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WRITING AND PERFORMING THE NATION: AN INTERVIEW WITH PAUL KEENS-DOUGLAS ON ORALITY AND CARIBBEAN LITERATURE



Amílcar Sanatan

Paul Keens-Douglas is the most prolific storyteller and performance poet from Trinidad and Tobago. By the 1980s, he had already established himself as one of the pioneers in Caribbean literature who challenged Eurocentric conventions of poetry and language with his performances. Keens-Douglas code switches between Standard English and the nation language and foregrounds all of his writing on the everyday politics and conflicts in Caribbean social life. He was born in Trinidad and Tobago on the 22nd September 1942. He would go on to spend most of his childhood and adolescent years in Grenada. There, he attended the prestigious Presentation College. He formed a relationship with Maurice Bishop who went on to become the political leader of the New JEWEL Movement and People's Revolutionary Government, 1979-1983.

Keens-Douglas attended Sir George Williams University in Montreal, Canada. He observed and participated in the student protests demanding dignity for African-descended people and Caribbean communities. After these tumultuous events, he had little desire to join the deeply unequal Canadian society. Keens-Douglas returned to the Caribbean and enrolled in the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus. As a postgraduate student, he encountered the inimitable and most internationally recognised performance poet from the Caribbean, Louise "Miss Lou" Bennett. This encounter inspired him to become a storyteller and performer. He developed a career writing short stories and poetry in the nation language for audiences throughout the region. In 1983, he founded Talk Tent, a carnival exposition that features traditional carnival characters and spoken word performers in celebration of the oral tradition. This is the longest running spoken word event in Trinidad and Tobago.

Central to Paul Keens-Douglas's longevity and long-lasting popularity as a performance poet is his consistent financial investment in his "brand". This branding has implications for the subject matter in his creative works and the curating of his events. He has commercialised his stories and poetry into books, events and multi-media productions that have extended the life of his performances. Some of these productions have been absorbed into state television programming and media features at national and regional cultural events. While his work contributes to the nation-building project of a post-independent Trinidad and Tobago, it is also confined by some narrow political ideologies and representations. Today, Keens-Douglas has to contend with a vibrant spoken word movement that espouses ideologies, self-presentations and poetic forms that are distinct from previous generations, specifically his.

In this interview, I explore the following questions with Paul Keens-Douglas:

- ✚ How does the notion of "Caribbeanness" influence your sense of self and performance practice?
- ✚ What is your relationship to the contemporary spoken word movement in Trinidad and Tobago?

In light of the privileging of the 'scribal' over the 'oral' in scholarly inquiry and the dearth of literary archives on performance poetry, storytelling and spoken word in Trinidad and Tobago, it is my hope that this interview between a pioneering performance poet and a younger spoken word performer illustrates the possibilities of inter-generational dialogue and academic recovery of cultural practitioners in our society.

I interviewed Paul Keens-Douglas henceforth referred to as PKD in his Diego Martin residence in Trinidad and Tobago on the 20th August 2019 in the lead up to his performance at CARIFESTA XIV. The interview was transcribed and Keens-Douglas use of both Standard English and nation language (Trinidadian Creole) were included to maintain the integrity of his expression.

THE PLACE OF PERFORMANCE POETRY IN CARIBBEAN LITERATURE

Amílcar Sanatan: I am interested in learning your thoughts about the reception of performance poetry in Caribbean literature. In spite of the celebrations of oral traditions and critiques about the coloniality of knowledge, the scribal tradition occupies a dominant position in Caribbean literature. Distinguished poets such as Louise Bennett, Linton Kwesi Johnson and yourself, often referred to as "performance poets," have been acclaimed by literary scholars in a way that few performance poets have. Selections of your works have been anthologised in leading

regional literary texts. Do you believe that there is a lack of recognition for the oral tradition and performance poetry?

