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# Spoken Word Performance

*Edited by T.L. Cowan with Ric Knowles*

Scripts

*Gitook/say it: An Anishnaabe Perspective on  
Spoken Word by Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm*

*S.O.S: Skeena of the Skeena by Skeena Reece*

*No Knowledge College (Excerpt)*

*by Naila Keleeta Mae*

\$11.50



130

# No Knowledge College

Naila Keleta Mae

Naila Keleta Mae is a theatre, literary, music and film artist who holds a Magisteriate of Fine Arts in Theatre and has worked in Brazil, Canada, France, South Africa and the United States. Her plays include *No Knowledge College* and *stuck* and her debut spoken word album *Free Dome* won a Canadian Urban Music Award for Best Spoken Word Recording. <<http://www.sonicbids.com/nailakeletamae>>

## Introduction: Spoken Word vis-à-vis Theatre

I became a theatre practitioner eight years ago, after years of performing spoken word in an era when the art form was both oblivious and resistant to tradition. I discovered that Canadian theatre was radically different: hard fought for and highly revered by its practitioners, steeped in tradition and cloaked in bureaucracy.

As a spoken-word practitioner turned playwright, actor and director, my initial experiences working with Canadian theatre organizations were particularly discombobulating. My texts and performances were subject to the visions of a bevy of people serving a plethora of stakeholders: directors, donors, critics, general managers, board members, granting agencies, artistic directors, subscribers and the like. In Canadian theatre, playwrights and actors were cogs in the wheel; in spoken word, the writer/performer was the wheel.

I continued to practice spoken word as I began to navigate the profound paradigm shift theatre demanded. It was, and continues to be, difficult to relinquish vast amounts of artistic control; yet collaborating with artists with specialized expertise is deeply alluring and rewarding.

Some of the juxtapositions of spoken word and theatre have aligned my approach to playwrighting more solidly with principles I associate with disciplines including spoken word. While writing *No Knowledge College* (please see excerpt to follow) I consistently contemplated and envisioned whether or not I could perform it solo and a cappella in any of the botanical gardens, night clubs, living rooms, radio stations and restaurants where I have performed spoken word. It was not, and is not, my intention to present *No Knowledge College* in this way; however, this approach was integral to my assessment of its performance integrity and storytelling value. It is also how I write spoken word.

*No Knowledge College* is a story of betrayal that pits the government and university faculty against six PhD students in the context of an ominous, unethical, federally funded study. The play explores betrayal through the intricacies of race, power, class, love and gender, as expressed in its inter-student and student-faculty relationships. My primary purpose in writing *No Knowledge College* was to theatrically articulate the isolation, shaming and anger some Black students experience

in Canadian academic institutions often rife with White faculty and White students.

Spoken word often claims social justice issues as its roots and naturally coincides with “methexis” (see Young) drama, and often its audiences dare to respond viscerally to its shameless battle cries. *No Knowledge College*’s unabashed interrogation of the politics of institutionalized psychological violence in Canadian academia arguably makes it spoken-word theatre. This play unequivocally tells its audience that the Canadian classroom is an exercise in displacement for its Black students, one that hurls them into conscious and subconscious cauldrons of self-doubt, fired by institutionalized White supremacy.

The growing audiences I have met in Brazil, Canada, France, South Africa and the United States in over a decade of practising spoken word have celebrated challenging, socially engaged content and quality performances with minimal production values. Thus, the skill set some spoken-word practitioners possess is arguably particularly valuable in this era of Canadian theatre where human and financial resources are often strained, production costs high and audiences dwindling.

With regards to development and the search for identity, the parallels between spoken word and Canadian theatre are eerily familiar: the visceral struggle for autonomy; the drive to situate itself within the established lexicon of ideas, partnerships and standards; its hierarchy, misogyny, elitism, misandry, racism and the like. Comparable with the Alternative Theatre Movement in its drive to define itself anew, some practitioners have abandoned the label “spoken word” in response to its “mainstream” shifts that they argue compromise artistic integrity and alienate artists and audiences. There are practitioners who are concerned that the art form, once imbued with possibility, will be commercialized and theorized into abstraction.

