

THE STARLIT POETRY OF NAOMI LONG MADGETT

By Melba Joyce Boyd, Ph.D.



I was first introduced to the poetry of Naomi Long Madgett through Dudley Randall's anthology, "The Black Poets," which contains several of her poems: "Quest," "Star Journey," "Dream Sequence Part 9," "The Race Question," "Pavlov," "Midway," and "Alabama Centennial," which led my graduate research to her collection, Star by Star, as referenced in the permissions section of Randall's seminal anthology. In the autumn of 1972, I met Naomi Long Madgett in the flesh at a poetry reading at the Highland Park Public Library, a beautiful building on Woodward Avenue. As a neophyte poet, having my first poetry reading with Naomi Long Madgett and Dudley Randall was an amazing moment. No doubt, I felt like I was walking on air, between these two stars of Black Poetry.

After the reading, Naomi graciously complimented my poetry. In retrospect, I think she was being really nice, because only one of the poems I read ever made it into print. But, her complimentary words encouraged me to continue to write, and over time, her friendship, wisdom and poetry have been guiding stars for me when struggling with aesthetic choices in a poem, when confounded by academic politics or dealing with difficult personalities in the poetry community.

Naomi Long Madgett, Detroit's poet laureate and the 2012 recipient of the Kresge Eminent Artist Award, is highly regarded for her contributions to the publication and preservation of African-American poetry. As the founding editor of Lotus Press in 1972, she

has since ushered in over 90 collections of poetry, giving voice to a plethora of fine poets. Her capacity to accomplish this Herculean task is not only the result of her editing skills, but it is also because of her talent as a poet.

Naomi's first book was published in 1941 when she was only 17 years of age. Since this debut, Naomi's poetry has flourished, and she now has ten books of poetry. Her poetry has appeared in over 180 anthologies, which places her works securely in the American literary canon. Moreover, Naomi's poetry has gone beyond the page. There are two documentary films dedicated to her work: *A Poet's Voice* (Vander Films, 1997) and *Star by Star: Naomi Long Madgett, Poet and Publisher* (penULTIMATE, Ltd., 2011). Moreover, her autobiography, *Pilgrim Journey*, was released in 2006, and she is the proud editor of *Adam of Ife: Poems by Black Women in Praise of Black Men*. In addition, many awards have heralded her literary contributions: an American Book

Award, an Alain Locke Award, the Michigan Artist Award, induction into three halls of fame, and four honorary degrees, to name a few.

Despite these amazing accolades, there is a disturbing absence of literary criticism about Naomi's poetry. There is considerable biographical information, wherein her talent is identified, but there are only a few critical discussions about her craft. In this poet's opinion, Naomi's accomplishments as a publisher have overshadowed her stature as a poet. However, when one considers her productivity as a poet, averaging a book for every decade of her life, it is an impressive body of work, especially in lieu of how much of her time has been devoted to teaching and publishing.

In 1985, I wrote an essay, "Out the Poetry Ghetto: Poets as Publishers," for *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research*, wherein I discussed Naomi Long Madgett's latest book at the time, *Exits and Entrances*. This essay was an effort to counter the paucity of criticism on these wonderful writers, who sacrificed so much of their time to publishing. One of the problems of being "the keeper of the flame" is that many don't see past the blaze.

NAOMI'S RISING STAR

Born on July 5, 1923 in Norfolk, Virginia to Rev. Clarence Marcellus Long and Maude Selena Hilton Long, Naomi was raised by educated, strong-willed parents during the Great Depression and an era of intense racial discrimination against blacks in the United States. Rev. Long held four degrees, including a doctorate in Divinity Studies, and Mrs. Long, who graduated from Virginia normal school with a teaching certificate at the age of 16. This school became Virginia State College, where Naomi received her B.A. in English. (It subsequently evolved into Virginia State University.) Maude Selena Hilton taught in one-room country schools in Virginia until she married, and became Mrs. Long.

Despite the prevailing and pervasive odds against a young, black girl pursuing poetry, Naomi's goal seemed realizable due to parental support and early exposure to literary culture. In the poem "He Lives in Me," in memory of her father, she writes: "In the unbeautiful years, he taught me pride;" and "My father was upright, noble and uncompromised . . ." Like her father, she excelled academically, and she read and wrote poetry voraciously. When she was not justly acknowledged for her academics, her mother provided fortitude, and actually confronted the white teacher of a class where Naomi was the only black child:

You coached me with my homework, rejoiced
in my small triumphs and prepared me to confront the enemy,
tapping your umbrella against my fifth grade teacher's desk
to punctuate your firm demand for justice.

