

Poetic Mission: A Dialogue on the Role of the Poet and Poetry

by

Rudolph Lewis

Editor, *Chickenbones, A Journal for Literary & Artistic African-American Themes*

Overview

Recently (24 January 2009), Marvin X, a well known writer and co-founder of the Black Arts Movement (BAM) sent out by email a provocative piece titled "Poetic Mission." On the surface the concern was the controversial investigation of the murder of the Oakland journalist Chauncey Bailey. But "Poetic Mission" goes farther and makes an argument about the role of the poet and poetry.

Here are some excerpts from "Poetic Mission.":

The mission of the poet is to express the mind of a people, a culture, a civilization. He extends the myths and rituals, taking them to the outer limits like a Coltrane or Eric Dolphy tune, stretching, transcending all that is, was and will be. His tool is language, from which he cannot be limited by political correction or submission to the culture police on the left or the right.

The poet is a healer in the time of sickness, inspiring wholeness and celebrating the positive. He must point out contradictions and lies. . . .

The poet's mission was well defined in Mao's classic essay Talks on Art and Literature at Yenan Forum. The poet is either part of the problem or part of the solution—is he with the oppressor or the oppressed? Or we can recall the words of ancestor Paul Robeson, "The artist must become a freedom fighter." For whom does he write? Does he write to satisfy Pharaoh and his minions, or is his mission to liberate the suffering masses from ignorance, although he should never consider himself superior, since the teacher always learns from his students. If he listens, the poets will come to know the pain and trauma of his people and his duty is to relieve the pain and trauma with visions, plans and programs for the collective good.

The poetic challenge is to take people to new vistas of consciousness that reveal the soul, individual and communal, which are one. Language is a communal experience that is not the property of the poet. He can add to it with his imagination, but is there imagination without myth-ritual? What is the source of imagery except the collective myth of a culture or civilization.

In time of struggle and crisis, the poet must become a propagandist who whips defeat into victory, sadness into joy. Truth is paramount—there are lives at stake, hence this is no game, no job for money, no position for public adoration, no ego trip. Call it revolution, change of the most radical form. **Marvin X, "Poetic Mission." 24 January 2009**

Reading Marvin's "Poetic Mission" provoked a slew of questions, which I emailed to him and others in my address book. Poets Jerry Ward, Jr., Mary Weems, and C. Liegh McInnis (with a poem) responded. Marvin responded to a number of my questions, directly. Below I will place them in a Q & A format. After which, I will present the other responses.

Rudy: Maybe the subject should be "poetic missions." The heart of the problem for the poet is to discover what is *the* Mission, isn't it, if there is such a thing?

Marvin: Everyone, whether poet, scientist, lover, street sweeper, dope fiend, must ultimately define his/her life's mission or purpose. This is why brother Ptah suggested and I included the 13th Step in my *How to Recover from the Addiction to White Supremacy*.

What is the mission of the poet—words can kill or heal. Sonia Sanchez says, "Will your book free us?" Apparently not since the stores are full of black books and we still ain't free.

The dope fiend must come to understand recovery is only a step—once clean and sober then what? Only to sit in meetings claiming sobriety while still drunk on recovery—so after recovery, then discovery of one's mission.

Remember that Nancy Wilson song, "I Never Been to Me"? So we can be poet, mother, wife, husband, yet never discover our true mission in life, and even when we discover our mission, we may be too fearful to execute it.

Rudy: Is the audience "the people" or is it the poet's sense of the people? Or is the poet's audience, his choir? Is the poet really a "truth sayers"?

Marvin: The people are real live people who we should encounter in their/our daily round, thus we hear their cries if we listen, for they will tell us all, if we listen. It is not some echo in our head, life is beyond imagination (the poet's sense of the people). They will tell you their joy and suffering as they have told me while I was "selling Obama T shirts. The "people" told me again and again the ritual they planned for inauguration day, they told me their joy and happiness, no matter what intellectuals think. So it is my job to express their joy in this world of sadness and dread.

It was the same with the murder of Oscar Grant here in Oakland (the young black man murdered on New Year's Day by the BART police as he lay on his stomach). The people told me of losing their loved ones to homicide, yet received no attention because it was a black on black crime. They said even the police showed no real concern. Thus we must be guilty of selective suffering. If a white man kills us, we protest. When we kill us, nothing happens. The murderer still walks the streets and everybody knows he's the killer, but we say nothing out of fear, so families suffer grief and trauma alone, in silence. These people are not some abstraction, some imaginary sense of the people, not the poet's choir. The poet is either about truth or he is about lies, the choice is his.

