

A Poet of Witness

LANGUAGE ARTIST
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PHOTOGRAPHY BY EVAN TEMCHIN
Ⓢ 15 MIN.

Bradley's first African American woman to earn full professor believes in the power of words to change the world.



A

paradigm shift happened when
DEMETRICE ANNTÍA WORLEY
'82 earned a Cave Canem
fellowship in 2004.

The weeklong retreat, which she attended once a year for three years, was the first time she was able to immerse herself in her craft. Her daily poems received feedback from writers such as former U.S. Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith and Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Jericho Brown. That's when Worley wasn't talking with writers like renowned playwright August Wilson.

"We had people there from (ages) 21 to 91," she said of the experience. "It was the first time many of us were in a place of all Black poets. That was the very first time I said, 'I am a poet' ... It was a life-changing moment because in 2011 my book of poetry, 'Tongues in My Mouth,' came out. Had I not become a (Cave Canem) fellow, I know my poetry would not have been as strong."

Her view might seem at odds when compared against a career filled with many accolades and awards, including Worley's poem "On this day, at this moment a ghazal," published in "44 on 44: Forty-Four African American Writers on the Election of Barack Obama 44th President of the United States."

But perseverance and determination are part of her nature, honed by generations of women who had to fight for the opportunity to better themselves. Worley's third great-grandmother was a slave, while her grandmother, who grew up on a farm in Mississippi, became a 1940s cosmopolitan woman living in Chicago. Her mother was the second Black girl to integrate her white elementary school. Worley had 40 rejection notices from publishing contests and book publishers before Main Street Rag Publishing Company accepted her manuscript.

"That's what gave me such strength, was to know the women who had made the way so that I could be here at this moment."

Women's voices factor strongly in the collection beginning with poet and civil rights activist Audre Lorde's quote, "Your silence will not protect you." It's a fitting line for poems dealing with issues like domestic violence, rape, oppression, redemption and freedom.

Some of the entries have real-life events as their inspiration. The crown of sonnets "Femicide/Femicidio ~ The Murdered and Disappeared Women of Ciudad Juarez, México" is about hundreds of women missing, mutilated or killed in that border locale since 1994, discarded as fugitives and prostitutes. In the last sonnet, Worley laments — like the Mexican women who have lost loved ones — over the Black women in Peoria who've met a similar, tragic fate.

Famed writer Kwame Dawes calls Worley's work, "committed to the task of truth-telling and political daring" that combines "impeccable poetic timing" and "delicate management of sentiment and emotion." Like Dawes, Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies Rob Prescott, who has served alongside Worley in the English department for 30 years, has enormous respect for her talents as well as her fortitude in bringing her work to fruition.

"I have a privileged understanding now of the profound inner strength she developed from her youth and throughout her amazing career," he said. "You will catch glimpses of it in her poetry, and the compassion she feels for others' struggles, trauma and triumphs that resonate with her own lived experience."

However despite such praise, Worley has struggled with fallow stretches brought on by self-doubt.

"Our artistic talents do not die; sometimes they are forced to sleep and smolder waiting for fresh air so that combustion can begin again," she wrote on her Facebook page in 2015. "I am a poet and for a 10-year period I did not write one word. Since I, as an individual, obtained the freedom to be myself, my words have never left me again. To everyone reawakening, welcome back into being yourself, and best wishes for the birth and life of your new self."

A QUIET, AVID READER

Worley grew up in Chicago and developed a love of reading at age 4 when her mother taught her by pointing

Excerpt from "Tongues in My Mouth"

"My ancestors are making me
practice my languages,
forcing me to make foreign sounds,
to turn new words over,
until the tongues in my mouth
speak in a single voice,
until the tongues in my mouth,
speak the truth that no one wants to hear."

out letters and words in the newspaper. She and her two younger brothers made frequent trips to the library where Worley would get as many children's books as she could carry. When she finished with those, she got permission to get books from the young adult section.

"I just learned so much about the world once I did that," said Worley. "At night, I was in my bedroom and there was a little piece of light. I would sit there and read, then I'd go to sleep. But I still wanted to read."

Her parents exposed her to as much of the world as possible, including opera, which confused the 8-year-old at the time. But her parents explained it was important for her to know what an opera was. More enjoyable were trips to the Ice Capades, museums and the zoo.

After earning an honorable mention for an eighth-grade essay in a Chicagowide contest, Worley began to consider a writing career. Her confidence grew when one of her short stories placed in a competition hosted by the Peoria Journal Star, followed by it placing at the national level.

"That really assured me that maybe I had talent. That's what I came to Bradley with — a sense I could do creative writing — it's when I probably started to take (writing) seriously."

HOMECOMING QUEEN TO WORLD TRAVELER

"I had such a great experience at Bradley," said Worley. "I did things. I wanted to run track, I was on the track team. I was a Pom-Pom Girl. I was president of Mortar Board (National College Senior Honor Society). I was president of Sigma Tau Delta (English Honors Society). I was doing things that gave me such a sense of self, and I knew we were changing Bradley. My Bradley experience helped me to realize education was what I took out of it."

