

At The Intersection of Art and Advocacy

Writer and SUNY professor Kofi Antwi artfully merges local community writing workshops with his advocacy of amplifying marginalized voices.

By: Kylie Adedeji



Picture taken by Kylie Adedeji at the Syracuse University Art Museum.

Brooklyn-native-turned-Central-New-York-resident Kofi Antwi is on a mission to reignite the creative spark in the youth of the Syracuse local community. Through dynamic poetry workshops at the Community Art Center, Kofi Antwi actively works towards the inclusion of marginalized voices in Central New York.

Antwi is a SUNY Cortland professor, poet, and author of the poetry collection, "Tidal Wave." With his commitment to working with inner city youth and communities, Antwi has become a facilitator of writing workshops that encourage attendants to write about their personal experiences within the scope of their background, culture and community practices.

I interviewed Antwi about his thoughts on advocacy and organizing within local communities, during the Community Day Fair at the Syracuse University Art Museum,

where he hosted one of his poetry workshops and was featured as a leading storyteller. The conversation has been, edited for length and clarity.

How does your background influence your poetic voice and in what ways do you implement those factors into your writing?

I want to say about six or seven years ago, I first started to take poetry a little more seriously. I was working through forums. I was working through mentors, and poets that have “skin in the game”—that’s how we would say it—. I have spent some time creating poetry and poetry programs not only in New York City or New York State but also globally as well. So, through that process, I was able to merge my voice and interests in hip-hop, soul, R&B, and reggae, such as things that interest me like afro beats as well. I think that over time, I was able to find my voice as a poet and a writer. Fast forward to 2024 now, I’m teaching poetry, and facilitating creative expression workshops. And now, I look at myself. Yes, I am a teacher, professor, and facilitator of creative writing and poetry, but I am still developing my voice as well as a poet.

More about your workshops, could you describe the structure of them and what key elements you hone in on to make them more effective and engaging?

I’m smiling because when it comes to my life sometimes, I don’t want to say I have that much structure. Right, I’m an artist, I’m a poet. But with my workshops, I am structured. We usually work through prompts, we use other poets—established poets—as almost like a muse. We would like to enter into their world and their library of poetry. I feel like through that, I am able to kind of set up a format where people feel more engaged to—let’s say—write and understand poetry. Yes, I am currently working through a Haiku and Prose poetry form workshop and I am doing that at Community Folk Art Center with Adults as well. So that’s something I am venturing into some forms. So, going back to structure, we usually start off with a prompt. Sometimes, we bring in a poem or two for students and participants to observe that poem and see some of those poetic elements. Maybe, if it’s repetition, or if it’s rhyme, end lines, and things like that. So, there is a bit of structure in my workshop and there is also some flexibility where we are able to explore as well.

What inspired your journey of advocating and amplifying Black voices in local communities?

Currently, I am working on a grant. It’s through CNY Arts, and they ask similar questions. Right? Yes, it is because I work in the community and what I took from that similar question was: “I started off in Brooklyn, New York, in the inner city of Flatbush, where poverty was

rampant. Then, I moved to Staten Island and saw a lot of social changes and a lot of cultural changes as well." But, one thing that stuck out with me, as I started to grow older—36 years old now—. I think it was the first opportunity that I had in undergrad to teach, and I was also a mentor. I was working in an impoverished area in Utica, New York, and I think that's where something went off in my head. Right? Like, this is where I am supposed to be, and serving that community meant something more than moving back to New York City. And then also working in the south Bronx in poverty and crime, and just an underserved community. I started to realize I could make some real change here, instead of just working in these colleges and also working in Staten Island where they have access to arts. So, I think through those little testimonies and experiences, I was realizing like "Okay, this is where I should be".

How do you measure the impact of these workshops on local communities, and do you have any personal anecdotes regarding that?

When I think of impact, I think of the personal relationships I'm building with the participants, the organizations where I'm hosting or they're hosting the workshops as well. Just having participants be able to write something on the page, as silly as that sounds. I think sometimes as new poets and new writers, we are thinking—human beings, right?—that we need to fill up the page, or that it has to follow the format of Langston Hughes or Gwendolyn Brooks (which is great to understand form and—let's say—the structure of poetry). But, I think where the poet is able to find themselves is where they break away from that form as well.