(from "Reluctant Light")

Because her father was a Baptist minister, the family lived in different locations, including East Orange, New Jersey, St. Louis, Missouri and New Rochelle, New York. "While my father was the most important single influence on my life," Naomi relayed, "growing up in East Orange, NJ in one of the most prejudiced northern cities I have ever heard of was also a strong (mostly negative) influence. Moving to St. Louis just after I started high school and attending historic all-black Sumner High School was the positive turning point of my life."

The Longs were not well off financially because Rev. Long's congregations were often poor; so poor, in fact, he voluntarily reduced his salary since the church had

that he could strut when he got happy,
walk the narrow straitly,
and even drive a car.
Surely an understanding Jesus
had laid His hands on him.

It is important to note that the title of Naomi's memoir, *Pilgrim Journey*, is taken from a line in a hymn and a Negro spiritual. The title brings the poet's guiding purpose: to help others as she travels through life. Her example confirms her religious belief in Christianity, and how it should be exercised in one's day-to-day life, and not something practiced conveniently on Sundays.

FAMILY POEMS

In more subtle forms, biblical lines and beliefs appear within poems that are not necessarily religious in theme, but the moral content is effectively so, as in "White Cross" (*Negro Digest*, April 1963) a poem she wrote when her brother, a Tuskegee Airman, was missing in action during World War II. For several months the family did not know if Wilbur was dead or alive. "He is actually fused in this poem with my cousin's boyfriend," Naomi relayed, who was "also a fighter pilot, who had gotten killed in action not long before my brother's plane was shot down." "Lonely Eagle" was written for the same brother shortly after he died suddenly of a ruptured abdominal aorta.

Biblical allusions also appear in lines of her poem for her daughter, "To Jill" (1947, the year of Jill's birth):

For life shall flow from life as Adam from the sod
Became a heart that could not die and eyes to see
The wonders of a shining world. And only God
And I will understand how such a thing can be.

"Midday," "Kin," and "Fantasia" are later poems written for Jill, reflective of various stages of her daughter's life. These poems are only a few of the many dedicated to her family, which reveal aspects of Naomi's personal life. As referenced above, she has written poems for her father, her brothers, her mother, her granddaughter, and her husband, Leonard; one of her most recent poems, "Reluctant Light," for her mother, she said, took her "years to complete."

A UNIQUE VOICE

Naomi Long Madgett's oeuvre is extensive. She began writing in the aftermath of the Harlem Renaissance and during the Modernist Period in literature. Her mastery of traditional poetic forms and her awareness of African-American literary tradition are evident in the range and breadth of her expressions, which are rich in social consciousness and stylistic elegance. Naomi's literary influences from previous generations and cultures are readily apparent. In addition to Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and Sterling Brown, as well English and traditional American poets, her writing is in tandem with her ethnic contemporaries: Robert Hayden, Dudley Randall, Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, and Melvin B. Tolson, to name a few. These poets, who emerged during the 1930's, 40's and 50's, consistently and simultaneously demonstrated cultural consciousness and artistic individuality and are the forerunners for subsequent generations of African-American poets. Their mastery and improvisation of classical poetic forms is characteristically African American, and is the primary creative force

that informs their unique styles and the individuality of each voice. They expanded the parameters of the genre, and Naomi Long Madgett's work illustrates this aesthetic sensibility.

Naomi's arsenal of poetry is thematically broad and culturally diverse. Her poems are local and yet cosmic; specific to ethnic identity and yet universal in human scope. Her ethnic identity is central to origins of expression, but does not limit the broader dimensions of her themes. At the same time, many of her earlier poems are embedded with racial pride and protest. "Song for a Negro" (1942) and "Midnight Magnolias" (1942) contain strong political statements against racial discrimination:

I walk here while your highborn ladies,
Your blond children who learn "nigger" with their alphabet,
Your pedigreed horses, your dogs, your cream-fed kittens
Are asleep.

I walk here because I have nowhere else to be.
I press my lips to magnolia petals
Because I am weary and magnolias may be the last scent I
Ever know
And the softest kiss I'll ever feel again.

(from "Midnight Magnolias")

Naomi dedicated the poem "Simple" to her idol, Langston Hughes. In the poem, she reanimates the voice of Simple, a character from Hughes' newspaper column, which was ultimately published as a book, *The Best of Simple*. In another instance, "Monday Morning Blues" should also be regarded as a tribute to Hughes, as she employs the blues form that Hughes introduced to Afroamerican poetics. It is an ethnic indicator that demonstrates her adaptation of indigenous culture as a resource for poetic expression, and it affirms Langston Hughes' aesthetic influence on her work.

