

“Everything is Here and Now”: The Polyvocal Poetry of Naomi Long Madgett

by

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Abstract

Naomi Long Madgett—poet, editor, professor, and Detroit Poet Laureate—has a poetic career that spans over sixty years. Despite this, her work is rarely engaged critically. This thesis aims to present new scholarship on Madgett that engages her both within the context of the Black Arts Movement as well as the Womanist movement in literature. “The New Black Poetry: Naomi Long Madgett, “Newblack,” and the Search for Black Aesthetic(s)” examines the poem “Newblack” from Madgett’s collection *Pink Ladies in the Afternoon* (1972), a poem that responds to the arguably prescriptive dictums of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Written through the narrative lens of a Black Arts Movement critic, Madgett explores the tension between the Black Arts Movement’s determinations for what qualifies as Black art and the individual perspective and directives of the artist. Through a nuanced exploration of both poetic form and aesthetic and ideological concerns, Madgett’s “Newblack” reifies her own beliefs as both a poet and editor in respecting the individuality and unique vision of the artist. I extend Madgett’s work during this period to create a literary lineage between her poetic concerns and the New Black Aesthetic Movement of the 1980s and 1990s, conceptualized most famously by poet and critic Trey Ellis, as well as Madgett’s import and connection to Evie Shockley’s critical volume *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (2011) and her poetry collection *the new black* (2011). “Singing a Dual Song: The Legacy of Phillis Wheatley and Naomi Long Madgett’s Sense of Place Poetry” also charts a literary lineage between Madgett and other Black writers, examining Madgett’s connection to Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1983) and the Womanist Movement in literature alongside other foundational Black Feminist scholars such as Barbara Christian, Carol Boyce Davies, bell hooks, and Layli Phillips. This article examines Madgett’s poem “Phillis” from her collection

Exits and Entrances (1978), a narrative poem written from the poet Phillis Wheatley's perspective. Through a reimagined narrative history, Madgett explores what Alice Walker calls Wheatley's "contrary instincts," a set of complex and often conflicting understandings of personal identity. Madgett imagines Wheatley's revelation of her own "dual song" in her connection to both America and Africa. In this article, I tie these concepts of "contrary instincts" and the idea of a "dual song" to Carol Boyce Davies's concept of "migratory subjects" from her book *Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994) in order to argue that Madgett moves our understanding of divided loyalties beyond a recognition of physical geography into a spiritual, artistic realm that defies space and time and connects Black women writers in a unique way. Finally, included in this thesis is the transcript from the interview I conducted with Naomi Long Madgett on July 15th, 2017, at her home in Detroit.

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Introduction

I was not familiar with Naomi Long Madgett's work before I began my graduate studies at the University of Kansas. Despite the fact that Madgett has been anthologized frequently,¹ there is an almost complete dearth of critical work on Madgett's poetry. This need for a critical evaluation of her work was the driving motivation behind the creation of this portfolio thesis. My undergraduate thesis focused on Detroit historically, combining my interest in urban history with creative work. When I was given the opportunity to interview the Detroit Poet Laureate while I was working with the Project on the History of Black Writing, a research unit at the University of Kansas focused on recovering the work of understudied Black writers, I was immediately interested. As I prepared for the interview in the summer of 2017, my correspondence via e-mail with Madgett proved her meticulous and a true documentarian of her own work and others'. What I thought initially would be a short project composed of the interview and a 10-minute documentary film has now grown into my master's thesis.

Because Madgett's own poetry is lesser-known than her role as editor of Lotus Press or her long career as an educator at both the high school and university levels, my goal was to create at least one critical piece on her poetry; however, her work, the interview, and the video inspired not one but two critical articles. The first article is about "Newblack," a poem that addresses Madgett's positionality within and anticipates later criticisms of the Black Arts Movement. My second article examines her narrative poem about Phillis Wheatley's life "Phillis," demonstrating Madgett's engagement with Womanist writings of the late 1970s and placing Madgett amongst a literary legacy of Black women writers. In addition to these components is a roughly twelve-minute video that provides an introduction to Madgett's life and work and a transcription of the aforementioned interview with Madgett at her home in July 2017.