Paul Keens-Douglas: We start with what we meet, whatever conditions we meet, that is what we deal with from the beginning. In my particular case, I was never a person in literature per se. I started writing, just as a writer, something to do, although I enjoyed literature. I did not study literature at university to be able to analyse poetry or develop an academic approach to literature. For me, I came to understand what I do from a cultural point of view, wanting to write down what we spoke like, trying to get the sound on the page. There was nobody else [at that time] to follow, we did not have a wide range of examples to follow. We had people like Louise Bennett [from Jamaica], Bruce St. John from Barbados and other people who were working from a national point of view to preserve the language and preserve what is “us.” The literature part came afterwards. The concept of literature, in my case, was second to the concept of trying to preserve the way we were, which was language. We [attempted] to write the sound of the words on the page – this was the challenge. How do you get the way we speak, the nice nice way we say things, the way it sounds, on a page? We tried to write the sound as close as possible to what we felt. Up to that point, most of it was oral and writing was in Standard English. A character would say something in dialect and then you would go back to the Standard English. Even the great writers of West Indian literature would write it in [Standard] English and talk it in West Indian. When they are speaking it, they don’t speak as it is on the page. They speak it as how they normally speak, which was not written on the page either. They’re not getting the Bajan accent or the Trinidadian accent on the page; it was written in Standard English.

Up until that point, I wrote in Standard English. All of us learned literature and poetry [as] English, Shakespeare and Wordsworth. This is what we studied in school. The natural thing was to write what we knew to be literature. We were looking at literature from [the point of view given to us in our schooling]. We grew up on American literature and English literature; that’s how we spoke about literature.

I became a writer. What that became was literature, after the fact. I didn’t start off saying, “I am writing literature; I am writing this poem to be a great literary writer.” Up to now, I don’t really care about the title “great literary writer”; I just write what I want to write. If you call me great, that’s fine but I don’t care. I am not writing for that. I am writing for an audience; if my audience understands me, that is it. I am writing for them.

When you write like this, you know fully well that you won’t get a publisher. The publisher will tell you that your market is too limited, writing in your nation language. Or, they will tell you that it will only sell in Trinidad and Tobago. You understand how the world goes and you know what you are doing. You write like this and you will not win a Nobel Prize, you cannot

qualify for it. The great writers write in Standard English. They write characters who speak in the nation language. I write in the nation language. I write for Trinidadians and my books sell in Trinidad.

Now, they call what I do “orality.” Long time they called it “noisy.” I write the words “dis” and “dem” and “dat.” The crowds come to hear “dat” and not [Standard] English. The crowds come to hear “dat”. I getting my place full, [Derek] Walcott own half-empty. Walcott was a great writer, but they can’t understand Walcott; they can understand me. My twenty-dollar shows getting the crowd because the people can relate to it. The great literary fellers, they are the greater writers, but no one is in the audience; only a select few will come. Then, suddenly, orality is popular, the nation language is in and then writers start to discuss “good dialect” from “bad dialect.” They take over again. They become the judges. I might be totally wrong about these observations, but this is how I saw it. They don’t come to our shows, they didn’t see what we did as serious poetry, they thought we offered entertainment. They ignored the power of what was said inside our stories and poems. They called me a comedian. I am not a comedian.

AS: Your work has been preserved for posterity in print publications and DVD productions of your live performances. What motivated you early on to invest in print and digital publications of your work?

PKD: First of all, the print was the easiest to do in the first place. Nobody knew about making records and CDs. When you are writing, the first thing that you are writing for is a book! So, the paper is obviously the first choice. You write stories one by one; you don’t write all together. My first book was over a period of maybe two years of writing stories before I finally decided to make a book. You cannot write a book in one week. You write one poem now, then maybe a poem next month, until eventually you have a pile of poetry and that’s how you make a book. So, you write the book and read back and realise that you spell words differently. In each poem you have a word spell one way and another way in the other. The challenge with dialect is that you are making a decision on how the word sounds. We become the pioneers of language. Others will come after and disagree and say, “We spell it this way.” This is how our language develops. The first decision I made was to spell “that” as “dat.” This is how I feel we say “dat.” We say “allyu.” Somebody else says “allyuh” with an “h.” Eventually the most popular one wins in the end. However, someone has to start. This changes from island to island. A Guyanese will write and sound Guyanese; the people in the Eastern Caribbean will sound like their own dialect. It is literature in one sense and nationalism in another sense. The literature represents the nation.