All night my bed was rocky, all night nobody by my side;
My bed was cold and rocky, all night no good man by my side.
The radiator sputtered, the furnace gave a groan and died.

(From "Monday Morning Blues")

Finally, "Black Poet" was written as a tribute to Langston Hughes upon his death in 1967.

"Sterling Brown was also an influence," Naomi said. "We exchanged letters when my brothers were attending Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri (where he was a professor) and we later got to know each other." Naomi's attention to the "common folk" is reflective of Brown's work, especially in her incorporation of voice and folk forms. Reminiscent of Brown's "Strong Men," "Alabama Centennial" expresses the determination of black people never to go back to things as they were before Brown vs. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas in 1954:

And other voices echoed the freedom words.
"Walk together children, don't you get weary."
Whispered them, sang them, prayed them, shouted them.
"Walk!"

(from "Alabama Centennial")

Her poem “Echoes,” dedicated to Duke Ellington, is a tribute to one of the geniuses of African-American culture. By relying on oblique rhyme, she created a rhythm pattern that recalls and reiterates like echoes of jazz:

But those perfect stones
tossed into timeless canyons
will reverberate in concentric melody
that will go on
 and on
 and . . .

Likewise, Naomi’s poem, “Phillis,” for Phillis Wheatley (the eighteenth century, internationally renowned, African-American poet) is a tribute to a fellow poet, who transcended slavery to make her literary mark on the planet. About Phillis Wheatley Naomi said, “She showed to the world the face the world would see,” a common strategy in early African-American literature. It is a longer poem, written in the first person from the perspective of Phillis. In free verse, the poem simulates the slave narrative, as the persona recalls glimmers of her mother, the ocean voyage on the slave ship, the repression of her African soul and identity, and her survival as she learns “to sing a dual song” and “asserts: “I am.”

Then the sun died and time went out completely.
In that new putrid helltrap of the dead
And dying, the stench
Of vomit, sweat, and feces
Mingled it with the queasy motion
Of the ship until my senses failed me. . .

I do not know how many weeks or months
I neither thought nor felt, but I awoke
One night—or day, perhaps—
Revived by consciousness of sound.

The black woman in various forms is also a recurring image in Naomi’s poetry. In addition to “Phillis,” poems such as “New Day” and “The Old Women” are compassionate portraits that reveal admirable qualities that are often unrecognized and underappreciated by society. “New Day” begins with an epigraph with lines from a Negro spiritual: “Keep-a inchin’ along, keep-a inchin’ along.”/Jesus’ll come bye an’ bye . . .” and continues with language that coincides with its theme of endurance and persistence:

She coaxes her fat in front of her
Like a loaded market basket with defective wheels.
Then she pursues it, slowly catches up, and
The cycle begins again.
Every step is a hardship and triumph.

The poet empathizes with her subject’s courageous resilience in a hostile atmosphere:

I feel the thunderous effort
of her movement reverberating through
a wilderness of multiple betrayals.

In “The Old Women” the primary images are of “hands” and “mouths.” Unlike “New Day,” which contains precise, concrete imagery, the imagery in this poem is abstract and surreal:

They see the gnarled hands raised
and think they are praying.
They cannot see the weapons hung

between their fingers. When the mouths
gape and the rasping noises
crunch like dead leaves.

They laugh at the voices
They think are trying to sing.

This attention to anonymous persons redirects Naomi’s vision to encompass the unassuming, unglamorous lives that, for the most part, comprise the basic reality of black life in America. The purpose of the poem is also to illuminate the resistance of the women. “The actions of the old women also (are) misunderstood by young people who never knew how subtle protests once had to be,” Naomi said.

Naomi’s sense of literary freedom persisted even during the 1960s, when politics of the Black Aesthetic commanded certain thematic and stylistic limitations, which she ignored because, as indicated in earlier poems as well as current ones, her poetics are embedded in black consciousness, exemplifying racial identity and pride “in the unbeautiful years.” However, her genteel style may not have been didactic enough for popular taste.

Dudley Randall’s “Ballad of Birmingham” and Margaret Walker’s “For Andy Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney” are two classic poems by Naomi’s contemporaries about the activities and events of the Civil Rights Movement. Naomi’s “Alabama Centennial” and “Midway” also reverberate this era and these poems have been anthologized several times in a wide range of anthologies; but to her dismay, the poem “Midway” has become possibly her most popular and most anthologized poem and crosses-over to so many cultural tastes that it has become a classic American poem. “Midway” appears in *Star by Star* with the note:

“I have included “Midway,” not for its dubious literary merit, but because of general popular demand. This poem, which I wrote in 1959, has been reproduced without permission, misquoted, and even published anonymously since its first legitimate appearance in print in 1961. This is the original, authentic version.”

