

'To be black is to be political'

BY JULIE SENSAT WALDREN

On the first Saturday night in May, while rowdy college kids roamed the Mifflin Street block party in search of their next keg, a quieter crowd gathered at Escape Java Joint on Willy Street. In the art gallery coarsely decorated with organic fair-trade coffee sacks, over 50 people sat in folding chairs and in the aisles. Madison's new poet laureate, Fabu Carter Brisco, took the mike.

A fiftyish African American woman in a purple dress and patterned headscarf, she smiled at the diverse mix of folks in front of her: whites, blacks and Latinos, students with cell phones and backpacks, gray-haired couples in jeans.

Fabu, as she's professionally known, was introducing the evening's guest, renowned poet Martín Espada. But first, she had a poem of her own to share. "It's pretty new and pretty raw," she said in a delicate voice.

She began a politically charged poem, and it wasn't until the last line that the audience realized it was an anti-Hillary Clinton piece. Fabu's voice rose as she arrived at the poem's final punch: "On the treacherous journey to power/she may have once believed/that white privilege was not her right/corruption was not her goal/and everyone had equal opportunity to be president. Until...Barack Obama."

There was a split-second of stunned silence, and then the crowd applauded. It was a tough subject to tackle at that May Day event organized by the progressive Rainbow Bookstore Cooperative. Fabu knew she would be reading to an audience not necessarily sympathetic to that poem, as Democrats and lefties across the nation duked it out over who would be the better candidate.

"I feel it took courage to read that to that particular audience," she says when asked about it later. "I knew what their sentiments would be. And if all the poem did was have people think more deeply about the issue, then I feel very happy."

As a poet, Fabu doesn't pull punches. To

Madison poet laureate Fabu doesn't pull her punches

read her work is to be confronted with what this country's racist past has done to African Americans. And as a columnist for *The Capital Times*, she's written about how she's felt betrayed by white women; how she fears for black children in Wisconsin, with its dismal reading scores and high rates of incarceration for African Americans; how racism is alive and well in Madison and beyond. "To be black is to be political," she says. "Just the fact that I exist is political."

Yet Fabu has a graciousness about her that makes her a natural community leader, and not just in the African American community. She's worked to encourage the poetic talents of schoolchildren and has brought African American history to several schools. She has led a citywide Kwanzaa celebration and helped bring the Wisconsin Book Festival to the Harambee Center on South Park Street, so literary events could reach a more diverse audience.

So when she was named Madison's third poet laureate last January, it fit with what she's been doing for decades — not just writing her own poetry but also promoting poetry across a wide spectrum of the community. And she's aware of the significance of her role.

"I've had people come up to me and say, 'We never thought it was possible for an African American woman to be Madison poet laureate.' That's a responsibility, and that is a joy."



KIM KEYES

The emotional one

Fabu arrives for our interview late, apologizing for having lost track of time while engrossed in reading. But she immediately draws me in with her warm, friendly manner. As we talk over iced tea, the conversation is unhurried and meandering, a holdover from her Southern upbringing. A question about the role of politics in her poetry leads to a 20-minute digression about her time in Kenya, her work in Madison's schools, and the differences between the racism she experienced as a child and the internalized racism of her son's generation.

Born Phyllis Ann Carter, Fabu (who officially changed her name at age 21) was always a creative child. "Poetry was everywhere, and that was during the black arts movement," she recalls of the 1960s. "I always wrote. Artistic children, you are identified early in life. I was considered the daydreamer, the emotional one."

Her mother was from rural Mississippi, and her father was a career Army man from Poughkeepsie, N.Y., whose job took the family to many states and overseas, including France and Memphis, Tenn., where Fabu spent much of her childhood.

After graduating from the University of Memphis with a B.A. in magazine journalism, she came to Madison in the late 1970s for graduate school, earning one master's

degree in African languages and literature and another in Afro-American studies. She then went to Kenya to do her Ph.D. research in Kenyan oral and written literature, drawn there by her interest in radical writer Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. But when an attempted coup shut the borders down soon after she arrived, she was unable to conduct her research or return home. Instead, she began teaching, married a Kenyan man and had a son. At one point, she thought she'd found her new homeland and would live in Africa the rest of her life.

But the marriage took a turn for the worse, and knowing that it wouldn't be possible for her to live as a divorced woman in Kenya, she grew concerned about her fate and that of her son. So the two of them returned to Madison. Last year she remarried, changing her name from Fabu Moga-ka to Fabu Carter Brisco.

Words are power

Though Fabu never completed her Ph.D., African and African American culture are major themes of her poetry. Her chapbook, *In Our Own Tongues*, examines language through three generations of women in her family. Growing up, she recalls that her grandmother used so many African reten-

tion words ("buckra" for white person, "pickaninny" for child) that Fabu often had to get an older cousin to come translate. "Oooh, she'd get so upset about that," Fabu laughs. "But she loved me anyway."

