POETRY PERFORMANCE · NYBALF 2026

Titilope Sonuga at Let the Poets Govern

Titilope Sonuga

FESTIVAL	NYBALF 2026 (second edition), The Village in the Book: Literature and the Near
DATE	18 September 2026
VENUE	Harlem Stage, The Gatehouse, New York
RECORDING	10:04 · youtube.com/watch?v=_K3X0Tj7B20
PRESENTED BY	Harlem Stage. Supported by the Open Society Foundations

On the opening night of NYBALF 2026, Titilope Sonuga gave a continuous performance of almost ten minutes as part of Let the Poets Govern. It moves from a litany of everything a woman is not, to a hymn for the friends who gather us, to the prayers ancestors made for descendants they would never meet, and finally to the women among the first Black settlers of the Canadian prairies and a great-grandmother waiting at the river of her becoming.

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The woman is not your mother

TITILOPE SONUGA 0:03

The woman is not your mother, is not mammy or wet nurse, is not a place to cut your teeth, to milk the marrow from bone, to suckle until sagging. The woman is not your training wheel, is not the leather and lust of your first car, some boys-will-be-boys story, something hot you swallow to put hair on your chest.

The woman is not a rite of passage, is not some river you cross to prove yourself, carrying all of your baggage on your head. The woman is not a dumping ground. She is not a wilted and broken thing, the junkyard scrap you drag home to fix. The woman is not your project, is not your problem, is not an exercise in patience.

The woman is not a game of chance, a choice at the crossroads of your life. She is not a gamble. The woman is not your lucky number. The woman is not a reward. She is not a trophy. She is not your God. She is not your savior or salvation, some name you call upon like a prayer. She is not proof of your piety.

She is not penance for the sins of your father. The woman is not yours. She is not waiting for validation or permission. She is not afraid of her lonely or alone. She is not afraid to heal or be healed. The woman is busy, elbow deep in the work of becoming whole and unto herself. She is in conversation with God, trying to understand the blueprint of creation.

The woman is making magic from scraps of nothing. The woman is working. And if she finds you working too, she might just let you love her.

1:38

Call us a prayer

TITILOPE SONUGA 1:38

So call us a prayer. Say we are a song. Say our laughter is praise song, our tears a holy water. Beloved and blessed, loved well and witnessed. Love, ours is the chorus of a hymn where one chord is thank you and another is yes and amen. In the trenches and in the peaks, by blood or chosen bond, in the valley and in the rolling river we journey through, we count it all joy, count it all evidence of living.

From my grateful mouth I pull the ribbon of a poem and bend a word into a bow. We are the gift. We are the endless offering. Our love is biblical as any parable, of courage, of betrayal, of grit or grace, and this is my testimony: that in the light of my sisters' love I see the truth of redemption, and I know why even the savior of the world journeyed with friends, and still it was a woman who waited, who saw first and believed.

And I believe that everywhere I am loved well, there are women. Everywhere I am frayed or falling, there are hands that stitch, that gather. I am altogether beautiful here, my reflection a mirror of us. Everywhere I am loved well, there is a song, a blessing held in the mouths of my girls. Praise the wild orchestra of us, the imperfect music we make by our being, by our believing in the gospel of this love.

We are bound by promise. Our only contract is the breath-by-breath choice to stay. Gather my story from my girl who knew me before before, my girl who knows me now and understands the universe between the two, my girl who calls cross-country, cross oceans, who is the knock at the door at just the right hour, my girl who is never on time, whose chaos is her magic, my girl whose voice is a boombox booming or light as a hummingbird, my girl who couldn't find a note if it had her name on it,

my hotheaded girl whose tongue is a bullet in the chamber, my girl who bristles, who sparkles, my girl the gardener, deeply rooted, my girl the bird in flight, my girl who sees, my girl the storyteller, voice notes like a podcast, my girl who never picks up but is always there, my girl who is the plug, my one degree of separation, my dream weaver girl whose mind is a riot, my girl who is unashamed to feel, whose tears fall easy, my girl who prays, who bends God's ear on my behalf, my girl, my girl, my girl who gathers me, my girl, you. Gather me.

