

Purpose Driven Art:

Refining Your Purpose In Art

by Tshombe S. Harris

About the author:



Tshombe Sekou Harris, poet/motivational speaker/community activist/humanitarian from New Orleans, Louisiana, has spent the better part of the last five years supporting and promoting inspirational art through facilitating poetry study groups, and online radio programs.

While traveling the world, serving on active duty in the US Navy, he introduces spoken word poetry to parts of the world that aren't privileged to have a concept of "Freedom of Speech"; delivering messages of hope as a call to action. Tshombe's international tribute to women, entitled "Woman", has been featured and performed at various venues across the US and Asia. He was recently invited to speak at the annual NAACP Hawaii rally to deliver a message through poetry on "Financial Empowerment".

As the founder of Freedom Verse Café (FVC), a program that as educated communities worldwide on the heritage and power of spoken word poetry, he has conducted in-depth interviews with poets extending from the Black Arts Movements to Def Jam Poetry. He is a true ambassador to his nation and a strong voice in the poetry community.

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“Thought is more important than art. To revere art and have no understanding of the process that forces it into existence, is finally not even to understand what art is.”

— Imamu Amiri Baraka

Art has been a major component of every culture and era throughout mankind's history; becoming an essential part of identifying a peoples' heritage and place in the grand scheme of the world. It is through art that we capture the lineage of culture, beauty, and the struggles of life, along with a few other influences that lend themselves to the future of a generation. The art of poetry is no less responsible for being indicative of life, the passing on of our human experiences, and sharing them across cultures to incite a meaningful revolution. I know that it may seem that I am alluding to anthropologic responsibility, but that connection is up to your contextual logic.

In western Africa, a tradition observed by the more indigenous cultures, are the oral traditions of passing on the historical accounts of its ancestry, military engagements, as well as triumph and defeats, etc. The cultures that extend from these practices refer to such artists as griots. Griots were the elders who were well versed in the historic accounts, and were tasked with the incredible hereditary responsibility of passing the culture to its young: the future of the nation. They carried out this charge through song, story, and poetry. This practice has been carried forward through the ages, and in some small way it is practiced as such today.

Despite the colorful idea of passing on lineage, this simple practice has made poets a cornerstone of the human existence, and if nothing else the hazard to the fascists. It is important to note that of all artists the most threatening, in terms of reactionary to any society and its government, has always been the poets. Being fluent in language, armed with conviction, and being well versed in matters of both the people and court systems makes them the imperilment of any dictator's total dominance over its people. Such examples can be seen in the distant echoes of castaway poets, or dare I call it what it is: the exiled, relegated, and political prisoners. Though it isn't just the idea that being a "poet" totally makes you a threat, at least not as much as the purpose of the message that is delivered, yet it is through the almost omniscient skill of language; an alchemy of allegory and metonymy that set the contexture, which in turn makes being a poet such a deal. If you've never believed that words have power, then this is a testament that they do.

The most powerful weapon in a poet's armory is the fluency of language, and the most important of any language are the words that construct the basis of understanding. This fluency is more important than charisma. An example of this can be derived from the current president of the United States, Barack Obama: had it not been for his eloquence and fluency with the English language, coupled with his character and charisma; he would have failed well before the primaries. If we were to remove his mastery of syntax and semantics with language, would he have been victorious on character alone, without being able to fortify it with his words? Who would have listened to anyone who

would've had a hard time articulating his or her message? Furthermore, who would have understood his purpose? Thus, making it understood that a poet's mastery of language, thus words, is essential for a successful delivery, or conveyance of the message within the art; otherwise is to speak in ignorance, and thus speaking words without true purpose is absurdity.

Given this brief introduction and understanding of the impact of art on cultures and societies, one should be curious of the impact that poetry has on the mind of those who indulge in poetry venues today. It is within my opinion that poets have an incredible impact as well as a responsibility to their listeners, fanatics, and to society; whether they own it or not. Despite the ideas that capitalists promote, and gorge on the affluence of the "get famous" and "do you" mindsets, there is more to the power of speaking from a person's mind than we take notice. In recent observations of the spoken-word poetry scene, and the more recent declination of the rap culture; such ideologies of selfism has been poisonous to progressiveness, and most of all to black democracy. One could make the connection as a "conspiracy", and the fascists have their hands on the cash, calling recession progression as they prostitute culture in killing the one thing that drives every revolution: art.