Rudy: Does not the poet often obfuscate (or exaggerate) the truth, maybe for good reasons, maybe for awful consequences? I suspect that neither poems nor poets have a special Mission. It is a romantic notion that has outlived its times.

Marvin: All art is exaggeration. What is music but the exaggeration of natural sounds, birds, bees, water, wind, rain, thunder. The poet often takes poetic license with events, especially for dramatic effect. The poet, the musician, the painter must decide to join the revolution, as they did during the 60s and earlier, throughout time. This is not a romantic notion. How can the conscious poet ignore the suffering of his people when he sees they are ignorant, suffering poverty and disease? The poet must decide to aid them or leave them alone and praise the king, pharaoh or whomever he decides to clown for, shuffle and dance. For thousands of years the poetic mission has been to cry for freedom and justice. We know the source of art for art's sake—simply art of the master class, the rulers and oppressors who pass by the man on the roadside, robbed and half dead.

Rudy: Poems can be sledge hammers (hurtful) or they can be subtle (very subtle), like Elizabeth Alexander's inaugural poem, Praise song for the day? Which ones indeed carry more truth? Which ones are more effective in getting us where we want to go?

Marvin: As is well known, my style is the sledge hammer (Kalamu ya Salaam) or venom (Dr. Julia Hare). The youth on the streets of Oakland who have read my books say, "You're very blunt." Indeed, it is a style reflecting my lifestyle (you're too rough to be a pimp, said a prostitute).

And yet I am in awe of the feminine style. It is so gentle, subtle, smooth like a razor cutting to the heart. I am amazed at the feminine approach or style, especially in writing. But Elizabeth Alexander's inaugural poem was too soft for me, bored me to tears. Alice Walker's as well. Now the poetic message from Rev. Lowery was great. It moved the soul, my soul, it had the language of the people, not that academic bullshit language of Alexander's. See my "A Day We Never Thought" on the inauguration. But all these poems are a matter of style, not truth. Some like it soft, some like it hard. Some like Miller Lite, some like OLE English 800. We can get to the truth many ways, just get there.

Rudy: Is poetry the same as propaganda, which some associate with outright lies and distortions? How do we reconcile the two?

Marvin: All art is propaganda of one class or another, one group or another. Alexander's poem is bourgeoisie art to me. Would I be allowed to read my poems on such an occasion? The bourgeoisie runs from me on sight, no need to say boo. Although the *Oakland Post Newspaper* claimed they were going to run "A Day We Never Thought." I did not try to be the sledge hammer with this poem. I wanted to express the joy of the ancestors, the living and the yet unborn. Oh, Happy Day. Finally, the poet is not limited to one approach. He is able to don the feminine persona when necessary. It is his duty to know the spirit of male and female, and the non-gender of the spirit world?

Rudy: As you know many of the poems of the BAM period are relics and say more about the mindset of the period or the poet, for instance, some of the poems of Nikki Giovanni or poems of Sonia Sanchez. The poets themselves might argue that they are not relevant for today. Or they would denounce or apologize for them as the expression of youth, and not really *the Truth*.

Marvin: The mission of the Black Arts Movement was truth. There is still truth in the BAM poems, yes, forty years later. There is truth in Baraka's *Toilet*, *Dutchman*, and the poems of Nikki and Sonia. Yes, these poets might say their poems are not relevant but they are not truthful. The *Dutchman* is real. "If Bessie Smith had killed some white people, she wouldn't need to sing the blues. She could have talked very straight and plain about the world—no metaphor, no innuendo...."

And Sonia's lines are still relevant even if she finds them distasteful, such as "What a white woman got except her white pussy?"

Are the above words youth or truth? Of course time causes a maturation of thought. All the things I thought at twenty, some of them I no longer think, but there is still much truth in my early writings. Khalid Muhammad (RIP) used to tell me to hell with my current writings, he loved my early books such as *Fly To Allah* and *Woman, Man's Best Friend*. These are the books that awakened his consciousness, he told me more than once.

Baraka, the man who taught me how to say motherfucker, now objects to use of the term, except in a moment of passion. As for myself, all words are holy and sacred, none are obscene. What is obscene, saying motherfucker or actually fucking your mother, sister, daughter, son? There are those persons here in the Bay who object to my language, yet they have been indicted for incest and child molestation.

Simply because the BAM poets have reached old age does not negate the truth of our early writings. Of course the rappers took our language to another level that may indeed transcend truth for pussy and dick nonsense.

