

# COMMUNITY

## LATIN@ GROOVE



**Magdalena Gómez**

Springfield's Poet Laureate, Co-founder and Artistic Director of Springfield's first and only Latin@theater, Teatro Vlda. Ms. Gómez has been a teaching artist for over 35 years.

## A Living Legacy: Flint, Michigan's Inaugural Poet Laureate, Semaj Brown

By Magdalena Gómez

Some folks are so real, so present, that they arrive intimately close, rise from the virtual world and feel like they're seated next to you. I kept having the desire to offer Semaj Brown the hospitality of food and drink even though we were meeting over Zoom.

Brown takes her role as the inaugural poet of Flint, Michigan seriously. She understands the power of poetry to inspire change, to heal and connect us to ourselves, each other, the Earth, and our true histories. Like myself, Brown is one of the 23 national recipients of the Academy of American Poets Poet Laureate Fellowship, 2021-2022, made possible for us with funds from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. We know and care that this award highlights more than just us — it shines a bright light on our respective cities and communities, while affording us the opportunity to continue in service to our communities through poetry, as we have done throughout our lives. Brown is yet another example of why I believe that none of us are strangers — that all of us are connected and belong with each other. I am grateful to Semaj Brown for sharing from her magic and vibrancy with us.

**MG: Where does your life in poetry story begin?**

**SB:** I am a daughter of Detroit, Michigan, born and raised. I married my love, Dr. James Brown, a Family Physician and moved to Flint where I became the Director of Community Outreach for the medical practice. I innovated health education programming that was power based, poetic. I wrote my first poem in 1968. My second grade teacher, Mrs. Bridgett, celebrated by copying it on to giant three line paper that graced the hall display cabinet: "War is a bad thing. It is also a sad thing. You look out to the field, and many bodies lay still. Next thing you know you are attending to someone's will. And you look out to the field and all the bodies lay still..." The Vietnam War was raging, and my young mind was an antenna for the time.

**MG: Clearly, your desire for justice, and your highly charged "antenna" remained lit. What**



**were some of the experiences that inspired and motivated you?**

**SB:** The year prior, there was smoke and fire; the 1967 Detroit Rebellion. My aesthetic was shaped by the zeitgeist of the anti-war, women's, labor, environmental, Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements. Benefiting from the toil of the generations before, I thrived. In retrospect, I call my generation, the *In Between Generation*, after the hard labor of Civil Rights and before Black Lives Matter. The social and political lull allowed for the largest growth in the Black middle class in history, especially in Detroit. Cultivated by the self-determined, "I'm Black and I'm proud" mantra, Detroit was not only the Motor City, Motown, home to labor movements, first Black mayor of a major city, the rise of Black political power, but it was also noted as The City of Neighborhoods. I lived in Conant Gardens, a historic working/professional class area, land established by an abolitionist, the first neighborhood where Black people were allowed to buy a plot of land and build a house.

**MG: Your mother was a strong presence in your life. What would you like to share with us about the legendary, Bessie L. James?**

**SB:** My mother, a classically trained student instructor at the Detroit Conservatory of Music and her mother, Elmira, a day worker, also classically trained, purchased two plots of land and built a home. This was a huge feat for two Negro women in 1938. So much so, it alarmed the FBI, who investigated every penny of their savings. The World War II war effort broke opportunity wide open for African Americans, offering government jobs in mass for the first time in United States history. Mother entered the secretarial pool.

After my parent's divorce, she returned to the Revere home with her two daughters, me and my older sister, Jacqueline. Every other night she and I would read poetry, always anticipating the new publication from the now, historic Broadside Lotus Press. Then, Broadside Press founded in 1965 by scholar/librarian poet, Dudley Randall, is the

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oldest continuous publisher of African American poetry, publishing first noted poets: Sonia Sanchez; Haki R. Madhubuti; Audre Lorde; Etheridge Knight; Nikki Giovanni; and including Gwendolyn Brooks. Today, I am a Broadside Press poet, the progeny, next generation. Growing up in the crucible of literary excellence was a gift and responsibility.

By high school, I was a serious music student attending a downtown magnet college preparatory school, Cass Technical High School, absorbing the specialized curriculum that emphasized music ensembles, theory, and loads of math and science. The 4000 students in attendance were following the design form of W.E.B. Du Bois Talented Tenth social theory. I studied violin with Joseph Striplin, the first African American member of the Detroit Symphony. Practicing a minimum of five hours a day, I also played in the Highland Park Chamber Orchestra and the Cass Tech Symphony.