4:49

Prayers generations in the making

TITILOPE SONUGA 4:48

And there are prayers generations in the making that push through time to arrive in the moment of our awakening. That is to say, my presence here, every measure of magic that exists in my life, is likely a prayer made at the altar of an ancestor for whom I only existed as a dream. What grace to be known and loved before your birth.

Isn't that the history of Blackness across the globe? Isn't that the very ingredient of our improbable act of survival, that we have always made an offering into a future we might never see, in our stories, in our song, in our art, this prophetic declaration that in a time beyond now this gift becomes a rope, a hammer, a loaf of bread, something to build a life, a lighthouse for the children who will one day walk this soil, Black as the night sky?

We offer them the stars to know that we were once here, and how beautiful we were. We were once here, and how excellent, how brave we were. Once here and beyond, our magic, our right to ease, to abundance, to a life beyond strength and survival. Our rest and refuge was worthy of celebration too. And we were Black every day, on a Monday when the city stomped the concrete, on a Sunday when the church choirs troubled heaven, every day in the face of what threatens to undo us.

We are here, a soft place in a hard world. We make love. We make magic. We birth our babies and kiss our elders. We make each day a ritual of remembering. We create this time capsule and offer it to generations who might never see us, but they will know us, and they will know themselves.

6:41

Only the trees know

TITILOPE SONUGA 6:41

Only the trees know what wayward wind buoyed the first one thousand through river, creek and muskeg, feet a callous bark we peel until the fleshy center. We count the rings to tell us how many lifetimes is the measure between a stolen land and a stolen people. What is lost eternally in the currency of the sale? How many paces is each generation, between limber pine and baobab, between prairie grass and cotton?

If we ask the sky whose hands, raised in prayer, carried their people across the bridge from one dream deferred into another, who nursed the children on the promise of home, a place of rest and refuge, it will answer: the women. In Campsie and Breton, in Clareview and Amber Valley, Clyde and Rosetown, in Wildwood, knuckles bloody from begging bush and meadow into farmland, fruit into a harvest from the labor of living and loving, of running from that which will maim and unname.

From all the ways the Black body is undone, unwound from the spool of its history and unraveling for generations to gather, it is the women, arriving even now in Edmonton and Saskatoon, in Calgary and Regina, who touch their hands to the prairie dust and ask first of the land, “What may I offer?”, who ask first of the people, “Where may I flourish?”, who pour the water of their gifts until an unforgiving winter gives way to spring, women who teach the language of our resistance and tally our remembering, who birth and bury, their hands beneath the braiding and baking, the building and bracing.

We cannot gather what was lost beneath the ocean swell. We will never know whose baby teeth line the ocean floor, iridescent as seashells, so we honor what was before and after the boats, before and after the hands that spun the globe and scattered the seed. We honor what remains, the wild push and pull that gathers us here, our Blackness blooming defiant against the backdrop of a staggering white.

We honor the song even the meadowlark knows, a centuries-old melody that gurgles to the surface to touch the land and call it home, what we speak in our soukous and ska, our soca, soul, calypso, our kompa and Afrobeat, what the women sing into the ears of children, children whose dreams take up their space in the night sky, children who say their mothers’ names and close their eyes, knowing.

In the dream, my great-grandmother sits under the shade of a cocoa tree, sweat glistening on the bridge of her nose. The seeds of an age-old language fall from her lips. A dense forest springs up at her feet. My tongue is a machete, clearing a path to find her waiting barefoot at the bridge she has built for me to cross the river of my becoming. I genuflect. Ẹ ṣé, Màmá, and we cross over. Thank you.

NEW YORK BLACK AND AFRICAN LITERATURE FESTIVAL

ABOUT THIS TRANSCRIPT

This transcript was prepared by NYBALF from the verified caption track of the published recording and lightly edited for readability. The recording remains the authoritative record. Poems and readings are transcribed as performed and may differ from their published texts. Section headings are editorial. Timestamps refer to the recording on YouTube.

PARTICIPANTS

Titilope Sonuga is a poet, playwright and performer, born in Lagos and based in Edmonton, Canada. She is the author of the poetry collections Down to Earth (2011), Abscess (2014) and This Is How We Disappear (2019), and served as the ninth Poet Laureate of the City of Edmonton.

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