My point is that you must try to put it on the paper first, and you write the paper and then you find that after when you go to put together the book, that when you start reading through, you realise that you have been spelling words differently in different things. Then, you go through

your whole [collection] and [review] the poems you have and standardise [the language]. By the time [you publish] your book, you now have a standardised language in your poems. This is your first collection. You have set down a standard for others to follow. You are the pioneer. On the other side, Louise Bennett is doing the same thing in Jamaica and preserves her language. I don't see our work in terms of literature; I see it in terms of culture. I don't say, "I want to be a great poet; I'm going to write in dialect." I prefer to say, "I want to preserve the way it sounds and therefore I am going to write it." And so, I became a writer and then a poet and then a storyteller.

I was always in drama and theatre. When it comes to writing and performing [poetry] I was never a "front man." I was always in the back of the stage. Later, I became the writer and I performed.

AS: Do you believe there is higher status and value given to a poet who is regarded as a "writer" in comparison with one who is seen as a "performer" in the Caribbean?

PKD: Status? The performer will get the most status because he can go out there and represent his work. The person writing silence [sic] on to the page needs to fight to get it out there, to get someone to read the book in the first place. If he cannot read the work himself, he now has to get other persons to read it. But as a performer you can always go out there and people hear you and people listen to you. You always get ahead as a performer. We write first and perform afterwards. A written poem would have a different rhythm on the page; a performed poem has another rhythm. Once you read a poem, you have to do something extra; you have to put on a performance.

When I started reading the written work I [learnt] that I was missing certain things in the writing while performing. I noticed that I needed three lines instead of one line, two lines here and not there. I began to write poems, perform them and publish afterwards. Publishing came after I corrected all the things in my performance.

AS: I want to follow up on this issue of validation and the value placed on written and spoken word poetry. You currently hold the position of the Poet Laureate of Trinidad and Tobago and you are widely regarded as a national cultural icon. Your distinction as a performance poet in Trinidad and Tobago and the wider Caribbean has certainly elevated the regard for you and your work. However, I disagree with your argument that performance poets "get the most status" in our society. I think that there is a popular appeal to the art form and a positive public reception to performers. Yet, it is published poets who are given more media attention, material benefits and institutional assistance.

PKD: That is an interesting point you make there. My idea of the poet laureate was in the traditional ivory tower person. The “laureate” makes me think of a Caesar with a bush on his head. That is the traditional laureate. In today’s concept of a laureate, the role is to spread the message of poetry, to represent poetry and to help make poetry even survive. The laureate gives poetry a face; that has nothing to do with academic [accomplishment]. If he has the ability to reach people with poetry or make them see the value of poetry, then that is what matters. In Trinidad and Tobago we have too many academic people who are qualified. However, they cannot get the job done. They cannot reach [people] and they cannot sell the thing. Today what matters is who can sell the idea, sell the concept, and sell poetry to people. You hear some boring people and you don’t want to study poetry at all. You not going to any and every poetry show! You need people who can be the face. Everything today is marketing. We live in a marketing world. We all have to market what we do. It sounds very commercial. Everything is marketing. Bookshops market, publishers market, yet they make such a big thing about poets self-marketing. In the world of money-making and poetry, publishers make real money, and they market their books, movies and films. What do we do? We fight down here about what a poet laureate is supposed to do. We need a face to represent us. You can produce a very academic man and he not going anywhere out there and talk to nobody. Nobody really knows him. He can’t speak the language. The question is really: what do we want at this time?

