

## Arts and Culture in Edmonton

One of the main ways that Black History Month is celebrated in Edmonton is through artistic and cultural events. Each February, you can attend musical concerts and visual art showcases such as 5 Artists 1 Love (<https://www.facebook.com/5artists1love/>). Or you can catch a poetry event organized by Edmonton's very own Breath in Poetry collective, which you are going to learn about in this module.

### Here is a list of activities you will work on:

- KWL Chart
- Reading
- Listening / Video
- Activity
- Summary
- References

### KWL Chart

K	W	L
What I know about Breath in Poetry	What I want to know about Breath in Poetry	What I learned about Breath in Poetry

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## **READING**

### ***Breath in poetry***

Breath in Poetry (often abbreviated as BIP) is a collection of poets, organizers and community members who seek to expand the reach and consciousness of Edmonton-based poetry. The collective was started in 2009 by Titlope Sonunga, Ahmed Ali (aka Ahmed Knowmadic), Bert Richards and Nick Riley.

BIP is well known for its weekly slam and open mic series-the beloved Tuesday night Rouge Poetry Slam, which, until 28 June 2016, took place at the Rose bowl (10111 117 Street) in Downtown Edmonton. Now, it takes place at Massawa Cafe and Bistro located on 10153 - 97 Street NW at 7pm every Tuesday. Up to 12 poets compete each night in the hopes of being crowned the champion and securing a spot on the Edmonton Slam Team that will go on to represent Edmonton at the Canadian Festival of Spoken Word.

### ***What is a poetry slam?***

Poetry slam is the competitive art of performance poetry. It puts a dual emphasis on writing and performance, encouraging poets to focus on what they're saying and how they're saying it.

### ***Who can participate in the slam competitions at Rouge Poetry?***

Anyone who has original works of poetry is invited to Slam!

### ***How does it work?***

- Poets are to have 2 poems prepared; each poem should be no more than 3 minutes long. Sign up for the slam will be done at the beginning of the night.
- 12 poets will compete in a two-round elimination format. In the first round, all 12 poets will share a 3-minute poem. In the second round only the top 5 poets from the previous round will share an additional 3-minute poem.
- Time is started as soon as the poet engages the audience, whether by body language or speech
- The poem must be an original written by the poet performing it. If the poem exceeds 3 minutes, a 10 second grace period is given. After that 0.5 points will be deducted from the poet score for every 10 seconds over the time provided.
- The poets' cumulative score at the end of the 2 rounds will determine the winner for the night
- No props, no music, no costumes and only one poet may read at a time.
- Poets must compete to earn points throughout the season to be one of the top 12 poets going into the finals.

In 2011, the members of the collective were crowned the champions of the Canadian Festival of Spoken Word

BIP is a tireless and integral force of possibility and receptivity for poetry enthusiasts of all walks of life. Whether the collective is leading fun, engaging and authentic workshops within a local high school, or embodying the strength of storytelling for a community of new immigrants, the Breath In Poetry collective aims to help Edmonton's culture of performance poetry reflect the diverse and nuanced needs of those who animate and inhabit the city.

Irrespective of its form and the evolving nature of its initiatives, projects, and community partnerships, the goals and intentions of the collective are unchanging. The Breath In Poetry collective aims to do its part in creating communities that are warm, loving, resilient, and ultimately unified by a common appreciation for poetry, voice, performance and the power of the written word.

Members of the collective have represented Edmonton's poetry community by working with youth in prisons in Wales, and have been invited to attend literary conferences in Norwich, England, among others.

In addition to collective achievements, many individuals in BIP have used poetry as a tool to achieve great things. The next two sections will profile two of the founding members, Ahmed Knowmadic and Titilope Sonunga.



**Featured person: Ahmed Knowmadic**

Award winning poet Ahmed Ali also known as '**Knowmadic**', is a full-time poet, writer, actor, comedian, speaker and youth worker who currently resides in Treaty 6 Territory [Edmonton, Alberta].

Ahmed was born in Mogadishu in 1984 to a pastoral nomad and a farmer. In 1989, with help from their local community, Ahmed, his 3 older brothers and his mother

immigrated to Italy evading the civil war. When his family arrived in Italy, Ahmed and his older brothers were forced into boarding schools. To say Ahmed underwent a culture shock is an understatement. He quickly learned what it meant to be different. Not only because he didn't speak Italian but because he placed value on his culture and religion. After several years and many attempts at seeking sponsorship, Ahmed's father secured a sponsorship from an organization in Canada. His family packed what little belongings they had and traveled Edmonton, Alberta in the winter of 1992. But due to difficulty integrating his family moved to Kitchener, Ontario in 1993.

At the Age of 16, his parents decided they wanted to go back to Somalia. During their absences, Ahmed attended school and worked at Tim Horton's to cover rent. It was at this time Ahmed became involved in activities that got him in trouble with the law. Quickly his life became filled with the race wars and confrontational cops that he tried to avoid. This continued until he got arrested and expelled from school for fighting a student that was being overtly racist. Ahmed's older brothers gathered enough money to fly him to Somalia and visit their parents. There Ahmed learned the true struggles that people who had no access to food banks and shelters faced. He awakened at the lack of opportunity that was relevant there in Somalia and the freedom to be whatever he wanted to be in Canada.