Naomi also stated in the documentary film, *Star by Star*, that “Midway” is her most contentious poem. She is not satisfied with it, “But I don’t know how to fix it,” she said. However, “it has,” as she puts, “taken on a life of its own.”

Because of its popularity and its lyrical structure, it can be easily adapted to

Long ago the overflowing Cimarron River
reddened the gurgling creek. Disturbed now
only by a sluggish breeze, the waters murmur:
“Listen. Her footsteps often sounded
on the little bridge above me.
Her tears melted into my ripples.
If you are searching for her spirit, listen.
Be still and listen to my song.”

(from “708 South Second Street”)

The poet found portals into the past through the imaginative voices of elderly women, who were once students in Octavia’s classroom. Naomi sipped ice tea, inhaled their talk and quoted them in the poetry:

“Octavia Long was my high school English teacher,”
they all tell me.
And one, ten years their senior,
Puffing on a slim brown cigarette,
Nails lacquered wicked red,
Steady on high-heeled shoes:
“I knew the whole Long family.
Marcellus tried to court me
But I was too young for him.”

Octavia: Guthrie and Beyond is a brilliant composition and will eventually receive the acclaim it deserves. It was required reading in the Detroit Public Schools for eleventh grade English classes, and Naomi printed a study guide to assist teachers. *Octavia* should become required reading in American literature classes everywhere, because it is a marvelous and enchanting work of art.

DETROIT POEMS

In a special issue of *Michigan Quarterly Review* (25, 2: 316, Spring 1986) Dorothy H. Lee’s essay, “Black Voices in Detroit,” discusses Madgett’s poetry and prominence: “Randall and Madgett are certainly among the most significant literary figures the city of Detroit has produced.” Lee cites the following lines from the poem “The Ragman”:

Misfortune perched on his shoulder
Like a bird he once fed
And could never get rid of.

He could neither cage it
Nor shoo it out the window.

So, it just sat there,
Domiciled in pleasure of his pain,
Without even giving a song
In return for its bread.

The critic then comments that: “Such candid, uncomplicated snapshots of urban solitaires and urban sorrow derive ironically from the free-verse vignettes of city life etched by Whitman in *Leaves of Grass*, and constitute a mockery of Whitman’s hope for American cities.”

Naomi Long Madgett is not mocking Whitman’s vision, but she is conveying truth about the city’s underbelly, about its disenfranchised, about its poverty. Even in this sense, she injects poignant and salient insight with a subtle turn of phrase. The line, “Domiciled in pleasure of his pain,” explains how submission to defeat finds comfort through familiarity. The genius of the line is derived from its subject. The language is unassuming and the imagery is nearly static. However, contrary to Lee’s conclusion, there is hope in Naomi’s city poems. “City Nights” captures the honest truth about the dangers and distractions that characterize reality, but it also underlines the tenderness and promising outlook the citizens assume despite a legacy of strife. The poem opens with:

My windows and doors are barred
against the intrusion of thieves.
The neighbor’s dog howls in pain
at the screech of sirens.
There is nothing you can tell me
about the city
I do not know.

Madgett lays it out there and challenges the most cynical reader with the assurance that can only come from a Detroiter; “There is nothing you can tell me/ about the city/ I do not know.” However, it is not a poem about the horrors of the city, but about the warmth and strength of life despite distress and difficulties:

On the front porch it is cool and quiet
After the high pitched panic passes
The windows across the street gleam
In the dark.
There is a faint suggestion of moon-shadow
above the golden street light.
The grandchildren are asleep upstairs,
and we are happy for their presence.

The second stanza answers the accusations and the assaults in the first. The poet juxtaposes the trepidation of darkness and imposed fears in the beginning of the poem with imagery that is calm, peaceful, warm and even magical. Words like “gleam,” “moon-shadow,” and “golden” facilitate this transition, while the joy of sleeping grandchildren punctuates a feeling that is ultimately optimistic. While the poem considers family lore that takes the front porch conversation back to slavery, the last two stanzas return to contemporary strife and resolution:

Insurance rates are soaring.
It is not safe to walk the streets at night.
The news reports keep telling us the things
they need to say: the case
is hopeless.

Like a blues refrain, Naomi answers the paradox by returning to the imagery in the second stanza, but with a slight shift of emphasis, she affirms faith in the future:

But the front porch is cool and quiet.
The neighbors are dark and warm.
The grandchildren are upstairs dreaming
and we are happy for their presence.

