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Calypso, Spoken Word and the Oral Tradition*

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# ADRIAN GREEN WIELDING SPOKEN WORD AS WEAPON: THE MAKING OF AN ARTISTE



*Matthew Murrell*

Adrian Green is a spoken word performer and writer with a background in the visual arts and a focus on the arts as developmental tools. Green is a two-time Gold Award winner in Barbados' National Festival of Creative Arts, a recipient of the Prime Minister's Award in the performing arts, a three-time Barbadian Slam Poetry Champion, and two-time winner of the Emancipation Roots Experience Show. He writes a weekly column for the *Nation* newspaper where he often critiques society or the powers that be. He has been featured in a number of Barbadian film and theatre productions. His three CD compilations of poetry are "Random Acts of Conscience," "Hard Ears" and "Art is Chemistry."

Green holds an M.A. in Communications, a B.A. in Advertising and Fine Art and is currently pursuing a postgraduate degree in Cultural Studies at the University of the West Indies. He has developed courses and programs which use actor training methods and spoken word performance as means of self-development. Adrian Green has performed and presented to audiences in Europe, North America, Africa and throughout the Caribbean.

Within the interview, I chose to focus on Adrian's developmental consciousness as an artist. Throughout his journey, Adrian has purposely and methodically positioned himself to be socially and culturally aware of his surroundings. For him, personal development and artistic integrity are married to create the quintessential cultural activist that he has been known to be. As a

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cultural activist, Adrian Green has fought for African consciousness and continuously engages in conversations about African, Caribbean and Barbadian/Bajan identity; its progression and its definition to redefinition. As a social and community activist, he utilizes his abilities to engage in personal development for many diverse communities in Barbados, primarily the younger and more impressionable generation. On an educational standpoint, the article also takes a look into Adrian's journey through academia, his battles within the area and the bridging of the intellectual and the grassroots creative. Green has used spoken word as a weapon and tool for engagement in political, cultural and social thought far less than entertainment.

**Matthew Murrell:** Thanks again for doing this interview. In order for one to understand Adrian Green, I think we should start an expository. Can you give a brief summary of your beginnings within spoken word and how it segued into your cultural activism?

**Adrian Green:** My spoken word journey started seeing the Poet Heru and being amazed by what he was able to do with just the power of his words and thoughts. How he was able to captivate an audience for an extended period of time with just words and ideas, without music, without a beat, no background dancers, no accompaniment whatsoever; it was just him and whatever he brought along with his spirit. I said to myself, 'Wow, I would love to be able to do that.' What appealed to me was the way he did it came across as a form of cultural activism in that he and other spoken word artists, their ideas are pro social. They reflect what is going on in society and the world at large. They articulate problems and solutions as well. This was my introduction to spoken word as well as cultural activism.

**MM:** You've used your platform as a spoken word artist as part of social activism. Can you clarify the areas for which you advocate, and the importance of why activism is needed for such a movement or movements?

**AG:** I'm an artist. There are few things in a society as influential and active as its art. I have written about a diverse set of topics, I've written about Caribbean identity, African identity, domestic violence, politics, respect for the arts, and other number of things of which not all I can recall but are a part of our social Caribbean landscape. Really and truly, it's all one thing and the dignity of human beings, the dignity for human beings and being a human being. My work is an exploration of art and the art of being human. There is not a better form to do that than the arts, for me; it is through the arts that we become more human or better human. The arts are a part of programming and re-programming. The arts are not only a form of expression of the human spirit, but they also shape and mould the human spirit as well. Whether a person intends it to be so or not, art is activism. I share the best of my mind in the most artful way I know how, and coach others to do the same.



Adrian Green mentoring young spoken word poets for  
“We Come with Pieces”. 2019.

**MM:** You've carried your artwork and spoken word artistry into social and cultural activism, merging them into one thoroughfare; but outside of that you've also done what one can consider to be motivational speaking or public speaking. Not many of our artists do both; we normally divide the two worlds differently in a socio-political context. For what reason did you choose to do this?

**AG:** I don't particularly like the term 'motivational speaking'; the term I currently use is personal development work, so further to what I was saying earlier, the act of being an artist is intrinsically human and personal development work. You are shaping the culture; you are shaping people by being an artist. So for me, it is a seamless transition from becoming a spoken word artist to someone who does personal development in seminars or workshops or even being an educator. I've taught in our secondary school system and visit secondary schools regularly, either to do workshops, seminars or to perform. Really and truly it's a continuum; the difference really will be in the level of artistry that is involved and engagement.

**MM:** Can you give me an insight into your personal development work? Are you a part of an organisation or institution, or is this work you do privately?

**AG:** I've worked with schools and organisations such as A Ganar Barbados which is a sports program, The Free Mind Institute, which is a personal development company, Info Life which deals with HIV/AIDS educational awareness and also the Ministry of Youth Affairs. I believe in working with various programs. I've been able to see almost every class in every school in the island over a period of three years; secondary school that is. I also do stuff for the primary schools; most of it is charity work. I don't really publicise that because one, it is not for publicity and two, once people hear you're doing something for charity, then everybody wants to call you. People call me privately and if they have money, I get paid; if they don't, then I don't get paid.