Madgett's publication history is extensive. Her volumes of poetry include *Songs to a Phantom Nightingale* (1941), *One and the Many* (1956), *Star by Star* (1970), *Pink Ladies in the Afternoon* (1972), *Exits and Entrances* (1978), *Phantom Nightingale: Juvenilia* (1981), *Octavia and Other Poems* (1988), *Remembrances of Spring: Collected Early Poems* (1993), *Octavia: Guthrie and Beyond* (2002), and *Connected Islands* (2004). Madgett has also published an autobiography, *Pilgrim Journey* (2006), and has edited the Lotus Press poetry anthologies *Milestone Sampler: Fifteenth Anniversary Anthology* (1988) and *Adam of Ifé: Black Women in Praise of Black Men* (1992) as well as authored the textbook *A Student's Guide to Creative Writing* (1980). Madgett's work—her creative work as well as her careers as an educator and editor—challenges almost every critical interpretation or pronouncement of what Black poetry should or should not be; through her poetry, her understanding of Black identity is constantly reimagined.

Born in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1923, Madgett's father, Rev. Dr. Clarence Marcellus Long, and mother, Maude Hilton Long, moved the family to Orange, New Jersey, when Madgett was just eighteen months old. Her father was a well-known minister while her mother, a former teacher, organized events for their church and maintained the household. It was in East Orange that Madgett published her first poem in the *Orange Daily Courier* when she was thirteen years old. When her father's job again moved them to St. Louis, Missouri, Madgett attended the historic Sumner High School where she thrived as a student and writer. It was in St. Louis shortly before she graduated high school that she published her first book of poetry, *Songs to a Phantom Nightingale* (1941). After completing her undergraduate degree in English from Virginia State College (now University), Madgett began a graduate degree program at New York University but eventually withdrew and relocated to Detroit, Michigan, with her fiancé in 1946.²

Her move to Detroit made the city the eventual locus of her careers as an educator, editor, and writer.

Madgett divorced her first husband shortly after having her first and only child, Jill, in 1947. In 1954, Madgett remarried, and in 1955 she completed her Master of Arts in English Education at Wayne University (now Wayne State). Following her graduation, Madgett began teaching in Detroit Public Schools and taught both the first African American poetry class and creative writing course. In 1968, she was appointed Associate Professor in English at Eastern Michigan University where she would teach until her retirement in 1984. During her time there, Madgett earned a PhD from the International Institute for Advanced Studies and founded Lotus Press in 1972 in her home. In 1993, Lotus Press established the annual Naomi Long Madgett Award to recognize an outstanding poetry manuscript by an African American poet, an award that continues today with the sponsorship of Broadside Lotus Press.³ In 2001, Madgett was named Detroit Poet Laureate and in 2005, a life-size bust was commissioned by the Board of Directors of Lotus Press from the sculptor Artis Lane for the opening of the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, where it remains today. In 2006, Madgett published her autobiography *Pilgrim Journey*, and in 2012 she was given the Kresge Eminent Artist Award, the highest artistic recognition in the state of Michigan. Her archives are held at Fisk University and the University of Michigan, and she still lives in Detroit.

When I interviewed Madgett in July of 2017, she had just turned 94 years old. Her role as an editor and a keeper of records was evident: she had collected books, posters, broadsides, and documents to show me while also providing detailed answers to my questions. After visiting her archives at the University of Michigan and seeing her correspondence with poets such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Toi Derricotte, Oliver LaGrone, and Langston Hughes the previous day,

Madgett was quick to discuss her friendships with them and her appreciation of their work. For Madgett, Gwendolyn Brooks was an idolatrous figure, and Madgett aspired to her level of success as a poet. During the interview, she recounts Brooks giving her change for the meter and holding on to the coins, precious tokens from her poetic role model. Interestingly enough, Madgett was critical of Brooks's later poetry during and post-Black Arts Movement, saying it was too "political," a contention that I more thoroughly discuss in my article on her poem "Newblack." Her insistence on Black poets not being restricted in the types of poetry they create is a common refrain throughout the interview; it is this sentiment, this insistence on individualism that is the ultimate motivation behind the poem "Newblack" and a central tenet of her roles as an editor, educator, and writer.

Though Madgett is referenced peripherally in current scholarship in relationship to other accomplished Black poets of the latter half of the twentieth century,⁴ she developed a close yet wide-reaching network of poets and friends. Toi Derricotte, co-founder of the Cave Canem Foundation and a prolific poet whose early work was published by Lotus Press, is a particularly treasured friend, and she noted that the five days she spent touring Michigan and reading poetry with Derricotte and sculptor and poet Oliver LaGrone was one of her favorite readings in her life. Though Madgett's work is not often discussed or circulated—the fact that several of her volumes are currently out of print is certainly a factor in this—the memories in her interview put her intimately into a cohort of fellow foundational poets. While discussing her mentor Langston Hughes, Madgett remembers that she once drank too many martinis at a party for him when he visited Detroit. When Hughes demanded she read a poem for the group, she was thankful an anthology with her work was on the table or otherwise she "would have made a fool of [her]self."⁵ She was effusive over Hughes, repeatedly noting his humility: "He was the kind of

poet that I wanted to be. . . he was so down to earth, so easy to get to know, and if he walked in here today in 5 minutes you'd be calling him by his first name. He was always encouraging other poets." She did, however, have a bone to pick with him after he changed the spacing of her poem "Midway" when he included it in the anthology *The Poetry of the Negro: 1746-1970* (1970). It is an anecdote that demonstrates Madgett's sometimes stringent insistence on certain metrical conventions, reifying her view that an artist's vision should be respected above all in the editing and publishing process.