As a result of these observations, I took some time to reflect on the impact and the potential influence that spoken-word poetry has on today's cultures, and on how to improve the successful delivery of verbal art; particularly in a global culture of technological advances, transitory or randomly accessed memory (attention spans), and a growing population of "Free Speech" indulgers. A populous of entertainers looking to do nothing more than to grab some attention for their selves, in the "I" culture; a culture that embraces capitalistic idealisms while delivering what I call transitory art. This is a generation that's well influenced by social and mainstream media without filters, which has created a new form of expression that bares some getting used to; as it has a voice of selfdom and emotional catharsis, and very little to no community emphasis. This has been a trade-off in the responsibility of the griots for notoriety, "the American way". But I am digressing, and it may seem that I am speaking in an accusative voice with regards to the poetry of today; it is very important for me to state that I am merely observing from my own vantage point.

In the process of studying the oracy of poetry and the styles of many who have been so bold in sharing their experiences, struggles, and activisms in such an ancient practice— I say ancient, because much like revolution, spoken-word is in no way a neologism— they have all been driven by purpose. Throughout the more recent epochs of the "Black Arts Movement", "Beat Era", and the post "Civil Rights Movement" in America spoken-word poetry has been an intricate part of the activism and community expression. Each of these eras gave reason and purpose to those who would dare to venture and speak

up to pass on the much-needed messages. During my study of the creative works of poetic artists across several periods; I began to ask the inescapable question, what movement and purpose motivates this generation, the *free generation or hybrid-artists if you will?*

With the term *free generation*, I am attempting to add a brief contextual visual of a generation that exist post the activism of the '60 and '70. A generation that sprouted from the ashes of a long gone revolution; wherein the message was about unity, communism, and social consciousness as heard in the disquisitions of Imamu Amiri Baraka, the essays of Larry Neal, and the likes of The Last Poets, Jayne Cortez, The Watts Prophets, and so many to name actives in the social change of Black America. This new generation, like a chewed and unreel cassette, that has been snipped and spliced back together, is missing something; something that gave its predecessors conviction to speak. Somewhere in the gap we have spliced together one end from the revolution era, and the other the hip hop culture; a culture that has begun to slip away from its roots in the chase for that all illusive fiat currency, which has left both black art and culture prostituted and strung out in the alleyways of America; I call us the *hybrid-artists*. Yes, I say us only because I too am born in this generation.

Be it as it may, tragic no less, what is it that moves this generation to speak? In the age of full disclosure, open dialogue, and the constitutional right to the *freedom of speech*; many speak with no immediate cause or purpose save for entertaining in the hopes to be profound. In a random study conducted using a series of basic questions, visiting online forums, radio show chatrooms, as well as conducting phone and personal interviews; I was able to conclude that the undercurrent of what drives this generation is a tie between both self expression and achievements. However, in another process of deduction based on contents and social activities, I hypothesize that there is a different type of motivation, and it is driven by the need for or the lack of "*love*". With such catharsis expressions of sexual lasciviousness, traumatic experiences, and brokenness are the leading themes; in this large and rapidly growing populous of young self-proclaimed artists, it has become apparent that there is no movement per say, but a "poetry" community missing a key ingredient.

So how can we improve or fix this generation in the development of meaningful work? Art that is less transitory and more encompassing of a lineage, that can be spoken of as being impactful in the years to come. Particularly in a time when a revolutionary movement is needed more than ever before; with homelessness on the rise, economic downturns, a country that is plagued by two wars, and equality is still a question despite our presidential standing.

Besides the obvious need for mentorship, a meaningful dialogue between the still living legacies of the Black Arts Movement, and a system of development and accountability; I

was able to deduce that there are four basic, yet complex development-theorems that could be immediately implemented and should encompass the definition by which one presents their art to be effective in any arena. Though they may not solve the issues that face us now—like the Katrina and BP filibusters—they will in my opinion, lend artists some effectiveness and relevance when put into practice. These four theories are meant to serve as self-examinations, or tools to help improve the outcome, and again effectiveness. Nonetheless, they should be put into practice, and held against your work to define the true purpose in the art. If you are to ask, "why should anyone concern themselves with a purpose behind their works?", it would be prudent to note that art is revolutionary by its very nature; therefore needs a cause or reactionary foundation, and that foundation is its purpose.