*No Knowledge College* is arguably spoken-word theatre, in that its characters periodically burst into spoken-word performance, as in Sunify’s analysis of “They” in the play excerpt printed here. However, one could argue that this example is merely a monologue, just as one could argue that my spoken-word performances are merely theatre. In this ambiguous interdisciplinary realm, *No Knowledge College* is arguably as much Amiri Baraka’s Revolutionary Theatre, Bertolt Brecht’s Theatre, Black Theatre, Political Theatre, Feminist Theatre, or AfriCanadian Theatre as it is Spoken-Word Theatre. These terms resonate with some and alienate others; therefore, I seek to use them only as conventions to effectively communicate my current artistic intention of connecting with people, interrogating cultures of domination and telling compelling stories.

The storytelling traditions I was exposed to and revered propelled me to write and perform spoken word long before I learned of its existence and was associated with its aesthetics. Similarly, long before I became a theatre practitioner, these

same aesthetics informed my sense of audience and choice of subject matter.

I was raised on Beethoven Symphonies, *Ballet Creole*, *Oliver at Large* VHS tapes, *Phantom of the Opera*, *The Harry Jerome Awards*, Alex Haley's *Roots*, Royal Conservatory of Music exams, Ms. Louise Bennett's poetry, *Shakespeare in the Park* and boycotts of apartheid-supporting companies. My sense of the stories and storytellers I wanted to portray through art was most informed by the theatre, literature, music, dance, ceremonies and community organizing that conveyed the values and pursuits of my family members and community.

Ultimately, when I create art, it is not a wheel that I envision but an intimate circle, where the lives of audience and storyteller are intricately intertwined far before and beyond the moment of performance. In this circle, our accountability to one another is great, burdensome, joyous and mutually sought and sustained.

### Works Cited

Young, Jean. "Ritual Poetics and Rites of Passage in Ntozake Shange's for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf." *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora*. Ed. Paul Carter Harrison, Victor Leo Walker II, and Gus Edwards. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2002. 301.

### Production History

A one-act adaptation of *No Knowledge College*, directed by Naila Keleta Mae, was presented as a workshop production in beurrent's rock.paper.sistahz festival (Toronto, ON, 2006).

### Cast List

CLAY	Michael G'Yohannes
PORTIA	AfraKaren Niles
PROFESSOR	Martin Julien
SUNIFYA	Idil Mussa
ZENZELE	Saidah Baba Talibah

### Principal Characters

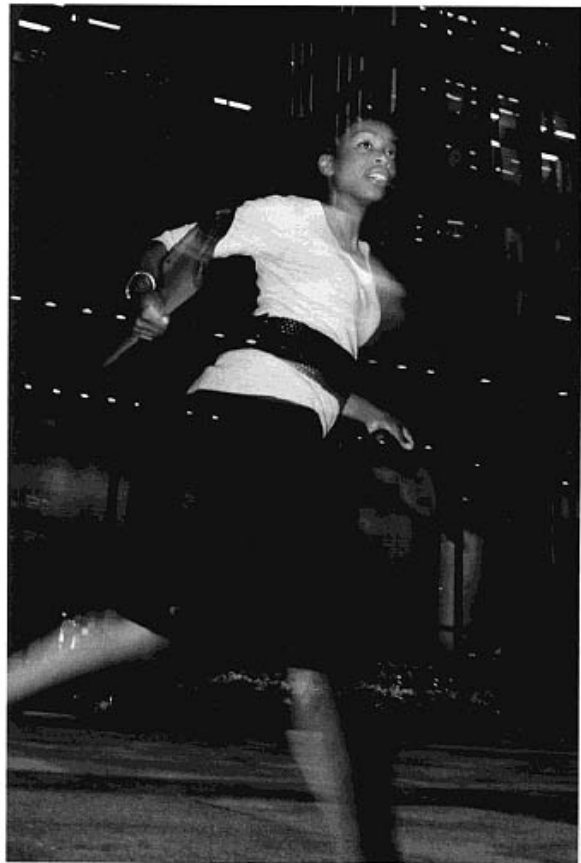
CLAY, *Black American male student*  
PORTIA, *Black Canadian female student*  
PROFESSOR, *White Canadian male*  
77, *Black Jamaican male student*  
SUNIFYA, *Black American female student*  
UMZANSTI, *Black South African male student*  
ZENZELE, *Black Canadian female student*

### Supportive Elements

BAND, *drummer, percussionist, keyboardist and electric bass player*  
SINGERS, *two Black female vocalists*

### Additional Characters (doubled by others in cast)

DRIVER, *Jamaican*  
QUEEN, *77's Black Jamaican wife*



With confidential report in hand, Portia (Naila Keleta Mae) races to the Witzend Residence moments before Act One, scene six opens.  
Photo by Elizabeth Stevens

### ACT ONE, Scene Six

PORTIA is in the kitchen. Her housemates, SUNIFYA, ZENZELE, CLAY, UMZANSTI and 77, enter.

