

Detroit Poet Laureate: A Local and National Necessity

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Abstract

From 1981–2020, Detroit officials appointed a city-recognized poet laureate. Though the position has been vacant since the 2020 death of Naomi Long Madgett, this essay advocates for reinstatement of a Detroit poet laureate to help spotlight important Detroit artists and to ensure that the words and ideas of Detroiters are sustained and celebrated. A poet laureate would continue to uniquely serve Detroit to help preserve its complex history and contribute to a literary canon specific to the city.

In 2021, Amanda Gorman spoke at President Joe Biden's presidential inauguration. She recited her poem "The Hills We Climb." Young, confident, and full of spirit, the poet effectively gripped audiences and captured the mood of the moment. She recited, "The new dawn blooms as we free it. / For there is always light, / if only we're brave enough to see it, / if only we're brave enough to be it" (Parsons). She emotionally moved the audience towards a mood of celebration and change, paralleling the transition of power. As the first United States youth poet laureate, she used her position as young black woman to uplift and inspire listeners in that moment. She is just one of many with the title of youth, national and local poet laureate that are given the opportunity to create poetry and connect to their communities from a position of power and artistic freedom. The role of a poet laureate not only provides an empowering platform for an individual artist to create and write, but helps catalog the sentiments, events, and personality of a place. Continuing the tradition of appointing a new poet laureate to serve Detroit will help

continue the preservation of its complex history and create a literary canon specific to the city.

Philip Levine's tenure as United States Poet Laureate from 2011 to 2012 is an excellent example of how the platform of the role can elevate a city. Appointed by the Librarian of Congress, the national poet laureate, "seeks to raise the national consciousness to a greater appreciation of the reading and writing of poetry" ("History of the Position"). Part of their role includes presenting and reading their poetry in an annual lecture, bringing other poets and artists to the national stage, and bringing their own unique emphasis and perspective to the position. As a writer heavily influenced by the city of Detroit, Levine brought his love for and dedication to the city to the role, effectively bringing Detroit poetry into the spotlight.

Because Phillip Levine's poetry is so rooted in Detroit, his work is an entry way for audiences to understand and feel connected to the city's culture. For example, his 1999 poem "Belle Isle, 1949" illustrates a Spring night at the landmark island. A first-person account, Levine describes running, "down into the Detroit River / to baptize ourselves in the brine / of car parts, dead fish, stolen bicycles, / melted snow." This sentence encapsulates so many of the complicated dynamics of the city. Beautiful and multi-faceted, the baptism he speaks of represents rebirth and a fresh start in the water filled with a variety of seemingly random objects, the "stolen bikes" next to the "melted" snow implies a complexity in the urban landscape yet a balance in its natural elements. The juxtaposition centralizes the rebirth trope that is fundamental to Detroit's identity, both to natives and outsiders.

In "An Extraordinary Morning" Levine captures that same *joie de vivre* experienced by residents of Detroit, contrasting the dominant media narrative of decay and destruction. He writes of, "two young men-you just might call them boys- / waiting for the Woodward streetcar to get / them

Downtown.” By selecting Woodward as the location, he immediately centralizes and directs his poem to Detroit residents. Because Detroiters have an immediate association with the street name, it is almost as if there is a secret solidarity with the audience that knows what and where Woodward is. Though anyone can read this poem and be moved by its content, only people with a connection to Detroit realize the impact of including the street name and relate to the exact location he describes. Levine speaks to the citizens of Detroit directly, a token even more special when his work was put on the national platform. By receiving the appointment from the United States, there is an implication that because Levine’s works matter to the country, so, too, do the stories and experiences of Detroit residents.