Let me give you an example. I started to write because I heard Louise Bennett. In 1972, I was on campus in [UWI] Mona. When I heard her, I was a sub-warden [on a hall of residence] and I was also doing my postgraduate studies there. I had not written anything in dialect, I only wrote in Standard English. When I heard Louise Bennett, I felt I could have done that too. When I went home I wrote “De Band Passin,” my first dialect piece and after that I never went back to writing in the Standard English. I started experimenting and writing in dialect.

CARIBBEAN IDENTITY FORMATION

AS: Mervyn Morris noted that Louise Bennett “is the earliest of our authors to have produced a substantial body of work in a West Indian vernacular” (76). You are seen as one of the “heirs” of Louise Bennett’s poetry. Without me bringing it up first, you acknowledged Bennett’s early influence in your work. Do you see yourself as an heir to Bennett? And if not, why?

PKD: I’m just here to tell you the truth. It is the truth. I would not say “heir” or nothing. I would say Louise inspired me. Leadership is not just about leading; it is about inspiring. You lead by example. It is important for young people to look on. Someone is always looking on. I looked at her and felt that I could do [performance poetry]. Persons looked at me and felt that they could also do the same. Then, they took off. When I started to write in dialect, after hearing Louise, I had not written anything yet. By 1974, I had written a whole pile of short stories on my own. When I returned to Trinidad and Tobago, I did radio and television.

In the studio I had the opportunity to write a lot more. In those days, the radio played one tune and then you had an hour without anything happening. So, I wrote because in between records there was no talk. There was just music, the time passing, the news and playing records. I started writing in the studio. Then, I got the producers to give a programme where I could read the stories. In 1975, I wrote “Tanti at de Oval.” After, I made the record for the story. By that time, I left working for Radio Trinidad and I went on to work in advertising.

When the record came out, I got calls from all over the place; I got calls to come and perform in Toronto and all over the place. Now, Louise Bennett and me coming up to the same level because she performing outside and I now coming up performing and so, I say “Well I leaving the job.” I was freelancing now, so I could travel, get up and go to Toronto and go Grenada and New York and all over the world because I am my own boss. I never went back to work [for someone else]. I became an independent artiste.



Paul Keens-Douglas and Louise Bennett at the Little Carib Theatre, Trinidad and Tobago. 1981.
Photograph retrieved from Paul Keens-Douglas' personal archive.

AS: Uriah Butler, The Mighty Sparrow, Derek Walcott, Arthur Lewis, these are some of the names of distinguished Caribbean personalities who were shaped by Trinidad and Tobago's culture and in turn shaped it with their labour and creative vision. You are a Caribbean man

with roots in more than one Caribbean country. How has this pan-Caribbean upbringing influenced your view on the world?

PKD: This is what I am trying to tell you. I found out in the early days when I came to Trinidad, they saw me as a Grenadian. I was born in Trinidad, then my family moved to Grenada, so I grew up in Grenada. Grenadians know me as Grenadian, and Trinidadians know me as Grenadian. I am a Trinidadian. It was easy for me to come here to work, so when I returned from university, I got a job at Radio Trinidad. I got the same question Sparrow got in trying to get sponsorship and support. This forced me into creating a one-man show. The only way I could make money is by producing a show. Instead of me begging for work, I became the producer of my own show and never went back. Once you are producing, you are working all the time.

Sparrow was born in Grenada and grew up in Trinidad. I was born in Trinidad and grew up in Grenada. Grenadians say that I am playing Trinidadian, and Trinidadians say that I come from Grenada. I never bought into one island or the idea of Trinidad and Tobago; I decided going regional was important for my survival. Up to now, I don't get much sponsorship in Trinidad. I produce everything with my money. I have performed in St. Vincent, St. Lucia, Dominica, St. Maarten, St. Eustatius; I have done all these islands, up to the US Virgin Islands, and they all know me. Over the years, I have built that connection [with people in different countries] as a performer. Trinidad and Tobago is another stop in my Caribbean.