PORTIA: I'm sorry I woke you up but I didn't know what else to do. While I was photocopying I came across this red folder and in it I found a confidential report.

ZENZELE: Did you read it?

PORTIA: Yes.

SUNIFYA: What's it about?

PORTIA: Us.

CLAY: Us who?

PORTIA: Us as in the six of us specifically. It's, I can't believe it, it's insulting. Deplorable, dehumanizing ... wrong.

CLAY: Let me see it.

ZENZELE: Wait. Maybe we shouldn't read it. It's confidential

right? We're not supposed to know about it so even if we know we can't do anything about it.

**77:** I want to know.

**UMZANSTI:** Me too.

**ZENZELE:** We defend our dissertations tomorrow, we move out of here the day after tomorrow. What's the point?

**PORTIA:** This report changes everything Zenzele.

**ZENZELE:** What if we don't want everything to change Portia?

**PORTIA:** *(Opening the report.)* It already has. *(She reads from it.)* "After careful consideration, the PhD program in the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies at North Kipling College has been selected to conduct a federally funded study. This study requires the faculty at North Kipling College to develop, train and produce six compliant Black PhD candidates for high level public and corporate service."

**CLAY:** *(Vehemently.)* Produce compliant Blacks?

**77:** *(Slight vindication at the confirmation of the existence of a government conspiracy.)* A government funded study.

**UMZANSTI:** *(Intrigued.)* High level corporate service?

**SUNIFYA:** When was it written?

**PORTIA:** Six years ago. The same day our late acceptance letters were typed. Exactly two weeks before we received our housing information that coincidentally placed the six of us in the Witzend Residence.

**77:** *(Visibly shaken.)* Six years ago? *(Almost to self.)* Queen found out she was pregnant with our first days before I left. I almost stayed.

*77 enters memory place. BAND, accompanied by SINGERS, plays the reggae-inflected rhythm and blues song "Basking."*

**SINGERS:** Basking in the sunlight of your embrace  
Basking in the sunlight of your embrace

*77 and QUEEN are outside of Norman Manley International Airport in Kingston, Jamaica. He unloads his luggage from the trunk of their car as music continues.*

**SINGERS:** Basking in the sunlight of your embrace  
Basking in the sunlight of your embrace

*BAND and SINGERS fade under as QUEEN picks up two heavy duffle bags.*

**77:** *(Rushing over and taking the bags from her.)* Lawd Queen! Put it dung nuh!

**QUEEN:** *(Lovingly.)* And what shall I do when you're gone King?



Nailea Keleta Mae as Portia.  
Photo by Elizabeth Stevens

**77:** *(Dropping his bags.)* Away.

*(Drawing her near.)* Never gone.

*(Caressing her face.)* Never.

*(She leans into him and inhales his scent.)* It's not too late my love. I can stay.

**QUEEN:** Go King.

Go.

*Car horns beep aggressively.*

**DRIVER:** Hey! Boss! Traffic a pile up man!

**QUEEN:** *(Pulling away from him gently.)* Go.

**77:** *(He touches her stomach.)* I'll see you soon Joseph.

**QUEEN:** Joseph?

<sup>1</sup> Jamaican. Translation: What are you doing? Please put them down.

**DRIVER:** A weh di rasclaat unno a gwan wid? (*One long car horn beep.*)

Move unno bombaclaat!!<sup>2</sup>

**77:** (*Incredulously.*) Yes, Joseph! After the greatest reggae singer Joseph Hill, from the greatest reggae band Culture, who put out the greatest reggae album ever: *Two Sevens Clash!*

**QUEEN:** (*Teasingly.*) And if she's a girl Seventy-Seven?

**77:** (*Big smile.*) Josephine.

**QUEEN** leans in and kisses **77**. They hold each other close. Car horns continue to beep but **QUEEN** and **77** are oblivious.

