



AFRORICAN FIRE

The song, dance and history of Consuela Francesca Lopez

By Matthew D. Ford

Consuela Francesca Lopez is a proud Detroit Afro-Puerto Rican dancer, singer and the co-director and founder of Bomberica, a group of Afrorican dancers and drummers. Their dances include the Puerto Rican *bomba*, a community dance with hand gestures, hats, and long skirts stylized as a challenge between the lead dancer and the drum which can last anywhere from several hours to a matter days.

There's also the *plena*, a fast-paced couple and two-step dance, and the Cuban *Rumba*, a West African-based dance with *congaes*, performed by a man and a woman.

Lopez has been dancing for a lifetime, though not professionally until her mid-20s. As a child, she danced with her father, who played James Brown in the background while she and her siblings performed chores and her mother mixed hip-hop tunes and operatic voice styles (much to her and her siblings' irritation).

The dancer plays the clave, congos and other percussion and also dances with another Afrorican group of 9-12 people, as well as another salsa group called Inspiración.

She is inspired knowing that "everyone is connected and comes from the same source" and that there is "joy in making art is a powerful tool [because it] orchestrates emotions." Making people feel better and reconnected is good, and telling a story through lyrics and dance reminds people of where they came from.

When speaking on an article by Detroit healing artist Adele Nieves, she tells of an experience where she was discriminated against in a Mexican restaurant because the server thought that she was merely a Black person who did not know Spanish. When she began to speak Spanish, a stunned expression took over his face.

This lead our conversation to respect and how one should not assume something about another based on looks and that when she was growing up, people would tell her that she did not look Black, Latino or Puerto Rican. She is, however, prideful about both sides of her heritage — Black and Puerto Rican — and is grateful to her parents for establishing and validating her identity within her at a young age.

Southwest Detroit is her "heart." Even not growing up there, she sees it as a jewel and that it is not only Mexican people there, but people from all walks of life from Latino to

Polish and Dutch. One can go to different houses and eat different foods and smell different aromas because it is so diverse.

Ms. Lopez has known Ber-Henda Williams for a few years, meeting her through Nieves and extending that article into her classroom. They would meet in the classroom where the students asked her to sing and she describes Williams as “the first African-American woman from the city of Detroit who just got me *like that*.”

The women support each other artistically and whenever they meet on an island or in New York, it is “easy breezy.” She remembers the DHDC (Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation) event in February 2011 where a Latino poetry slam was taking place. Ber-Henda knew all the words to the poem and was gesturing like she “was catching the spirit.” She has “knowledge for the spoken word” and was always “smiles and teeth.”

The fiery dancer’s work and life are guided by the principle that “one will always be learning no matter what genre of music, art or anything else in life.”

** For the 5th anniversary event for Poetry, Pages & Scribes, of which Ber-Henda Williams is the founder.*