One of Fabu's longer poems, "The Mary Turner Lynching in Valdosta, Georgia," is written in the Southern black English of the time: "since me be a lil gal chile/me hear bout lynchin/me know bout lynchin/plenty colored mens wimens chirens lynched/in valdosta georgia."

That poem graphically describes a horrific lynching that took place in 1918. Others deal with personal struggles under slavery, the civil rights movement and life in the Jim Crow South. But her poetry also celebrates the sensory details of the South — greens simmering, her grandmother's garden, the rituals of a black woman getting ready for a night out in Madison. One poem declares, "I grew knowing that words are power in a woman's mouth./...Poet synthesis of African continent and Mississippi dirt roads/I am recreated from the flesh, bones and tongues of my mothers."

Since returning from Kenya in the late 1980s, Fabu has worked with children and families at community organizations such as Mentoring Connections, the Nehemiah Community Development Corp. and Ujima Counseling and Advocacy Services. She also serves as a private consultant in literary arts, African American culture and education. She conducts workshops for Dane County Human Services and works with area schools.

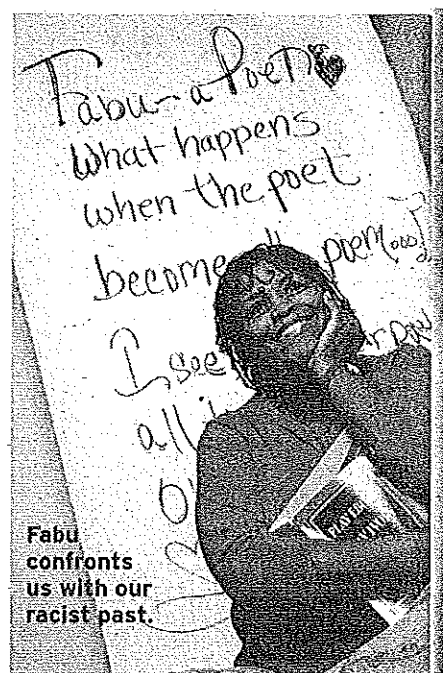
Plus, she's a mentor to young aspiring poets. She spent a recent afternoon at an all-school poetry presentation at Gompers Elementary, even taking one sniffling black girl in pigtails and a denim skirt aside and helping her overcome stage fright. "Sometimes a poet cares so much about the words that it causes tears," she said into the mike, her arm around the sobbing first-grader, before they recited the poem together.

"She's very inspiring," says Tuneija Tornai-Jackson, a Gompers student whom Fabu has been mentoring. "I was thinking about dropping poetry, but then when Fabu came we started doing all these poetry assemblies." The bright-eyed 11-year-old launches into a polished recitation of her poetry, using her hands in the air to emphasize the rhythm of her words.

Fabu is teaming up with local publications — *Madison Magazine*, *Capital City Hues*, *The Madison Times*, *Asian Wisconsin* and possibly *La Comunidad* — to get local poets of all ages published. "It's about which voices are heard in Madison and how do we help people's voices get heard," she says.

Despite her successes and a confident exterior, Fabu doesn't hide her personal disappointment at not having published nationally or achieved more recognition for her work. Several years ago, she was so dejected when she received a rejection letter from UW-Madison's MFA program in poetry that she went back to bed in the middle of the day. "I was feeling sad about why aren't I published? Why aren't I having books out? It's part of the poetic process to share your work."

But then she heard a heartbreaking story about a black woman sculptor during



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the Harlem Renaissance who destroyed her work because she couldn't get recognition. "So I had to make a decision as an artist. Who do I write for? If I'm never known outside my family or community, is that enough? I made a decision that if I never win competitions, if I never am part of the overall American literary movement, then I'm writing for myself and the people I represent, and that has to be enough. So I turned the corner on that."

Very harsh truths

As Madison's poet laureate, Fabu will continue in the footsteps of her predecessors, John Tusch and Andrea Musher, who were involved in the community and in social justice work.

This year, the position was formalized by the Common Council and added to the Madison Arts Commission. Fabu is also working on building the John Tusch Poet Laureate Memorial Fund, seeded by Musher and the Madison Community Foundation, for future poet laureates. Currently there is no stipend for the position.

Musher basically tapped Fabu to be her successor: "What is amazing about Fabu is that she can tell some very harsh truths," says Musher, a women's studies and literature professor at UW-Whitewater. "And you can even perhaps totally disagree with her or feel just overwhelmed by, for instance, the horrors in her poem about lynching. Or she and I might feel differently about Barack Obama and Hillary. But she has a graciousness in her personal style. She has a depth and integrity that allow you to hear her truths."

On the night Fabu introduced Martín Espada, she quoted a line from his poem "The Soldiers in the Garden," about Pablo Neruda and the persecution after Chile's 1973 coup. "There is only one danger for you here — poetry," she said. "There is *only* one danger for you here — poetry," she repeated. "There is *only* one danger for you here — poetry."

And with that, she turned the mike over to him. ♦