The primacy of an artist's vision reveals itself more fully in my article on the narrative poem "Phillis" about the life of Phillis Wheatley from Madgett's collection *Exits and Entrances* (1978). Because her work still needs a critical foundation, I did not want to restrict my evaluation of her work to a discussion of race, especially considering much of her poetry is not about race. It is interesting, however, that Madgett describes this volume as "ha[ving] a *more* ethnic focus than any of [her] earlier books" (*Pilgrim Journey* 371, emphasis in original). In reading this collection, I found instead a poet concerned with the various identities she held in respect to being a Black woman: as mother, sister, niece, aunt, teacher, mentor, and caregiver. In "Singing a Dual Song: The Legacy of Phillis Wheatley and Naomi Long Madgett's Spiritual Poetry," I explore Madgett's work in conversation with contemporaneous Womanist discourse, in particular the work of Alice Walker. Though scholars/literary critics have not linked Madgett explicitly with the emergence of the 1970s Black women's writing renaissance, I argue she was very much a part of this literary legacy. In the poem "Phillis," Madgett gives Wheatley's legacy a more dynamic poetic treatment, challenging oversimplifications of Wheatley's work. Madgett then asserts her polyvocality—a term I borrow from Carol Boyce Davies's *Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994)—to insist on the recognition of the

multiple and sometimes conflicting understandings of identity she explores in the distinctively spiritual, poetic space of the poem.

The prevailing theme throughout Madgett's work and the work I present here in my thesis is a respect for the individualism of the artist. In a genre that is often less engaged—as Madgett describes in her interview, people want to “read a poem and have it all explained, but that’s not how poetry works”—the need for a multiplicity and diversity of voices is expressly necessary. What I hope is demonstrated through this collection of critical work is an introduction to and engagement with Madgett's poetic voice. As I originally intended my second article to be a pedagogical article, I still plan to continue to work creating resources for how instructors can incorporate Madgett's poetry in the classroom. Bridging the gap between the academy and the classroom is a personal and professional imperative, and though I was unable to accomplish a full pedagogical inquiry for teachers into Madgett's work, I do see my short film—which will be archived as part of the Project on the History of Black Writing's digital archives and made available to the public—as an impetus for bringing her work into the classroom. It contains a biographical introduction and important excerpts of Madgett both reading and discussing her work to serve as a starting point for a short lesson in a class about poetry more generally or Black poets specifically. The interview included in the video comes from the Furious Flower Poetry Center at James Madison University, founded and directed by Dr. Joanne Gabbin, and exposing students to the work of this important research institution can open the class's curriculum to even more Black poets and their work.

Though I only look at Madgett's work from the 1970s for this thesis project, engaging her work across her career is a project I will take with me to my doctoral studies. Because Madgett's work is prolific both in publication time and in thematic scope, it is more difficult to

characterize; but the difficulty we encounter categorizing her work makes her distinctive poetic perspective all the more important to document. Madgett eschews strict dictums for poetry because, she says, “the core principle [of the poem] is always the same, and yet the reader brings something of his or her own experience into the poem so that it means something different [to everyone].” Madgett’s poetry makes space to explore the expansiveness of artistic identity in flux. Constant evolution: this is Madgett’s imperative as a poet, an editor, an educator, and a human being.

¹ On her personal website, she claims that she has been anthologized over 180 times; however, verifying this number has been difficult. She has certainly been anthologized several times in each decade since the 1950s, but I have only been able to substantiate and track down around 20 anthologies that include her work. Dudley Randall’s famous anthology *The Black Poets* (1971) is among the most notable.

² It is this man who Madgett refers to as “Spoon” in the interview, the same man who was shot in the back by a state trooper during the Detroit Riots of 1943. His injuries were widely reported in coverage of the event, though it happened before Madgett became engaged to him and moved to Detroit.

³ In 2015, Lotus Press merged with Broadside Press, founded in Detroit in 1965 by poet Dudley Randall. It is notable that during the interview, Madgett said she was not pleased with how the award was now being judged by a local rather than nationally-known poet.