Whether you have a witted idea for a poem, or guided by something greater than yourself to deliver a message, it must be driven by a purpose; otherwise, there exist no cause for the creation; besides, who does anything without purpose? Also note that the creation is a reaction of purpose, or the logical theorem of *cause and effect*.

Within the purpose are four areas that are of concern and they are: *cause and effect*, *impact*, *incitation*, and *relevance*; our four theorems. No matter whether you agree with me, those who consume your art will observe it in most, if not all, facets of these areas. Any good artist would be well off to be cognizant of how their audience will develop a perception based on the fruits bared. Let's take a look at these four theorems that I've defined as good practices in becoming a more effective artist.

1. Cause and Effect. Once the purpose has been defined, one must then define the methodology and medium for delivery and the desired outcome. If the effect does not meet the satisfaction of cause, then one must solicit insight of purpose, and re-examine the methodology. However, there must be a cause and effect to all things, no matter the defined purpose, for your words permeate and are subservient to your thoughts; once put into action (spoken), they are then reflective of self.

2. Impact. This is by far the most rewarding if the *cause and effect* theory are met with satisfaction. The impact of your work is defined by its receivers; however, if not carefully examine it can be the most poisonous. If one is driven solely on praise delivered sycophantically as a measure of impact, there will be no growth or true impact. This type of purpose creates a facade, and is deadly in nature to development. But if one can measure the impact of your works based on the positive change they've incited within those reached; then you have indeed mastered the purpose of your creation.

3. Incitation. I mentioned earlier that all art is revolutionary; this is a true statement no matter the way you define the word revolution. However, I define it—for the purpose of

my creations of art—as the "*transformational change*" of mind, body, and spirit. When you can speak in such a way that causes change in another's existence; where it reformats the tabula rasa, and the transformation is reciprocated and multiplied in a contagious manner; such that it incites further change beyond your expectations, then you have truly sparked a revolution. This theorem should be present in all purposes of art.

4. Relevance. There is nothing worse than spoon-feeding contents that aren't necessary to an audience. As an artist, you get one chance to appeal to your audience, and to be irrelevant is to fail before trying. It is said, "*that one man's trash is another's treasure*", but what happens when the trash is just that? Not every discourse has value to the general populous, and this is something that must be considered when one prepares for elocution. Just as every idea is a not a great one; it is not enough to hope that someone will eventually find value in mediocrity; just because you didn't take the time to present relevancy. Considering the relevance is as important as the purpose.

So one must take careful examination when it comes to the content, its cause and effect, impact, incitement, and lastly the relevancy to all who will indulge in your creations of poetic art.

These are my views and understanding of art; I share them with you as a matter of how one should define themselves as artists. Artists have the power to change the world simply by putting their words in the right place, if only they would recognized the power they've been gifted, which has purpose; they just have to define and harness its power.

This essay is dedicated to:

the growing number of exiled

relegated

and the politically incarcerated

homeless

the messengers

the bold and beautiful

the soapbox preachers

the corner store activist

revolutionary evolutionists

the spinners looking for a way out of the revolution

to the bean pie brothers in the cold

holding it down for truth

and the Sunday morning

pew warmers standing

for one of the most revolutionary

icons in human history

the flotilla sinkers

and those who persist to resist
the salaam and shalom
to her story and those who tell it
to hip hop
gospel
soul
and griots
to the poets
those who say selah or end poem
the open mic junkies
addicts to words not verbs
verbolatry
to the struggle
and the folks who tag me with their poems
and forgot the poetry
the "have you heard my latest piece"
and those too "Def"
to hear it
the "I'm gonna blow your mind" poets

so here it goes...three, two, one!

and silence

that's that piece!

or that's that, peace!

to the "purpose" writers

and those who got it and didn't

to the warriors with no wars

and the soldiers

fighting for shalom

and don't make it home

those who asked why I wrote this

and those who won't get it

to relativity and theory

for love,

truth

and you...

selah!