I advise artistes to become regional people. Have each island give you a show every year. And if you're good, you get called back twice! Then, there is the diaspora abroad. If you can get the Caribbean to support you, you can live. I have been living for forty years. You have to be good. If you are good, people will come. This is how I survived. They used to boo Sparrow. Then, when Sparrow sing he song everybody jump up and clap and "hey" and they booed him after. He was a Grenadian. They booed him in the beginning. They booed him. They never booed the song.



The Mighty Sparrow performing on the “Spectacular Tour”, London, United Kingdom. 1978.
 Photograph retrieved from Paul Keens-Douglas’ personal archive.

AS: In the 1970s, the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus was a hotbed of youth-led activism and critical intellectual and cultural action. Describe the campus environment.

PKD: Jamaica would change anybody. I have so many stories to tell. I just came out of the Sir George Williams Riot. That is another story. I went through the riot and I got vex and I said that I would not continue to stay in Canada. The riot was in 1969. By 1970 there were the trials. In Trinidad and Tobago the Black Power movement began. I graduated in 1970. I came back [to] Trinidad in 1971. I went to Jamaica in 1972. I went to do a postgraduate degree in Sociology. The offer in Jamaica was fancy thing on paper. They had nothing to offer. All I had was a Statistics and Methodology course. I went to see Rex Nettleford and complained that the university was not providing the teaching for the degree offer. Rex Nettleford replied, “Education is not just academics.” He encouraged me to sign up. I signed up for the courses that I was told to do. Then, I was made sub-warden because I was into the arts. I was in Pantomime and Tallawah Festival. I went to the first CARIFESTA with Jamaicans. I did a lot of theatre in Jamaica and started to write.

AS: Rex Nettleford was one of the most distinguished cultural thinkers and practitioners in the Caribbean.

PKD: Rex was Rex. We called him “Sexy REXY” on campus. He led the National Dance Theatre Company. They were bourgeois and we thought of them as [an] elitist [company of] dancers. They were the top dancers and excellent. Rex was a great choreographer. Rex gave me the best advice about my education. I stayed on in Jamaica. I stayed on and met Louise. I stayed on and got involved in the drama and the theatre.

I applied for a job in Jamaica. I got a job with the Tourism Board, and after a month I received a letter stating that they couldn't keep me on staff because I am not Jamaican. I got so vex. I just leave Canada because all this racism and riot and Sir George. I say I going back home to the West Indies where all ah we is black and we dis. Now I can't get a job in Jamaica because I am not a Jamaican? I went back to the university and I told them to transfer my degree to Trinidad. This is how I ended up again in Trinidad. I said I was born in Trinidad so I could work there. Me eh going back to Grenada because Grenada have nothing to offer there. Trinidad is the place. I came back to Trinidad and everything nice. I gone up to [UWI St. Augustine Campus] to look for the department. They had a little room [with a sign] marked “Sociology.” There was one professor. I said, “Where is the Master's programme?” Aye, you could just walk around UWI for years and nobody miss yuh, nobody know yuh in school or anything. You could just live a nice life, party and smoke. I end up here [in Trinidad] now and it was worse than Mona [Campus]. I never went back to school.

AS: You did not complete your postgraduate studies?

PKD: No. I just went on and my career took off. I did not need to study. I was already writing and travelling. I had published my stories and I had records. Everything opened up. About three years later, I was invited to do a big show with Louise Bennett, and we went to a big show in Canada. Louise and I became great friends. In 1981, I met Bob Marley in England. There is an interview with Bob Marley, Sparrow and I. Nobody in Trinidad have dat! Three of us around a table. I was speaking about story telling, Marley was speaking about reggae and Sparrow was speaking about how much money we owe him for calypso in Trinidad. At that time, I did not know how popular Marley was. That programme was called “Black Londoners” so everybody who came to London did the programme. The point of this story is that I went to Jamaica. All of this happened because of Jamaica. If I stayed in Canada, I might have completed my degree and worked up there.