She also ran for Homecoming Queen in her sophomore year and won, another first. Worley credits the university's founder — Lydia Moss Bradley — for being her inspiration after seeing an African American man in one of the school's earliest photos.

"(I said to myself) if Lydia created an institution where women were welcomed and people of color, particularly in this case, a Black man, that to me was a place where I was going to be."

After graduation, Worley earned her master's at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, followed by a teaching stint at Illinois Central College with students at widely varying writing levels. Some couldn't construct a basic sentence. Although she was a writing instructor, Worley didn't understand the reasons behind the



First sonnet from “Femicide/Femicidio ~ The Murdered and Disappeared Women of Ciudad Juarez, México”

i.
On this eve of the dead, I cry out loud,
“*por favor Virgen de Guadalupe, don’t
forsake me,*” before I open the door,
before I see *el policía* flat
black eyes, before his mouth opens to tell
me, my Solana, *m’hija*, is dead.

Our women and girls are vanishing from
Ciudad Juárez. Mi casa. All he brings
is a box with two leg bones; “Proof,” he says.
¡Ha! I’ve seen death; I know bones.
I cross myself, speak a *mamá’s* clear truth:
“On *m’hija’s* First Holy Communion,
She broke her right leg in two places.
These bones, two left bones, are not Solana’s.”

“In Mother’s House”

every Thursday
I am two dimensional,
thin enough
to walk down her hall
cluttered with small, still
figurines,
birds in flight,
clowns tossing hoops
poised in mid-air

I sit on the edge
of plastic couch covers,
protection from small
grape-jelly-covered fingers,
and stare
at faded gold brocade.

We exchange polite
conversation
before she asks why,
after 24 years,
am I still in school.

I answer her question
and my words,
paisley petals,
drift into my lap.

Thursdays
I leave,
avoiding staring
into her.
Behind me,
the doorknob turns.
I exhale
and draw in fresh air.

different methods. The experience led her to pursue doctoral studies at Illinois State University.

“At that time, there was a movement in composition that wanted to understand why students write the way they do,” she said. “I found that fascinating.”

Worley started lecturing in Bradley’s English department during the last two years of her doctorate, and she received a full-time, tenure-track position in 1990. She’s earned several awards, including the Outstanding English Faculty Member Award in 1993, the New (Untenured) Faculty Achievement Award for Teaching in 1994 and English Faculty Member of the Year in 2019. This year, she became the first African American woman at Bradley to achieve the rank of full professor.

Tim Conley, associate professor of English, emeritus, considers the honor well deserved and said Worley’s teaching has enabled hundreds of Bradley students to learn about heritage, culture and themselves.

“I’ve known Demetrice as a colleague and friend for decades, and she’s been a model of the teacher-scholar-mentor,” he said. “As one of Bradley’s very few African American faculty, she has served as a mentor to countless African American students, many of whom turned to Demetrice in the most challenging times. She is a wonderful jewel.”

Her teaching style engages students to be active learners, and Worley isn’t afraid to challenge them in a supportive manner. She believes it’s part of the educational process to teach students to think differently.

“Some students are ready and some students are not as ready, but a university education is where you learn to engage in civil discourse. We don’t all agree, but we listen to what the other person has so we can evaluate. Does that person’s position add something to what I’m thinking or does it not? That’s something students have to learn how to do.

“I had a student say, ‘Oh, I get it now. This is what’s happening!’ And the student was so happy the activity I created helped her to make a connection she had not been making. That’s one of the reasons why I like teaching. I like seeing them grow from freshman to seniors and see them looking back and say ‘I understand now why you were hard on me’ or ‘It makes sense to me now.’”

Being able to teach abroad for over 20 years has provided Worley with her own educational experiences, including trips to several European countries, Australia and Russia. Associate Professor of English Christine Blouch, who directs Bradley’s study abroad program, was quick to share gratitude for her colleague.

“I taught with Dr. Worley in the small mountain town of Igls, Austria, in one of my first teaching experiences abroad, and she affected all of my teaching after that experience,” said Blouch. “She models intellectual generosity and intercultural learning. What she taught has stayed with me. I’m sure it has for her students as well.”

“I would not have traveled the world if I had not been here at Bradley,” said Worley, who’s also visited 46 of 50 U.S. states. “To me, one of the biggest joys was taking students into a country they did not know and immersing them into it as much as we could so they were not a traveler on a bus, they were living there for a little bit.”

FUTURE PLANS

More travel is on Worley’s agenda for the future, as is another book of poetry. She’s also interested in pursuing creative non-fiction and possibly a book about her time overseas. Finding uninterrupted time to write is difficult, even with a break from teaching over the summer. During the school year, Worley said her focus is on ensuring she gives her students her best efforts.

“It doesn’t stop me, it just means I think I need to get up earlier in the morning and get my brain working ... I never have let it keep me from my creative (work) and as I look forward into the future, I don’t ever see that there’s going to be an ‘either/or’; I will continue to write my poetry.”

She’s currently working on a book manuscript with new and revised poems. Worley is excited to see what’s going to come together.

“That’s one of the best things about now,” she said. “I can come up with a new dream.” 