**MM:** In a conversation we had previously, you spoke about the totality of an artist, that there is no distinction between the artist, his personal life, work life and student life. Obviously, I mean you in this context; can you elaborate on the existence of that totality?

**AG:** Concerning the totality of an artist and the distinction between personal life, artist life and student life, of course there are distinctions. The shape of those distinctions and the rigidity of those distinctions will definitely differ from artist to artist, so for instance, for me: my personal life doesn't necessarily feature prominently, overtly in the art that I produce. However, on another level, there is no distinction because it is the same person. It may not be the same presentation; you don't present to your family the same way you present to your audience and vice versa, but it is the same person. People, all of us, are multifaceted and multidimensional and the dimensions you choose to show in whatever arena you are in may vary or they may coalesce

to different extents. So yes, they are distinctions in one sense, but in another sense, those distinctions are not always well defined.

**MM:** Education, whether formal or informal, is an integral part of an artist's development. Currently you're on an educational pursuit at UWI. Tell me more of what you're doing, why you're doing it and what you expect to gain from it.

**AG:** Currently I am pursuing a postgraduate degree at the University of West Indies, Cave Hill in Cultural Studies. The reason that I am doing this is because I began my work as an artist, as I said earlier, as a form of activism. It became clearer as I matured that there were things that I did not understand; there were holes and gaps in my knowledge and nuances that I wanted to get a better handle of. One of the ways to solve those lapses is through academic study, and there is a body of scholarship in the Caribbean that is not well known and not well tapped into. I wanted to tap into the body of knowledge and scholarship, and that is why I chose to do the postgraduate program. I'm not only doing it as a way of strengthening myself as a Caribbean person or as an African person but also as an artist and as an activist. One of the issues that I am facing is that in academia, or at least at Cave Hill, they make a very sharp distinction between academic work and artistic work. I think that is a problem. The distinction isn't as sharp as to be believed, especially in the Caribbean context.

**MM:** I can sympathize with you there, especially on the duality of brains being shut down and off. I had that experience as an undergrad doing fine arts and still having to complete studies on the main campus. Can you elaborate on that distinction a little more? Especially given in Cultural Studies many people in study are artistic scholars who've reached masses better in creative ways than through scholarly texts.

**AG:** With regards to the distinction that some people, not everybody in academia, would make between academia and artistic work, in the Caribbean we have academics who are also artists making strong impacts: Kamau Brathwaite, George Lamming, Wilson Harris, Orlando Patterson, a number of them. Most of them were authors, writers of books and/or poetry, but we have a tradition where there are persons whose works transcended art and academia.

**MM:** Has this new venture put a pause for you to create new content, or are you creating as you're developing into your studies? What is the process like for you navigating both worlds along with your activism?

AG: The process of doing the postgraduate degree and even before that, in thinking of my ideas and reformulating, questioning and interrogating myself in what I believe and how I approach things, that did put a pause in releasing artistic products, but the artistic process was still continual. So while people are questioning why I haven't been releasing artistic products in terms of spoken word pieces recently, the artistic process of learning and developing as an artist has been ongoing. There is a challenge in a program that makes that distinction of academic work and artistic work. It's almost like there's a different brain, one to turn off and turn on or a different part of the brain to turn on to do academic work. As much as I would like them to merge, I am not necessarily in a space or in an institution that is conducive to that. That doesn't mean that I haven't been contributing; in the last three to four years I've been writing a column in the newspaper, which in itself is a form of art and I would say just as valuable as my spoken word work.

MM: In the passing of our esteemed elder Kamau Brathwaite, his contribution to the pride of our Nation Language is very important. As a relatively young elder among the spoken word community, do you see idioms of the Bajan Nation Language as Kamau presented to the world preserved in the art form as intended (i.e., drums, call and respond, dialect)?

AG: The Nation Language as Kamau calls it, I guess it is prominent in my work in that I speak the nation language. I don't think there is a nation language in Barbados; I think there are nation languages. If you are from St. Lucy, you sound different from if you are from St. Philip, St. George, from Bridgetown; you sound different if you come from the heights, the terraces, the villages, if you come from the housing schemes. You sound different. There are many Barbadoses; it is one of the peculiarities of living in this small space. For me, I present my spoken word, much like I present myself in my daily life. One of the comments that I usually get from people is 'What? I didn't think you used to talk so for real!'. I don't know what that really means, but other than the spoken word, what I present is of the character of Adrian Green. What I will say is, there's an absolute power in being you and who or what you represent.

MM: Where is the next phase for cultural activism? What is it we are failing to accomplish or rather attempting to accomplish?