After a few months Ahmed returned with a new demeanor. His outlook on life had shifted dramatically. He enrolled in drama classes and took theater lessons. He instantly fell in love and quickly grew as an artist. His energy and focus on writing during his ESL days contributed to his strength in creative writing. He co-wrote an anti-bullying skit that he and several students performed for thousands of grade 4-8 students.

In 2001 Ahmed became the first Somali to enrol into Comedy Writing and performance at Humber College in Toronto, Ontario. He was involved in creating his own sketch comedy and presenting it at The Second City. He also performed at open mics throughout greater Toronto.

Ahmed moved to Edmonton in 2008 for university, and at the 2009 Edmonton Poetry Festival, he first performed a poem in front of an audience. In 2011, Ahmed became the first Somali spoken word champion at the Canadian Festival of Spoken Word. In 2012, he was given the RISE award for community involvement in the arts and culture, and a year later, the Artist in Residence at the Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute in Seattle, Washington.

Ahmed was named a "Difference Maker" by the Edmonton Journal in 2013 for his contribution to poetry in Edmonton. His commitment to poetry in schools is

audible during youth conferences from the many youth who he has worked with on some capacity. In 2014, ACGC recognized the young poet as Alberta's Top 30 under 30 for his work with IFSSA, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Mennonite Center for Newcomers, Ghandi Peace Conference, and Edmonton Public Schools to name a few.



**Featured**

**Person:**

**Titilope**

**Sonunga**

The story of

Titilope

Sonuga's

emergence as

a renowned

poet, actress,

and

ambassador

is a testament to the power of the human voice and the transformative power of speech. Titilope is a Nigerian-Canadian artist. Her humble beginnings in spoken word poetry have propelled her to a dynamic, multi-faceted and deeply meaningful life in the arts. She has shared a stage with legendary poets at the first spoken word showcase of the Achebe Colloquium on Africa at Brown University. Titilope was also the first poet to appear at a Nigerian presidential inauguration ceremony. She performed at the May 2015 inauguration of President Muhammadu Buhari.

It is therefore no surprise that Titilope Sonuga is well known in Africa and around the world as a writer and speaker of evocative, deeply empathetic poetry. Her debut poetry collection, which won her the 2011 Canadian Authors' Association Emerging Writer Award, is titled *Down To Earth*. To hear or read a poem of Titilope Sonuga's is to understand that she is a daughter of the Earth.

She has a quality of rootedness and unflinching womanhood that connects her every word to the very pulse of humanity. Titilope presents a world of sublime, latent beauty struggling to come to terms with itself. This is seen in her writings about her personal journey - which can be found in her 2014 collection, *Abscess*. As well as writings on topics ranging from the vibrancy of Lagos to the difficulty of healing from communal trauma. Her work is propelled by the idea of becoming, that is the notion that the whole globe is on a collective journey toward healing.

As a poet, Titilope Sonuga is special because she is a writer who blends a remarkable elegance of craft with an ever-present human quality. Titilope combines authenticity, emotional intelligence, and soft-heartedness. This character extends beyond the bounds of a single poem, or even poetic performance. This is why her work has expanded to include her role as an ambassador for Intel's *She Will Connect* Program in Nigeria. The program is dedicated to empowering women and girls toward greater technological literacy, commerce and opportunity. Titilope's influence helps to amplify the power of their voices and perspectives within the local and global economy, enhancing their ability to shape the future of their communities in new and innovative ways.

Titilope has also gained respect and acclaim as an actress. She acted as Eki" on the hit NdaniTV series, *Gidi Up*.

## **LISTENING/VIDEO**

Information from the videos and audios will also be included in the quiz.

1. Listen to a poem by Titilope Sonunga  
<https://soundcloud.com/titilope/too-young>
2. Watch a poem recital by Ahmed Knowmadic about the importance of knowledge  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZexfdL\\_vXA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZexfdL_vXA)

**ACTIVITIES**

1. Follow these people or groups on social media

*Breath in Poetry* F: <https://www.facebook.com/breathinpoetry/>

*Ahmed Knowmadic* F: <https://www.facebook.com/AhmedKnowmadic>

T: <https://twitter.com/Aknowmadic>

Y: <https://www.youtube.com/user/Aknowmadic>

*Titilope Sonunga* F: <https://www.facebook.com/deartitilope>

T: <https://twitter.com/deartitilope>

I: <https://www.instagram.com/titilope/>

2. Write a poem
3. Attend a Rouge lounge event
4. Recite a poem at Rouge lounge/Participate in a poetry slam

**SUMMARY**

This module contains a lot of information on Edmonton's poetry champions and the hard work they put into their art to raise awareness about race and other societal issues. We hope young people like you will be inspired to use your creativity and energy for good causes like these.

**REFERENCES**

This is for additional information only. You do not have to study the references for the quiz.

<http://www.breathinpoetry.com/about/>

<http://www.ahmedknowmadic.com/about/>

<http://titilope.ca/>