And the impact, right? Thinking of the impact and the feedback that I am getting from participants. Have the poems moved them? Are they able to start their own personal work from those workshops? Also, seeing if I am able to connect different—let's say—cultures, ethnicities, or individuals. I think that's when I start to realize my impact when I am to break away from things that seem normal to me. When I am able to create a bridge for others to join me in this experience of poetry.

How do you see the conversation around marginalized voices taking on a major role in writing and poetry, evolve?

I remember when I first—and I always go back to my MFA. When I first started writing poetry, my professor told me that if you are seeking notoriety or fame for poetry, you're probably in the wrong business. But for marginalized individuals—let's say—black and brown people, LGBTQ+ populations, and communities as well. Those groups face even graver circumstances where yes, it is important to face our voice and our culture. But, I think

holding on to our authenticity and realizing that there is power in the work that we are doing.

We are not only healing ourselves, we are healing and setting a future for the younger generation as well. So, yes, our voice does matter. But I think as individuals and groups—black and brown people, people that are marginalized—we have to realize that the work that we are doing can not be quantified by institutions that are marginalizing us. I think it is a catch-22, we do want to make sure our voices are at the forefront but we also have to realize the spaces we are in that there are systemic issues and components that separate why our voices sometimes don't reach our audiences well.

So, how do you feel about these writer workshops and them inspiring more and more communities of color to get more into poetry?

It's tough, it's really tough. I think that's the issue that I am facing currently. Being African-American, being a child of parents who were born in Ghana. I tend to realize that if we are going off of trends and what is going on socially in our circles and communities, writing and literacy rates are down tremendously. So, pulling people into an art form that focuses on literacy, reading, and writing is difficult. When I try to "trick" individuals or mask the poetry, I create an environment where it is more of a creative expression. So, everyone has something they want to say. Maybe it's how they feel or maybe their community, or their family, or maybe their favorite artist. I think that once individuals realize that poetry is just expressing how you truly feel or depicting maybe an image or idea. It breaks away the idea or the phobia of writing poetry or feeling like you don't know what poetry is.

In what ways do you see your poetry and the book that you published, what ways do you see that influence the narrative surrounding black identity and communities in general?

I try not to get ahead of myself. I love my writing, I love my art, I love my poetry. But I do know I am just one individual who's adding to an opportunity and a platform for people to explore. For instance, *Tidal Wave*, which was my first collection of poetry. I think what it did for me more so than what it did for the masses. It gave me a voice, and it made me feel like I was on par with my colleagues. So, activism *is* important. But I think when we start to own our voices and who we are as people, then we can start to lead. There is a quote from my mentor from when I was in my undergrad program at Utica College, "If you want to lead, you have to move. You have to be that change that you want to see." So, I think that was the first thing that resonated with me. I needed to act if I wanted to see any type of change or create any change and I needed to be that kind of change. I needed to take action. So, when I

think of activism through art and poetry, I think about the people that I am affecting and then also how my words will create a timestamp for who I am as an artist. Because who I am in 2020 is not who I am going to be in 2024. I think—as black and brown people and Africans—sometimes we are called to take on so many different tasks and responsibilities. When people see our last names, they want to know everything about us and why we aren’t where we want to be. So I try to merge those different components of owning my own poetry knowing who I am, and just making those small little steps for change.

Is there anything you want to add relating to the topic of advocacy in the local community, or just anything in particular?

Well, currently I am at the Community Folk Art Center. I am advocating for as many art forms as there are. I have some special programs that are going to be developed soon that I plan on talking with you guys about. I think as a whole when I think about activism, the programs, and my involvement as well. I look at the younger people that I am working with. I know it is cliché, but if I am able to reach one or two kids—or young people—I know that I am making a better environment for those younger people. Kind of creating a safe haven for them, so I think the poetry workshop and the initiatives that I am creating offer these types of safe havens and acts of activism as well.