AS: You are truly a Caribbean man with lived experiences and deep relationships with our people in and out of the region. I want to probe further about your identity and how it may have influenced your reception, that is, a widely positive reception with national and regional

audiences. You are brown skin, university-educated, articulate, male and married. You represent the ideals of the brown middle-classes in the Caribbean. I want to know if you have ever reflected on the ways your identity has opened doors for you in your career?

PKD: I have never thought in terms of colour in the Caribbean. That is a secondary thing. I saw myself as black. I lived in America and I did not experience their racism as others have. I went through life great. I had no real problems. I could have stayed in Montreal and do my Master's. Instead I chose to be in the Caribbean. I did not know what I was going to meet, but I went. I left Jamaica and then went to Trinidad. When I came back to Trinidad, I stayed. Life is about timing. It may be a simple thing; you make decisions. The path opens for you when you balance things and make decisions. All my life is timing.

To come back to your question, I know that my work is not threatening. I don't threaten people. You laugh at yourself. I think people like that. I respect people. I don't threaten them. I am conscious of my audiences, children who are listening. I do clean shows.

SPOKEN WORD POETRY IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

AS: Does performance poetry end when the poet walks off the stage? Many performance poets do not archive their work. There is also a lack of literary criticism in scholarship and popular media on what performance poetry is doing.

PKD: A poem must suit the dynamic of a place. You can only judge a performer by his performance. You need to see what he is going through. People critique performances and they write 'stupidness'. They write, "It was a nice show, the lights were good, he made people laugh." They don't write about the words, the diction, the delivery, the pacing, the timing, or how he responded to situations. We don't have people to analyse our spoken word people, and this is the big problem with Caribbean literature. We have The UWI that produces critics. Yet, we find it so hard to find somebody to critique a show. I don't know if people write for newspapers any longer. The newspaper sent a man who critiqued shows, attended the event at half-time, took two pictures, next thing he gone. He put up two pictures of you and say, "Paul Keens gives a joke that was nice." They probably sent the sport journalist to cover the show. We don't have dedicated critics who go to shows and do an analysis based on the performer's writing and style. We don't have that analysis here. So, the "critics" have always been my audience. I write for them. They tell me if I am good or not. When they don't like the show, they don't come back, they don't spend their money. My main concern is getting the work out there and getting space to perform. There is no space to do work. You can't publish books because we don't have publishers that bookshops will support locally. The bookshop business is consignment, and you have to run them down to ask how many books have been sold. This is

the milieu we live in. I don't know how young writers make it. I am happy at this stage in my life; I can look back and acknowledge what I have done and what I have.

My job is not to educate people about nation language, performance and spoken word. The university should do this, take our poetry and debate it after. Too much is left up to the creative to do. It is hard work for the creative as one [person] doing this educational work.

AS: There has been a tectonic shift in performance poetry in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean region. There is a very vibrant spoken word movement now. In your opinion, what has accounted for this growing interest and attention given to spoken word today?

PKD: The music. A number of the poets and storytellers draw their inspiration from music and blend their performances with music. I don't do that. I walk on the stage, me, alone, and the power of the voice. All expressions are valid. Still, we have lost the art of listening to people stand up on a stage alone and giving a story. For spoken word, I enjoy the narrative style. This is where storytelling has gone now. It lives in spoken word. The world has changed, and you have to see where your work fits into it. The hard part is preserving your work and seeing how it is useful for persons who come after.

AS: Since I was a secondary school student, I attended your events and went to Queen's Hall with my family to listen to Talk Tent during carnival. You have produced the longest running spoken word event in Trinidad and Tobago. You are the main act in the show but the programme features new and young spoken word poets each year. Why did you start Talk Tent?