CONCLUDING: STARLIT POETRY

Lotus Press was founded to publish *Pink Ladies in the Afternoon*, Naomi's fourth book of poetry, and to distribute her third book, *Star by Star*. This title is taken from a line in the poem "Quest," initially collected in *One and the Many*. In a related sense, "star" is a consistent and abiding image/symbol in Naomi Long Madgett's poetry. It appears in the title of two poems, in the title of a book, and in at least a dozen of her poems.

Directed at her first husband, "who scoffed at my poems and thought they were unimportant," the poem "Quest" declares in the opening lines:

With or without you I will go my destined way
Singing the stars and heralding the dawn.
Alone or with you I will give my dreams their say
From now on.

This solitary pursuit is reiterated in "Star Journey," which opens with: "Alone I tiptoe through the stars"; and closes with: "while my soul/Tips through the stars alone." The theme contrasts the difference between the body, which is earthbound, and the soul, which "tiptoes" on stars through the heavens. Considering the star motif in Naomi's poetry to the quote from Wordsworth that prefaces her poem "Family Portrait," might illuminate some understanding of Naomi's starlit imagery:

"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting.
And cometh from afar."

In the first case, the pursuit of poetry is her "life's star." It is a spiritual "quest" as well as the perfection of craft, a labor with words to be imparted on Earth. This imagery is also enlisted by the inclusion of lines from the Negro spiritual, "Lay This Body Down": "I know star rises," and "I walk in starlight," which appear at the beginning of the poem, "Poets Beyond the Blues," and these lines are adapted within the body of the poem.

By contrast, "The Race Question" includes the star image as a momentary gaze, a personal escape from racial protest, but in "Discards," a fallen star retrieved from a wastebasket is symbolic of a failed romance: "I emptied the wastebasket the other day/ and found the star I gave you once, when we were walking on air." A similar star imagery appears in the love poem "If Not in Summer."

Whereas "Tivoli" seems to intertwine both the spiritual and the romantic symbolism of the star:

We caught our breath, the suddenness of a lone star
In all that awesomeness of space and height
Startling us into new discovery.

"Anonymous Witness: A Minor Christmas Vision" references the star that led the wise men to the baby Jesus:

all of a sudden such a starburst split the sky
that I leaped—or fell—from my camel in fear and dread
and sank to my knees in the sand.

"Odyssey," a deeply philosophical poem, engages a more cosmic symbolic sense of the symbol and a possible intersection with the Wordsworth quote:

How many stars must burn to ash and death
While you tip edges of their alien shores
In search of worth?

The star motif in Naomi's poetry can be traced from her earliest to her most recent poems, and in these diverse settings, it traces her quest to empower her poetry with her life's spirit, rising to tiptoe through the heavens.

CONCLUDING AND CONNECTING

Naomi Long Madgett's latest book, *Connected Islands: New and Selected Poems*, contains many of the poems I've discussed in this essay, as well as selections from previous books. The theme of *Connected Islands* appears implicitly in the title poem; everything is connected. A significant number of these poems reiterate Naomi's religious grounding, including quotes from the Bible, lines from Negro spirituals and contemporary hymns. There are starlit poems dedicated to her pastor, a tribute to her church choir at Plymouth Church in Detroit, and to her favorite hymnal songwriter, Charles A. Tinley (1851-1933). There are, of course, pensive poems that are philosophical, and reflective poems about her family, friends and colleagues. There are troubled poems about Detroit, as well as serious and humorous poems about aging. It is a collection that encapsulates her oeuvre, connecting her past and her present to her vision of the world.

When Naomi expanded her publishing purposes to accommodate the talents of other poets, Lotus Press became a North Star for many black poets. This noble gesture is an extension of her creed to serve others, but ironically, this accomplishment as an editor has been a distraction for literary scholars who do not realize it is her poetry that is the foundation of the press. Indeed, since some Lotus Press poets have gone on to win national poetry prizes and to be published by mainstream publishers, literary critics have forgotten the service small presses continue to provide for the good of America poetry.

Poet-publishers, like Naomi Long Madgett, have a keen eye for talented poets, and Naomi is still dedicated to, as she puts it, "the most neglected American art form." She continues to sustain Lotus Press with poetry awards, finely crafted books and a legacy of her own starlit poetry.

I am clinging to the edge of a star trying to capture
the missing letter. I can't hold on much longer.
I will disintegrate before I hit the earth.

(from "Fragments of a Dream") 🌸

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¹ Unless otherwise identified in the text, the quotes from Naomi Long Madgett are from an interview by the author with Dr. Madgett in her home on June 15, 2012, or from subsequent dialogues during the writing of this essay.

Long lineage: generations of Naomi's relatives smile from photographs in her Detroit home.