As “Extraordinary Morning” grows, the standard themes of Levine’s entire life’s work emerge. The line, “Yes, they’re tired, they’re also / dirty and happy” encapsulates the work ethic and history of labor tied to the city. The two men are finishing their work week, charged with exhaustion yet, “singing a song about a woman they love / merely for her name, breathing in and out / the used and soiled air they wouldn’t know / how to live without, and by filling / the twin bodies they’ve disguised as filth.” As they sing on the street corner after a long week of work, they find a lighthearted comfort, emphasizing a specific work ethic combined with a love of life. Though they find it natural to work, they also find it natural to finish the work and celebrate. Levine often writes of this complexity between work, place and fulfillment inspired by the labor movement, lifestyle, and history of workers in the city. Though often sidelined to one note narratives, he romanticizes and acknowledges their multifaceted existence.

Perhaps most strongly in “The Radio,” Levine illustrates how deeply the city is ingrained in his work. Once again, he uses specific markers of place to describe the location in Detroit. “Another morning I rose before work / and played the radio, dance music / from Canada.” Here, he

describes the proximity that Detroit has to Windsor, a unique geographical position that while normal to Detroiters, contributes to a cosmopolitan culture of music, food, and relationships that outsiders may not understand. As he imagines others dancing to the music, he imagines, “the men were / working men, dressed up in dark / heavy wool suits even in summer / and they swung their thickened bodies / like small boats in rough waters.” His description of working men transcends tropes. He manages to humanize and romanticize this misunderstood demographic, while respecting the contribution and strength of the lifestyle. Finally, he demonstrates the potential that the energy of the city has by, “wondering / was it there ahead today for me / what men and women searched for / all their lives?” He asks a question that is localized, but also meaningful to all.

Because Phillip’s Levine poetry captures not only the location but mentality of Detroit, his position as United States Poet Laureate created a direct link between Detroit arts and the national audience. Detroit declared Chapter 9 Bankruptcy in 2013, directly following Levine’s year as laureate. It was a period of severe negative attention on the city, fueled by a narrative of governmental mismanagement, desolation, and poverty. In 2013, the New York Times published an article titled “Anatomy of Detroit’s Decline” detailing the racial tension, lack of transit system and reliance on the auto industry that contributed to a “collapse of this metropolis.” The dominant messaging ignored many of the local efforts to preserve the community and the many individuals fighting to protect and preserve their homes and neighborhoods. The timing of Levine as national laureate prioritizing positive and introspective consideration of the city when all attention was overwhelmingly adverse is an effective demonstration of how important representation on a national level is. While papers were publishing reports focusing on tragedy, Levine continued to represent the people, power, and positivity of the city.

On the local level, the position of Detroit poet laureate has this same power. Dudley Randall was named Detroit's first poet laureate in 1981 by Detroit mayor Coleman Young. Founder of Broadside Press, Randall was heavily influenced by his youth in Detroit and wrote poetry that not only celebrated the city but documented its history. In his poem "Hasting Street Girls" he documents the life of a group of young women growing up in Black Bottom. He emphasizes the complexity and unique experience of growing up in this racially segregated environment, chronicling the reality of having to grow up too fast. He writes, "O little girls, so young, so foolish-wise / Flaunting such knowledge in your ignorant eyes. / You are like flowers that bud, then droop away, / Or like the bright, quick – darkened tropic day. / Lovers and kisses, cruel, careless, light, / will you remember down the long, deep night?" This ode to the youth focused on the premature sexualization of the girls growing up in Hastings Street not only humanizes the complexity of their existence but documents a crucial time in Detroit's history when the neighborhood you grew up in suggested what your future might hold. He continues to document place and time in "Laughter in the Slums." He writes, "in crippled streets where happiness seems buried / under the sooty snow of northern winter, / sudden as bells at twilight / bright as the moon, full as the sun, there blossoms / in southern throats rich flower of flush fields / hot with the furnace sun of Georgia Junes / laughter that cold and blizzards cannot kill." The pangs of growing up in the city and experiencing its severities also comes with a joy connected to being surrounded by family, neighbors, and community. Randall's sense of place and connection to it, evident in his work, made him an ideal candidate for the laureate position.