**SINGERS:** Basking in the sunlight of your embrace  
Basking in the sunlight of your embrace  
Basking in the sunlight of your embrace  
Basking in the sunlight of your embrace

**BAND** and **SINGERS** fade out as **77** exits memory place. Lights back up on the kitchen where **PORTIA** reads from report.

**PORTIA:** "Extensive background information on the students has been compiled and their physical, psychological and intellectual differences are detailed in Appendix 2.2. Any significant behavioural changes are to be reported to a superior immediately.

"For the purposes of this study, it is imperative that an atmosphere of distrust, fear and envy be established and maintained among the selected six. This study seeks to nurture submissive tendencies in them and while we do not condone their demoralization, Black people expect adversity and are accustomed to it."

**CLAY** enters memory place. He stands at a lectern presenting an excerpt of his dissertation to the class. **PROFESSOR** stands nearby.

**CLAY:** (*Confidently.*) Similar to the liberal and conservative stances I described earlier, a humanitarian perspective defined solely by European and Western constructs of humanity is also an inadequate framework of analysis. A far more complex and rigorous examination is required in order to peel away the multifarious layers of contemporary institutionalized oppression.

**PROFESSOR:** I don't fucking buy it Clay.

I don't.

Your dissertation is bullshit.

You should thank me for my honesty.

Thank me Clay.

Clay!

**CLAY:** Thanks.

**PROFESSOR:** (*Pause.*) Good.

**CLAY** exits memory place. Lights up on kitchen where **PORTIA** continues to read.

**PORTIA:** "The faculty involved in the execution of this study will be well compensated financially for their efforts. A confidentiality agreement is attached and must be signed and submitted immediately to ensure prompt payment.

"Please note that for the purposes of this study, the selected six will graduate regardless of their academic standing." (*She turns the page.*)

**CLAY:** (*Furious and incredulous.*) What? I've done all this work for nothing? Six years of papers, comprehensive exams, research, classes, grant writing and a derelict social life for nothing? Will graduate regardless of academic standing? I researched and wrote a 378-page dissertation for nothing?

**SUNIFYA:** They didn't even care. They don't care. They just signed, cashed their cheques and complied.

**77:** Maybe Portia finding the report is part of the study. Maybe they want to see how we'll react.

**CLAY:** Who the fuck is "They"?

**SUNIFYA:** They professional string makers.

They pull enshrouded in darkness.

They masquerade and costume-wear.

Dress up decent, laugh pretty

Educated-speak, define reality.

They deep confederate flag fly.

They fascists in Patriot Act.

They sport invisible hoods and robes

Masks as night time burning wear.

Create reality.

They set religious trap.

Pit one against the other.

Preach, add minister, father.

They bathe in blood

With the drain unplugged

Cut another neck, testicle and uterus – pour more.

They drop grain from the sky

Hidden safely, They profit from poverty.

Dress foreign in same skin as their servants.

They sophisticate in proper colonial speech

Masquerade behind Pan African lies

Dressed in same skin as those they imprison.

They rule us.

**ZENZELE:** Why did you do it Portia?

**PORTIA:** Pardon me?

**ZENZELE:** What's your ulterior motive?

<sup>2</sup> Jamaican. Translation: What the (expletive) are you doing? Move your (expletive).

**PORTIA:** I don't have one.

**ZENZELE:** Bullshit!  
Are you in on this?

**PORTIA:** Absolutely not!

**CLAY:** When Canadians file their income taxes do they check off a special box authorizing racist, illegal federally-funded studies? Of course I know the government lies all the time. We know it uses taxpayers' money any way it sees fit. There's the funds they talk about publicly and then there's the cash they siphon off and use for whatever suits their fancy. And we know professors lie all the time too, propagating their White supremacist ideologies and archaic Euro-praising curricula. Especially those progressive, liberal, don't see colour, neo-con-ideology-suppressing fanatics with the best intentions.

*(Signalling report.)* And this is just the minute fraction that we know about. There have got to be other federally-funded studies going on as we speak. Staff and faculty hanging out around the water cooler, copy room, playground, wherever, talking about how they'll spend the extra cash they're making from nurturing another set of subservient Black people.

