

PROTEST AND PERFORMANCE: NEW ORALITY IN BARBADOS

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Popular Performance in Barbados

Performance poetry emanates from a tradition of protest that mobilizes poetic devices that are not elements of written poetry. The speaking voice may be mixed with music, non musical sounds, visual and theatrical devices that complement the verbal poem. The term performance poetry may include rap, dub, poetry slams and spoken word performances. Other characteristics of the genre are that they are predominantly public, unsubsidized, commercial events at which the author performs his/her own work. Over the past fifteen years or so, it would have been difficult to miss the global pattern of high levels of commercial sales and sell-out performances of popular oral performance art. US cultural critic, Dana Gioia, has characterized this growth as involving a shift away from the literary print and reading culture towards the spoken word. According to UK academic Cornelia Grabner, there is a vexed and uneasy relationship amounting to a mutual stand-off between performance poetry and academia. This arises, she suggests, from performance poetry's lack of a theoretical framework, while the academy's methodologies are inadequate to cope with performance poetry's innovative art forms.

The Caribbean has not been immune from the growing popularity of both imported and local performers. Edward Baugh has drawn attention to three features that infuse performance poetry in the region: these are metaphors of resistance, communal initiatives and the nurturing of ancestral links. Curwen Best suggests in Roots to Popular Culture that, at least for Barbados, the origin of spoken word performance poetry rests with Kamau Brathwaite in the late 1960's (188), while for dub, Mervyn Morris suggests Oku Onuora in 1979. Whichever may be the precise date, in Barbados, Bruce St. John is recognized by Kevin Arthur as the country's first significant practitioner followed, in the 1990s, by rhythm poets Winston Farrell and Adisa Andwele (later known as Aja) (184).

Although Best has expressed impatience in Barbadian Popular Music and the Politics of Caribbean Culture with what he calls the "critical establishment" (28) in the Caribbean for marginalizing contemporary popular works, in the wider region the academy cannot be said to have entirely ignored performance. Mervyn Morris, in his discussion of literary and performance poetry, finds categorization – establishment versus outsider, radicalism versus tradition, conservatism and scribal authority – unhelpful. He argues, instead, for a focus on the richness of cross-fertilization, attention to what the individual poet is doing and on the issues raised when performance is put into writing (44). Other critics of Caribbean oral performance art have drawn attention to the danger of commercialization, which cheapens the power of dub's fiery anger (Brown 53-54) and the superficial play acting by certain dub performers who are insufficiently schooled in the knowledge system of orality (Cooper 8). More importantly for this analysis, Best suggests that applying a more nationalist (i.e. local/island-based) criticism (Barbadian Popular Music, 33) reveals the ongoing subversiveness of popular forms of expression" (see Best Roots to Popular Culture, 189-229).

Meanwhile, two literary Caribbean poets have re-ignited the debate about the legitimacy of performance poetry. At the Calabash Literary Festival 2008 and, more recently, in an interview in Bim: Arts for the 21st Century, Derek Walcott explicitly distanced himself from

the genre. Far from being subversive, Walcott characterizes performance poetry as childish, excessively individualistic and with a poor standard of dialect. He observes:

I think performance poetry is a juvenile thing, you know, an adolescent thing, for the art. . . . [E]ventually the poet wants to do something a little more disciplined, a little more modest, a little more humble, a little less of the 'I,' showing himself. So where you get into trouble is that you mix it up with ideas of nationalism. . . . I think that there is a sort of virulent, vehement, aggressive incoherence that is taking the place of poetry and I think it's stupid. (17)

He also noted its inability to communicate effectively: "If you don't want to tell people your poem, and you want to go for the incoherence that you think is national, I'm not part of that" (18).

In contrast, Trinidad-born poet, Ian MacDonald, has been more sympathetic towards performance poetry, in particular applauding its extensive reach. In 2009, on the occasion of the eleventh annual Frank Collymore Literary Awards Ceremony in Barbados, he lamented the fact that the idea of poetry giving joy and pleasure to the mass of people "seems in this day and age out of date and even bizarre."¹ He proceeded to argue that performance poetry has an important role to play because it offers a lifeline to what is in effect a dying art form. Performance poets, he stated, "have been and will continue more than ever to be important in rescuing poetry from neglect in our Caribbean societies." The performance poet, he claimed, "explores a world remote from those of us who live largely insulated from the daily reality which he or she portrays so vividly and humorously with such humanity . . . a world the cocktail circuit does not know." He went on to suggest that performance poets "write out of the brave, humorous, bitter lives of ordinary people in hard times."