#### **MG: Where/when did you teach science?**

**SB:** I taught science in the Detroit Public Schools (DPS). With an undergraduate degree in Biology from Wayne State University, I began teaching High School Biology at Martin Luther King High School in 1986. I loathed the manner in which science was taught, sterile, divorced from reality and color. I first engaged with science as a child in my basement. My father bought and set up a science laboratory for me to explore, and I did just that! My beakers and test tubes, experiments were the delight of my summers. At the DPS I began writing integrated curriculum, developing a pedagogy that seamlessly combined arts with science. Eventually, I transitioned into professional development and educational consultation where my methods have been implemented to decode bias in standardized testing. I have developed curriculum and taught ages K-12 as well as engaging lectures on the university level.

#### **MG: When was the first time you knew you were an artist?**

**SB:** This is a difficult question to answer. My background was filled with mentors and community leaders who wrote, who were also engineers,

who danced and taught and who created visual art. Some the smartest people in our neighborhood had knowledge of the Earth. They were former farmers from the South who migrated North, driven off their land by white violence. They were specialists, herbalists, who advised the pharmacist and who lived one block north. These distinctions between artists and scientists were seldom recognized. It seemed to me the goal was to do everything well. I didn't think of myself as anything. I knew I was smart, Bessie's daughter and that I was destined for great things. The elders told me this, "You gonna make somethin' of yourself." I had no idea what that something would be, but I knew the entire community was depending on me.

#### **MG: What is the passion/desire that most drives you to continue to write?**

**SB:** I write because I am compelled to do so via external and internal forces. I receive much of my work through dreams. I awake and write and draw images presented during slumber. Visual art and my faithful friend, music, are both catalysts to poetry. Other times pre-poems and essays present as a gnawing that will not cease until having transformed the gnawing into words. Once I begin the process and I am completely over taken, there is nothing more fulfilling. But after the completion of the work, once satisfied, I quickly deflate, forget the satisfaction of writing, almost forget I am an author until the cycle begins again. My process is that of resistance, of tug of war and incredible peace.

#### **MG: Please tell us about upcoming projects.**

**SB:** I have a book of poetry soon to publish in 2022, entitled "Walking Rivers." The complementary essay is "The Water-Body Postulate. Our human relationship to water is described throughout:

"Walking Rivers" is delivered on the wide wing span of wave, across the girth of humanity, surfing smooth streams and thrashing emotional waters. While writing, many times inspiration touched down from the hazy vaporized ether or broke off from the once frozen tundra, slamming against my imagination, jarring me into water worlds, I had yet to conceive. I swam upheaval found in social justice puddles, and struggled the muck of toxic spills. Wearing hip waders, I jour-

neyed into political floods. Equipped with artist fins, swam deep into furtive wells, and with microscope in hand searched for the meaning of life in the soul of an amoeba. I wanted to expose the obvious, the all-apparent. For it is far typical to look past what is commonplace, to miss what is literally transparent and omnipresent—WATER. Water is life. Water is ALIVE. Like the planet Earth, human bodies are comprised of 60 to 75 percent water. That would seem to make us walking, talking rivers contained in suitcases of bone, and skin flesh.

#### **MG: How do you approach struggle in daily life?**

**SB:** Love is my fighting force; it is my breastplate. I was loved as a child and throughout my life. I am loved now. I have been cherished and made complete. Much has been poured into me from before my birth by my ancestors, then my mother and community, now my noble husband, James Brown, MD. I was cultivated in such a manner not to believe in my inferiority on any level and to believe all who live are worthy. Therefore, I have a reservoir of empathy and compassion to give to those who have been marginalized and disenfranchised. I have been given a great deal and with these gifts there is great responsibility. I am accountable to history.

#### **MG. What is your advice for living a fulfilled life?**

**SB:** Know that nothing is finite while understanding that everything is finite. Absolutism is sudden death. Consider everything so you might understand. Give grace to yourself and others. Know: You are legitimate because you exist.

#### **MG: Favorite quote?**

**SB:** "I have heard their groans and sighs, and seen their tears, and I would give every drop of blood in my veins to free them." -Harriet Tubman, from *Harriet, the Moses of Her People* by Sarah Hopkins Bradford.

*You may learn more about Brown's life, work, bookings, history and where to purchase her books by visiting: [www.semajbrown.com](http://www.semajbrown.com)* ■