- ✚ Preservation of culture (dangers of tourism and government negligence)
- ✚ Intrusion of outside culture
- ✚ Inclusion of other forms of activism
- ✚ Exposing the world to Bajan/Caribbean culture

AG: Cultural activism from the perspective of the Caribbean or the African diaspora, what is it we are failing to accomplish or rather at attempting to accomplish? That is a heavy question. I don't like the term preservation of culture because it can apply to some people that you are trying to keep culture in a static state. That's not what culture is; culture is very dynamic and culture changes all the time. Human consciousness shifts all the time; we're constantly learning and developing.

So maybe a better way of putting it is that you want to have a preservation of a thread that runs between cultural generations and a certain level of continuity and awareness of each subsequent cultural generation. This is something that at least in Barbados, we are failing at. Either the elders don't want to pass on their knowledge or their information or the youth are not open to what is being passed on; or the noise of cultural penetration, the culture of outside drowns the communication between generations. This is something that worries me a lot. I see in a lot of young people, sometimes cultural activists, that their activism is in a context that is not their own, which is understandable. In an age of cultural imperialism and cultural colonialism, many of us are highly influenced by North American culture, mass media and thought than we are Caribbean or indigenous thought or media, and hence our reference point is from outside.

The arguments we make and the perspectives we make oftentimes do not reflect the reality that is around us but rather the reality of somewhere else because that is what we are influenced by. For example, when I first started using Barbadian dialect or Nation language if you prefer, many spoken word artists were amazed. They didn't know you could use spoken word like that. They thought in order to use spoken word, you had to use an American accent. Now that was just in style. In terms of content we have a similar issue; when I hear many spoken word artists or activists get up to speak, it's almost as if they are reciting from a playbook, a school of thought that is alien. I don't know how to express that; it would take some time for me to express that.

Like I said, I got into spoken word not only from the power of style but from the power of the thought, the ideas, the content of ideas that I saw being expressed, and it is not uncommon to hear people express ideas that sound as if they are lifted from somewhere else and that they themselves have not really thought them through. It is another form of cultural imperialism wrapped up or disguised as cultural activism; it is insidious and nefarious and sneaky! It is something you have to be aware of. It is something, I myself have fallen prey to on more than one occasion; we've all fallen for in so many diverse angles and sources, but it is incumbent upon the artist or activist to interrogate themselves and interrogate why they think it and how they think it and how they came to think it, so when they put forward their thoughts to the public, they have done their due diligence. I can't say it enough, there is not enough self-interrogation being done.

In terms of introducing the world to Barbadian/Caribbean culture to the world? I've traveled quite a bit, Europe, North America, Caribbean and Africa as a performer and as a speaker, and one thing I've learnt is that, in my experiences, people are open and welcomed to you and your authentic self. I have performed to audiences that were not native to English speaking dialects, and I may slow down the piece a little bit, but I pretty much perform the same way I would in Barbados and they get it. They get it, because they respond in the places I know they are to respond to and even performing it in the Caribbean, sometimes I may be insular to the Caribbean, but when I do pieces that are specific to the Barbadian experience, the people from other Caribbean islands can relate because they go through the same things.

**MM:** Final question, spoken word in Barbados: how does it create a space or a connection to society or if it doesn't, what do you think?

**AG:** In terms of how or not spoken word creates a sense of space and place in a community, I think that in general art is a tool like a hammer or a pliers or a fork or whatever; it is only as good as the consciousness that we use it. A fork can be used to eat food or it can be used to stab somebody; it can be used as a dining of a community, like eating together at the table, or it can be used individually or aggressively. So spoken word in particular and art in general are no different. If you are not conscious in your space and place then your art will not be. If you are conscious of your space and place in the community, your art will be. You can do what you want with it; I'm not really idealistic about it. I'm no purist about art or where art is concerned. It's dynamic. Anything you do, the philosophy behind it is very important. I think this is very important; we live in a very anti-philosophical and anti-intellectual time, where when you try to have these types of conversations, everybody is like 'lewwwe talk about the practical stuff',<sup>4</sup> where there is nothing wrong with a good theory or philosophy as long as you don't get stuck there.

In my approach to spoken word or my philosophy in spoken word from the way I view spoken word as an artform, is that it is the art of making art as your person. By that I mean, each of us has a personality, each of us has a character, each of us has a set of elements that makes us who we are. It distinguishes us from other people and for me, spoken word is the way that you develop these elements into an artform into itself as a presentation. I said one time in a workshop that spoken word is the art of being yourself under the spotlight.

So in that respect, it is a very individualistic artform, I don't mean that in a negative way; I mean because in the way it should be approached to me, it should help in a way, build a strong individual who then is secure in working with a community who will not lose themselves in community but can integrate well in the community. That's the way I see it, ideally. So spoken

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<sup>4</sup> 'Lewwe' - Bajan or Barbadian parlance for 'Let us', loosely translated to 'Let we'

word, then, is the way of finding your personal space and place and integrating them into a wider or larger place or space.