Is this popular art form a blot on the poetry landscape or the savior of a dying tradition? The comments above suggest a quest for order by adopting radically different strategies to what might be seen as the fault lines between performance and literary poetry. More prosaically we might ask: Is there revolutionary potential in performance poetry, as Best suggests? Is MacDonald too kind to a distant relation of literary or high art poetry and too optimistic that the popular art form of performance might rescue literary poetry? In essence, is performance poetry a show or a tool for interrogation of social norms or an affirmation of the status quo?

I attempt here to tease out the answer to some of these questions by the analysis of the work of the Barbadian performance poet Adrian Green. He has, for the last three years, been organizing performance events in Barbados, where he has become arguably the most popular performer in this genre. In this period, he has produced a sufficient body of work to offer scope for analysis of its underlying ideology and strategies of protest.

Green first observed and practiced the skills of performance poetry in the United States while he was studying marketing and journalism in Miami at the turn of the century. There, he visited performance poetry clubs and was attracted by its rawness and the authority that the genre commanded. After finishing his studies, he returned to practice the art in Barbados. Since his return, he has won a number of unofficial poetry 'slam' events as well

¹See "Hail to the People's Poet."

as official national poetry competitions organized by the National Cultural Foundation. In 2008, he established monthly performance events called "Iron Sharpen Iron." The phrase is from Proverbs 27:17: "As iron sharpens iron; so doth a man sharpen the countenance of a friend." The Biblical reference is noteworthy, first, for the allusion to communal interaction, the sharpening of both performer's and audience's wits in performance and, second, its hint at the religious influence evident in many of the performance pieces on Green's independently released CDs - Random Acts of Conscience (2007) and Hard Ears (2009). In the first CD, Green is introduced by another spoken word performer, while the second is loosely structured as a radio call-in programme in the course of which Green, the caller, moves from one subject to another. Each CD contains 16 and 18 tracks respectively. The longest featured track, "Hard Ears," on his second CD lasts some 10 minutes. With the exception of a few romantic tracks, the main themes are warnings, visions and "truths." He suggests that the population has been duped by a combination of false educators, politicians and the commercial world and makes a plea for the shunning of Eurocentricism and a revival of Pan-Africanism.

Contemporary performance poetry, as practiced by Green in Barbados, is designed to offer a challenge to the status quo. In his second CD Hard Ears, he claims: "We keep falling for the same old tricks" and eventually he claims "it all boils down to pleasure and pain, if they can't make money from your perverted pleasure they will use your suffering for financial gain." His advice therefore is: "Let us stand apart. . . . [L]et there be a chasm between us and the sons and daughters of materialism." I would like to suggest, however, that beneath the fireworks of performance lie an essentially conservative and traditional set of attitudes and behavioural norms which ultimately have a religious base and which align the form more appropriately with the tradition of folklore studies, as defined by Roger Abrahams. I will demonstrate this by paying particular attention to the performance occasion, in particular the tea meeting, and performance techniques which I identify as a modern version of the man of words. What I am suggesting, in so doing, is a redrawing of the boundaries of criticism between performance and literary poetry.

The Tea Meeting and the Man-of-Words

Over forty years ago, the folklorist Roger Abrahams began to publish his studies of the folk art of what he called the 'man of words in the West Indies' and, in particular, the 'tea-meeting.' His observations on these practices were collected in his book of the same name. Folk art, he argued, was made up of "items and performance that are self-consciously and artistically constructed" (62). The tea-meeting, one of the festive moments at which the man of words appeared, was a form of leisure time or seasonal activity that was widespread in the Caribbean before the era of radio, TV and other electronic media. The traditional tea-meeting was an institution established by British non-establishment Christian churches, like the Methodists, in the region. They were essentially structured creolized events of verbal dexterity that involved audience participation. Abrahams suggests that they originated from a combination of a British theatrical tradition, the Mumming play, and an African reverence for eloquence. By the 1980s, the migration abroad of the more able practitioners and the increasing availability of public mass media in individual homes led to their demise.