Naomi Long Madgett was named Detroit's poet laureate in 2001 and served until her death in 2020. A poet and a publisher, Madgett created Lotus Press, releasing and promoting the works of many important Black writers. Prioritizing the work of other poets over her own, her tenure as

laureate was defined by bringing many other important Detroit creators into the conversation and scene. Her poem “City Nights” illustrates the kind of writing she prioritized and spotlighted. She writes, “The conversation comes around to Grampa Henry / thrown into the Detroit River by an Indian woman / seeking to save him from the sinking ship. / (Or was he the one who was the African prince / employed to oversee the chained slave-cargo, / preventing their rebellion, and for reward / set free?) / The family will never settle it; somebody lost / the history they had so carefully preserved.” She illustrates the complicated history of Detroit residents and the unusual ways we remember the past and move into the future. Her focus on promoting black art and resistance arts continued her whole life.

As an artist living authentically and who dedicated her life to promoting the art of other artists (specifically from Detroit), Madgett’s appointment as city laureate not only suggested that the city cared about the arts, but valued the issues they were discussing. Madgett was focused on promoting Black Arts and publicizing political issues affecting her community such as police brutality and poverty in the inner city. During her time as poet laureate, she also received a Kresge Foundation Eminent Artist Award in honor of her dedication to amplifying the voices of black artists and contributing to the great legacy of Detroit writers.

The city of Detroit did not appoint a new poet laureate after Madgett’s death in 2020. This gap is not only a loss to the poetry community, but a loss to the city as a whole. The preservation of this role highlights important changemakers and visionaries to the city who help to categorize figurative and creative changes in Detroit’s history that are not necessarily cataloged by media and government reports. By promoting artists that are deeply connected and rooted to the neighborhoods and spirits of Detroit residents, they can create work that accurately represents the feelings and sentiments of those who actively live in the city.

Now more than ever, especially with the emergence of a new wave of homeowners and people investing money in the city, it is important that native Detroiters have someone that can represent them in an amplified position. Though the poet laureate is not necessarily a government position in the same way that the national role is, the appointee still serves their community in a representative way. They are the go-to authority in their field and a person capable of promoting their own work and the art of others. Much like Levine contrasted the dominant narrative of a failing city with his resilient and uplifting poetry, a new Detroit poet laureate could represent the reality of Detroit life and sentiment amid a continuing wave of gentrification.

The recent appointment of Detroiter Nandi Comer to the position of Michigan Poet Laureate after a 60-year gap in the position, shows how modern and crucial a role it is (Hendrickson). The list of qualified candidates is vast. Poet Robert Laidler, for example, channels a youthful excitement about Detroit in his poetry, while also maintaining a sense of its important and sometimes dark history. In his poem “Epistle” Laidler writes from the fictional perspective of both a father and son, examining the complexities of family and growing up. His work shows how an artist does not have to write specifically about the place they are from for it to still be ingrained in their work. He uses the world around him and formative memories and experiences to explore what it is like to be a young Black man interacting with the world today. His expressions parallel many of the thoughts of those coming up in Detroit today. By appointing him as Detroit poet laureate, those normal experiences might be considered worth taking seriously.

There is no lack of Detroit artists that exhibit Detroit’s quintessential resilience in their work. Melba Boyd, Chris Tysh, Jessica Care Moore, and Bill Harris are just a few of the many writers who would make phenomenal candidates for the role. Each of these candidates understand not only what

it is like to make art in Detroit, but to be formed by Detroit. As the city enters a new era of redevelopment and urban sprawl, maintaining a sense of history and preservation of the past is a crucial component in protecting the interests of native Detroiters. As more and more landmarks and institutions are demolished for the sake of capitalist interests, it is important to listen and have a sense of the origins of the physical and figurative landscape of the city. By appointing a local poet laureate with artistic talent and a sense of dedication to Detroit as a sacred space, the city can inspire and bring more people into the cultural conversation, protecting the interests that authentically serve residents. Additionally, by propelling more Detroit artists in positions such as state and national poet laureate, the unique attitudes and experiences of Detroit residents are spotlighted, effectively changing the dominant narrative into a narrative controlled by the people.

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