find a new home soon.