The meetings combined attempts to organize rural village communities with church fundraising. To begin with, they involved the demonstration of eloquent speaking by church

members who made public testimonials of their conversion. As Abrahams observes in "British West Indian Folk Drama and the Lifecycle Problem":

These events were soon subverted and tea meetings became an occasion not only for speech making but also for numerous other kinds of traditional performances. . . . [I]n fact the tea meeting became so secularized that the inhabitants soon had to make a distinction between the secular 'tea meeting' and the religious 'service of song.' (247)

An important feature of the more secularized tea meeting was the performance of the man of words, the speech maker who tested himself against the barracking of the 'rude boys' at the back of the hall whose role was to heckle and attempt to put him off his speech. The man of words won over his audience by his ability to go 'higher' than other speakers. The phrase implies that he was able to achieve heights of rhetoric and inventiveness above other speakers; in addition, he spoke long and copiously and offered 'truths' or 'facts' to the voluble satisfaction of his audience who would noisily concur or, by continuously barracking, make him retreat.

Today in Barbados, the centre of modern performance poetry in Bridgetown is a cafe called the Bump and Wine Bar. These events attract enthusiastic audiences of over 100 persons. There are often two masters of ceremonies who perform at the start and end of the evening. Performances include featured guest artists as well as a list of eight to ten open-mike performers who have previously signed up through the internet. The audience is tightly packed around the stage area spilling out onto the open air verandah that surrounds the bar. The room is low-lit, except for spotlights that pick out the performer. A backing band or a DJ may supply rhythms for performers who require this although a few musicians and singers may also perform. The audience crowds around the stage and offers encouragement or commentary or wanders off, depending on their interest in the performance artist. Most of the audience is relatively young – in their late 20's or early 30's – and they each pay a \$10 entrance fee.

I am not suggesting a simple continuation from the tea meeting to the modern performance poetry event. There are a number of important differences. The modern events have a more commercial base and tend to be for a young, urban self-selected group of people rather than for an entire village community. Though both involve audience participation through noisy recognition of the performance, the modern audience does not challenge the performers by heckling. However, many of the characteristics of the tea meeting do spill over into the contemporary world of performance poetry. They are both essentially creolized popular entertainment adapted to the region, the former from Britain, the latter from the USA, and both are participatory and place high social value in oral ability. Most importantly, there is a strong relationship between flourishes of language by the performer and the response of the audience.

Perhaps the most important distinguishing feature between the tea meeting and the performance poetry event is the latter's apparently defining element of protest. Does Green's work offer a sufficient interrogation of social norms or is it predominantly an affirmation of the status quo? Is the poet offering, in the words of Grabner, persuasion and entertainment or an instrument of empowerment to his audience? If it is entertainment, the performance remains essentially a means of distraction from the everyday. Empowerment, on the other hand, implies a focus not only on a sense of community within which the poet is situated but also scope for development.

For the man-of-words in both traditions, the power of the statement involves first the element of bringing to light important 'truths' or 'facts.' The traditional man of words relied on the King James Bible, parts of Shakespeare's speeches, or texts on emancipation to give the ring of authority. The following example is part of a speech on emancipation collected by Abrahams:

Ladies and gentlemen, we have reason to consider . . . this great probability that Africa is now free from the vicious and the barbarous effect of this traffic and may be in a better state to comprehend and receive the sublime truths of the Christian religion. (118)

In a similar vein, Green's two CDs contain warnings to those who have strayed from the correct path. He states: "I am the hard truth sayer," "truth that has been covered up" must be revealed and "truth must be told, light must be seen."

Thus, in both the traditional and modern form of the tea meeting, facts and truths are promoted through the richness and substance of sound conveyed by the words of the speaker. Their accumulation carries the audience along on a wave of chanting, alliteration and rhyme. A form of sustained verbal pyrotechnics is central to the man of word's performance as well as the audience's awe and noisy appreciation. Facts are facts and so these forms of indisputable fact-finding and statements of absolute truths leave no room for the development of more complex argument. Simultaneously, while encouraging a sense of community, the feat of eloquence and the persona adopted in the modern context set the man-of-words apart from the audience.

Techniques of the Man of Words

An important feature of the man of words, Abrahams observes in the book of that name, is that "he is worth nothing unless he can, on the one hand, stitch together a startling piece of oratorical rhetoric, and on the other, capture the attention, the allegiance, and the admiration of the audience through his fluency, his strength of voice and his social maneuverability and psychological resilience" (xxx). Abrahams identifies two types of men of words: one whose forte is the public arena of the street corner or cross roads, where a base or lower form of language is used, spiced with expletives and invective; the other draws on a more studied, elevated language traditionally achieved by rote learning and memorisation. In the modern context, Green employs the latter in his performances. He also relies on memorization and describes achieving his fluency by a type of cathartic "letting go" when performing on stage. It is reinforced by feeding off the audience "with a call and response going on." He states: "If you can close your eyes and go into another space it makes the world of difference for the audience." A self-imposed rule is never to *read* a poem on the stage.