PKD: Talk Tent started in 1983. It started with Helen Camps. She had 'Tent Theatre.' Helen Camps is a woman who has done a lot for Trinidad and Tobago. She has produced most of the major theatre personalities in the country. I was part of the Tent Theatre. One night I asked her to "lend" me the tent. I wanted to do "Talk Tent." At that time, I called it "Talkie Talkie." I [felt] that there was no place for 'talk artistes' to perform at carnival when I was there. All of the 'talkers' were MCs – Bill Trotman, John Agitation and Sprangalang were on the scene. We needed a place where we could hear talking as an art. Our [tagline] was "Where talking is art." I am not a comedian. I write poetry and serious poetry. I wanted a place just like a calypso tent where you could see Shadow, Sparrow and [Chalkdust] and they are all different. I wanted people to come to a talk show and listen to performers who were all different. This is an art. It is not an easy thing. Most of the performers could not do twenty-minute [sets] on stage when we started. They were MCs; they could only give two jokes and run off [stage]. They began to prepare material and they realised that they had to do work. Horace James and John Agitation had the edge because they were storytellers. The MCs practiced, connected their jokes, practiced and they were better. Tommy Joseph, Sprangalang, Agitation, even Brother

Resistance all came through Talk Tent. When they did not put Brother Resistance in calypso tents on the grounds that he was not a calypsonian, [he was given an opportunity] in Talk Tent. Now, he is the President [of Trinidad Unified Calypsonians' Organisation].

Talk Tent just happened. No one really focused on Talk Tent. The Ministry [of Culture] don't know what happens in Talk Tent. They ignore the show. We don't beg ministers [of government]. I invite them. If they come dey come, if dey eh come, I doh care. The show goes on. It always has gone on. I am getting tired now and somebody can run it after I am done.

AS: I want to follow up on Talk Tent and its representations of youth cultures. I recall Llewellyn "Short Pants" McIntosh reciting the lyrics from soca music in his performance. Short Pants recites the lyrics of Iwer George's infamous "hand song." During the performance, it is implied that soca music is devoid of lyrical content. However, soca music, understood only in terms of the lyrics, marginalises the dynamic music composition and performances that drive the genre. This attitude might be seen as out of touch with the current cultural landscape. It can be argued that Talk Tent is a conservative space that organises around the attitudes of an older generation in Trinidad and Tobago. What are your thoughts on this?

PKD: Artistes I put on the show, I tell them, "This is your fifteen minutes." I want the performer to fit into the mood of the show. If you want to do a serious poem or you want to do comedy, then you go ahead. The artiste represents himself on the stage. I don't want bad words and cuss at the event. That is all. The show is supposed to represent a variety of styles within the oral tradition. In Talk Tent you also have to impress children. Artistes have a style, and I don't try to change them. Each performer has a style. Individuals represent what they are doing.

Over the years the show has become very family-oriented and people know what to expect. You keep your standards and people keep coming back. People don't get anything political there.

AS: But is this deliberate? Do you deliberately avoid political issues? I have seen your past performances that are critical of regional institutions such as the CARICOM.

PKD: I am artistically political. I need humour in the writing. I don't say, "Manning dis and Panday dis and Kamla." That is for calypso tent. In Talk Tent, you perform about politicians and how they behave. You can do that [in] any part of the world. Once you do a poem about Eric Williams, you get half of the audience vex or when Eric Williams dies you cannot do the poem again. That piece dead. My point is that you build a show and you have a standard. You have a moment on stage and the time is entirely yours.

Also, half of the performers in my show are educators or community workers. They are very grounded people and do work for children. My show is about values. What do people get out of a show that helps Trinidad and Tobago?

AS: In 2018, you were the head judge of the First Citizens National Poetry Slam. You have lived long enough to see spoken word grow to a popular expression among youth in Trinidad and Tobago. You are a pioneer and founding father of spoken word, and I am interested in learning about your thoughts on spoken word today.