Rudy: Is poetry not also a personal statement that says more about the person at the time of writing, than it does the Truth? Take for instance your poem in response to the slaughter in Gaza.

Marvin: My poem "Who Are These Jews" is basic truth. And if it's true for me, it's true for you. But the essence of the poem was said by Jesus 2000 years ago, John 8:44. Was Jesus lying then, am I lying now? At what point do we come out of denial and admit we got some devils up in here? Why should Hamas recognize the existence of Israel, does Israel recognize the existence of Hamas, the democratic victory of Hamas?

Rudy: How do the "people" really know when the poem or the poet has really failed to speak to the real needs of the people?

Marvin: Are the people deaf, dumb and blind? Have you not read a poem or book that changed your life? The people tell me all the time my writings transform their lives. Truth transforms, lies do not, not for the better. Lies lead to destruction, truth to construction of people and society.

Responses



THE TRUTH is not an entity but a conflicted set of conditions, phenomena which our human minds might envision or speculate about but never fully grasp. In that sense, poetry seeks to represent an insight about a truth. What is made of a truth in a poem varies among readers and most certainly between different generations of readers, particularly if the poem is topical.

You are right in suggesting that we ought to talk about the missions of poetry. When I write a poem, I do have a mission in my head, but my readers may or may not perceive what that mission was intended to be or to do. Knowing that poems have both limits and unforeseen consequences, I believe my work is designed to move readers to have fresh thoughts. The act of reading a poem involves change, of course, but whether the reader gets the point is a matter of chance.

—Jerry Ward



Poetry is an art and like all art its success/impact/power is up to the interpretation of each audience member who engages it. What constitutes a good poem or a powerful poem or a truth telling poem varies based upon interpretation . . . there is no one meaning, no one way of expressing whatever inspires a poet to write.

Also, poets write for a variety of purposes . . . some, like me (Harlem Renaissance poets, Black Arts Movement Poets, Socially conscious Spoken Word artists), use our poetic voices most often as political acts to speak out against the injustices of the day, to speak truth to power—historically, this is one of the reasons many poets have been considered dangerous to various power regimes resulting in imprisonment, exile, and censorship.

Some poets believe the role of the poet is to make the mundane memorable, to record various degrees of beauty based upon their interpretation of what that is, to describe the world they are living in for future generations, without regard for politics, protest, or social justice.

Some poets believe it's all about performance, giving the audience what they want to hear for popularity purposes, to win Slam poetry competitions.

Some poets are introspective to the point of confessing, zeroing in on their personal trials, tribulations, and successes.

I am not one to publicly dis a poet because a poem that says nothing or little to me, could mean the world to someone else who is able to step inside the poem and make meaning based upon the experiences they bring to what the poet has written. A poem that doesn't make me feel anything, though it may be technically flawless, is not a good poem to me, but—

There is no one way to be a poet, there is no one purpose, there's only folks who have a gift for metaphor, simile, rhyme, rhythm, imagery, trope, allegory, for seeing the world through a particular lens—doing our best to do what we do because we have to . . .

--Mary Weems



“What Good Are Poems?”

by C. Liegh McInnis

Can a poem be as effective as a .357?

Can the images of a poem spray buck shot holes into the body of a greenback stuffed sheet wearing shoat?

Can a poem be thrown as a brick through the window of a grocery store so that we may pillage and plunder its shelves for food for the hungry?

Can a poem be laid on top of a poem,
be laid on top of a poem, be laid on top of a poem
until we have built a shelter for the homeless?

Does a poem need a million dollar war chest
or a foundation grant to be mightier than the sword?

What good does a poem do a spoiled, bloated belly?

Can a poem clothe the naked?

Can a poem improve an ACT score?

Can a poem pay the rent?

Can poems assassinate Negro turncoats
who have sold their souls to racist rags?

Can poems cut short the lives of serpentine superintendents
who slyly suffocate African babies in Euro-excrement
disguised as Caucasian curriculums?

Poems are the sperms of revolution.

We need poets to stop adding extra syrup and saccharine
to their sonnets so as to appease the pale palates of people
who have not the stomach for the truth.

We need poets to stop
masturbating away their talents into literary napkins.
We need poets to start impregnating thoughts of
Black magnolias bursting through white cement
into the minds of Raven virgin souls who without it
toil in the reproductive process of self-aversion.

Poems are the sperms of revolution.
Are you making love to your people,
or are you fornicating away your existence?