The use of respectable and elevated language characterizes both of his CDs. For example, on Random Acts, the listener is given a self-conscious warning about its contents. It begins: "Warning: this CD contains no violence or explicit lyrics yet it does contain ideas and concepts which may rattle the minds of those not accustomed to unconventional thinking." In his second CD, Hard Ears, Green draws attention to the unconventional features of spoken word and his intentional use of elevated language: "This is spoken word, not exactly poetry, not exactly speech, not exactly drama." On another track, he describes what he is doing as "word work. These are parables," the aim of which is to "raise the perception of

oration from empty old-talking to meaningful might-rocking, sometimes shocking, but always rock steady logic.”

Another feature of his elevated style is his performance persona as a “sage, a lyrical poet who knows where he’s going.” The role of sage suggests that the poet occupies an elevated position in relation to the community. In keeping with this concern, he observed in an interview with this author: “My thing is the message not the art form. I go to where I can get the message over.” There is here some evidence for Walcott’s contention of self-aggrandizement, though the focus is clearly on the speaker’s role as soothsayer rather than artist. The language of the sage involves the simplistic division of the world between those who are damned and those for whom there is a route to salvation. The underlying influence appears to be the resurgence of a deep rooted messianic style that draws on a form of Christian fundamentalism. It appears more than coincidental that tea meetings and the striving for eloquence emanated from the non-establishment church base. In the latter part of the twentieth century, the evangelical church movement swept the Caribbean and continues to be a prominent force in the twenty-first century. Census trends from 1960 for Barbados, for example, suggest that by 2010 the Pentecostal church movement will have a similar proportion of adherents as the once dominant Anglican church. Church services, radio and TV broadcasts combine to familiarize audiences with a particular style of declamation.

In a similarly evangelical style, eight of the fifteen tracks on the first CD alert the listener to be on guard against re-enslavement by greed (the threat is from a history of international psycho peddlers (presumably those in the marketing industry), war mongers and modern exploitation), superficial entertainers, false intellectuals whose text books are “littered with lies” and professional exploiters who “don’t use chains and whips but brains and tricks.” They all represent the generalized threat of “spiritual wickedness in high and low places.” The threat is conveyed in the rising crescendo of a Baptist preacher as he warms to the task:

Man I tell ya, in this nation of blue, black and yella, we raising an entire generation on musical junk food, a strict diet of jam and wine, it’s no wonder that we will find the children can’t concentrate but are great at rolling their behind.

There is also the more indirect metaphorical threat posed by the ‘serpent’ which “begins to weave its way up your spinal column – will you kill it? . . . This is not paradise, no paradox, no Garden of Eden.”

Salvation requires that the black population in the Caribbean recognize that it has lost its way – “Father, forgive them for they know not who they are. The breaking process has taken them far from themselves” - and it is necessary to look to traditional African systems for resolution. The Africa that is celebrated is one outside of modernity, as signified by references to the ancient Egyptian states of Kemet and Kush and early Egyptian and Ethiopian texts, including the Pert Em Heru or the ancient Book of the Dead. The Africa that is thereby constructed pays homage to the ancients, while the more modern associations are with the legacy of slavery, the rhetoric of race, displacement and return. The politics of African memory in this case subscribes to a form of trans-Atlantic Pan-Africanism, one that imagines a Pan-African world by linking pre-historical continental Africa and its modern diaspora in the Americas. A celebration of the Africa-diaspora link involves a return to African roots through the valuing of ancestors and an abhorrence of Eurocentricism. These

roots are both historically generalized and selectively Pan-African, with associations ranging from early Egypt to contemporary Yoruba and Bantu.

In conclusion, while performance poetry in Barbados is undoubtedly a popular activity that attracts substantial audiences, artists and critics remain divided as to the significance of the art form. I am suggesting that, at least in the context of Barbados, much of the criticism misses the point and that this new orality's radical and oppositional appearance is misleading. The roles adopted by the two prominent exponents of the 1980s in recent years suggest weak ground for agitation: Aja became a United Nations ambassador for world poverty, while Farrell combines community work with conventional theatre-directing and poetry-writing.

In the present manifestation of performance poetry in Barbados, I am suggesting that the boundary lines in the landscape of literary and performance poetry need to be redrawn. For all the focus on Africa in the content, we are in the presence of a Caribbean creolized practice that is nearer to popular folk culture, one that draws as much from the tea meeting and the man of words as from a tradition of communal religious expression.

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