**PORTIA:** Maybe we can contact the media: newspapers, magazines, the CBC and CTV.

**UMZANSTI:** No credible media outfit will run this story without substantial proof and no one will corroborate the report but us.

**PORTIA:** Maybe we could occupy MOVE 86.9. Take over the university radio station and broadcast our story ourselves.

**UMZANSTI:** Then the focus would be on our rogue behaviour and not the substance of our complaint.

**PORTIA:** Maybe we should go international – contact the Human Rights Watch, they have an Academic Freedom Committee that deals specifically with academic censorship and ideological controls. We could also contact the Network on Education and Academic Rights. And there must be other relevant organizations, we just have to strategize, delegate and do some research tonight.

**UMZANSTI:** *(Looking at watch.)* When tonight exactly?

**PORTIA:** Now. We've got to do something. This is wrong.

**UMZANSTI:** Many things are wrong in the world Portia. The majority of the world suffers tremendously in excruciating circumstances, as the true minority indulges in whimsies. The study is unethical but it's not excruciating. We're not suffering.

**PORTIA :** My problem with your worldview Umzansti, is that it always minimizes the potential for positive human impact on a specific situation.

**UMZANSTI:** Maybe once we're working we could gather information about the study from the inside, coordinate our efforts and assess the situation as an informed, rational collective.

**PORTIA:** Don't glamorize it Umzansti. We wouldn't be rational after a few months at cushy jobs – we'd be complacent.

It's anti-revolutionary.

**UMZANSTI:** Don't talk to me about revolution Portia. I've lived the bloodshed, death, famine and astute poverty of "revolution" in South Africa. This is nothing, categorically insignificant in comparison to what the majority of the world faces daily. And you may want to consider the circumstances endured by the true world majority, it may help you contextualize your privileged Black Canadian meanderings.

**PORTIA:** Your who's-Blacker-than-whom intellectual arsenal is so worn out. Next you'll remind me, for the billionth time, that your name means South Africa in Xhosa.

**ZENZELE:** We could sabotage the study.



Naila Keleta Mae as Portia.  
Photo by Elizabeth Stevens

We could drop out of the program tomorrow.

**77:** But we're not like White people Zenzele, we can't teach in a university without a PhD no matter how much experience we have. We'll never be able to design any courses, never sit on a hiring committee, never become the dean of a faculty. We'll be radical and Black without credentials.

**ZENZELE:** We don't need PhDs to validate our existence.

**SUNIFYA:** I want my PhD and I want the \$103,000 salary, four-week vacation and full benefits that CSIS is offering me. So, in three hours I will walk into conference room 406A and defend my dissertation. Why? Because no matter what they've done, are doing or will do, I've earned my degree and every privilege that comes with it.

**77:** I think we need a safe place.  
Somewhere to raise children.  
Somewhere to think independent thoughts.  
Somewhere to self-actualize outside of someone's agenda for us.

**SUNIFYA:** I think we need to be real. We at the plantation and we the house niggers collecting the scraps. We the updated, barely politically correct version of Tuskegee. That's just the reality. We're in the ivory towers, we know this system: it's a business: the commodity is social capital and they got what I want. So please, don't fuck this up for me as you navigate your middle class Black nationalism. Don't involve me, refer to me, don't include my name in whatever you decide to do.

I need to get some sleep. Goodnight. *(She exits.)*

**PORTIA:** I'm writing a letter tonight. I'm e-mailing it and faxing it to every relevant media outfit, association and organization I can think of and tomorrow I'm slipping it under every door and into every mail box I can find.

**UMZANSTI:** We're the subjects of a well planned and well executed federally-funded study. You don't spend a few hours in the middle of the night executing a counter attack.

**PORTIA:** I'm sorry you feel that way Umzansti. I see it differently.

**UMZANSTI:** What if you forfeit our degrees Portia? What if they refuse to give them to us?

**PORTIA:** I have to fight now. I don't know what else to do.

**UMZANSTI:** Wait!

Wait until we graduate.

Wait until we're holding our degrees in our hands. Please.

**PORTIA:** They can revoke our degrees after they've been issued Umzansti. There is no guarantee.

*(Pause.)*

I'm writing a letter and I'm distributing it as I see fit. That's what I have to do. *(She exits.)*

*Silence.*

**77:** So what do we do?

**CLAY:** Find them and kill them.

*Fade to black.*

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