PKD: There are many persons who do spoken word. I [pay attention to] individuals. This is important because they stand out and set the standards. Sometimes in spoken word, I can't follow the story. They speak so quickly, you cannot analyse the line. They do command language well. They rehearse their poems and they concentrate on the delivery of their lines, their diction, pauses and how they separate the different thoughts in their poem. Personally, I prefer poets who have a narrative style. I see this as continuity. I put these poets on in my show, those who can tell a story. Many of the poets are angry poets who do protest poetry. Protest poetry needs a special place and people can go there for that. Spoken word poets need to develop different material for different audiences. They have the right to choose specific themes, and that means that they would make less money. A lot of people lose work because of their image. People hire you for a show, for entertainment.

AS: Is there anything 'new' and 'fresh' about spoken word today?

PKD: I don't think spoken word has decided what it is yet. Is spoken word a style? People tell me I do spoken word. I have never done spoken word. I tell stories to people. To me, spoken word is what they [do] on the stage there, a style, a delivery, a kind of poem. The question is probably for you now. What is spoken word?

AS: Spoken word is performance poetry. The intention of the writer moves from the page to the audience. The style of spoken word varies. The art form emphasises rhythm, rhyme and the creative use of narrative.

PKD: My history with spoken word goes back to Montreal. My first experience of spoken word was there and a poem called "The Chant of the Blacks." Then, it was the group The Last Poets that exposed me to spoken word and what people call rap now. It was Black Power in those days. A lot seems to have changed since then. What has happened between that time I was talking about and now?

AS: That is interesting. When I began my career in spoken word in 2006, I identified as a spoken word poet. People found it difficult to name what I, along with my peers, were doing.

When I was introduced on stage, the performance was referred to as “monologue,” “dramatist,” “dub poet,” and “oral presentation.” I remember Anson Gonzales and his difficulty in understanding what my friend and I were trying to do when we were part of his writing workshop. I have also observed that the majority of contemporary spoken word performers do not cite rapso or Trinidad and Tobago storytelling as sources of inspiration for their craft. Most of the contemporary performers either followed US-based spoken word shows broadcasted on television or encountered the space as a distinct “spoken word space” in open mics and school tours.

PKD: What you are saying makes a lot of sense and more work needs to be done to present this history to the people of Trinidad and Tobago about the art form.

AS: Many of your contemporaries have died. The audience in the shows ages as you age. What is next for you?

PKD: I have built up Talk Tent for so long that I won't give up the show. I might step back and have someone else [take charge]. Still, you need something to do in old age. What I am doing now is trying to get my work digitised so that people can access my work. I also have new work that I have not published. I have a lot of material here. We don't have many strong voices in the arts anymore. In the old days, you heard protests and people fought for the arts. I don't know what is going on now. I am also glad I am in my capsule here. I have enough to live; I can polish it up and remain here. We need to ask ourselves: where does poetry fit in this world?



“Celebrating West Indies Cricket in Words and Song”, Long Room Lords Cricket Grounds, London, United Kingdom. 2007. Photograph retrieved from Paul Keens-Douglas' personal archive.

AS: Before we close, what are your thoughts on the state of West Indies cricket?

PKD: Some of my best writing is on West Indies Cricket. You can't write about a hero [in West Indies cricket]. A hero does not last longer than one year. Two years later [the cricketer is] off the team. I wrote about Gary Sobers for years, I wrote about Brian Lara. They hung around. I developed work on them. Now I have nothing to write about cricket.

CONCLUSION

In Trinidad and Tobago, there is no other practitioner of the oral tradition who has cultivated a body of work, archive and community of readers and listeners around their creative vision as Paul Keens-Douglas has for over four decades. For all of Keens-Douglas's encounters with uncertainty and new landscapes, he transformed these experiences to shape the geographies, language and cultural sensibilities in his creative writing and performance. It is no coincidence that the Mighty Sparrow features prominently throughout the interview; the "outsider" from one Caribbean territory who moves to another territory, transcends national division and asserts a Caribbeanness of the consciousness. For what Paul Keens-Douglas has done is to choose his validation – one that is based in the Caribbean space and live audiences of Caribbean people.

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