⁴ Melba Joyce Boyd’s *Wrestling with the Muse: Dudley Randall and the Broadside Press* (2003) is a notable book in this regard, placing Madgett in the literary company of both Dudley Randall and Margaret Danner in the Black Detroit poetry scene.

⁵ Hughes met Madgett when she was an undergraduate, and they met several more times while he was still alive. He included several of her early poems in the anthology *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1949* (1949) co-edited with Arna Bontemps.

The New Black Poetry: Naomi Long Madgett, “Newblack,” and the Search for Black
Aesthetic(s)

Black poetry in the 1960s and 1970s demonstrated a marked shift in the intentions and positions of poets, intellectuals, and aesthetes on how Black poetry can and should be defined. The mid- to late-1960s saw the rise of the Black Arts Movement (BAM), and the issue of how, exactly, to distinguish Blackness and the Black aesthetic was central to the BAM critics. Members of this movement, according to writer Larry Neal’s foundational article “The Black Arts Movement” (1968), created art that was “the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept” and that “[spoke] directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America” (55). The term “new Black” emerges in the post-BAM period of the 1970s, and Stephen Henderson’s 1972 volume *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech & Black Music as Poetic References* marks the first book-length critical work to grapple with this classification.¹ He asserts that the new Black poetry first and foremost “speak[s] directly to Black people *about themselves* in order to move them toward self-knowledge and collective freedom” in addition to classifying the new Black poetry as eschewing purely “romantic” motivations for “chiefly political” intentions (25, 32). Henderson’s designation of this new group of poets and their poetry as “chiefly political” is an important one: through his analysis, Henderson demonstrates an ideological imperative within this new Black poetry in that it had the primary outcome of promoting, challenging, or critiquing political systems of power rather than focusing on solely aesthetic considerations. The word “chiefly,” however, implies that there were Black writers whose work fell outside of this political imperative, poets whose work had different intentions and positionality than the work of poets who were a part of the BAM.

One of these poets is Naomi Long Madgett. In her poetry, which calls upon various poetic references, forms, and themes, Madgett anticipates later criticism of the BAM as limiting in its requirements for what qualified as Black art. Her poem “Newblack” from her volume *Pink Ladies in the Afternoon* (1972) provides a skillful poetic commentary on this issue of prescriptive Black poetics. Her poem also demonstrates a profound anticipation of Trey Ellis’s parameters for Black art in his landmark essay “The New Black Aesthetic” (1989) and Evie Shockley’s argument for a recognition of “black aesthetics—plural” in her book *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (2011), a theoretical imperative she extends to her creative work in her award-winning volume of poetry *the new black* (2011) (7). By distinguishing Madgett as a forebear of contemporary understandings of the new Black aesthetic—or, in Shockley’s case, Black *aesthetics*—we can fully recognize Madgett’s critical role in a literary and theoretical debate about the categorization of Black poetry, a debate that still continues today.

While critics like Henderson, Addison Gayle, and Clarence Major in the 1970s and Houston A. Baker and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in the 1980s were aiming to create critical frameworks for understanding Black poetry, other poets, like Madgett, were pushing back against some of the restrictions to artistic expression that were either explicit or implied in both the critical and creative work of the BAM leaders. In fact, some aesthetes, including Clarence Major, were already beginning to foresee a shift away from the necessarily political objectives of the period’s art. As a poet and critic, Major reified the political intentions of the BAM in his essay “Black Criteria” (1968), directing the Black artist to recognize their art as “ow[ing] something to the society in which he is involved” and demanding artists “use [their] black poetic energy to overthrow the western ritual” (148). However, by 1973, Major had already recognized

the potentially prescriptive dictums of the BAM, saying in an interview that he “now [found] it repulsive, the idea of calling for black writers to do anything other than what they each choose to do” (Martin 39). Even Larry Neal, whose article “The Black Arts Movement” served as one of the period’s foundational theoretical frameworks, significantly altered his definition of Black art later in his career (*Renegade Poetics* 2). Dramatic theoretical shifts in such a short period of time, as evidenced by Major and Neal, demonstrates how in flux thoughts on Black poetry were during the early 1970s. It is in this poetic climate that Madgett enters her most productive period.

Madgett founded Lotus Press in her basement in Detroit in 1972 where she served as primary editor (and, for much of its incorporation, sole employee) for three decades. Her motivations as an editor were to publish the work of Black writers who could not find support elsewhere, a direct result of her struggle to find a publisher for *Pink Ladies in the Afternoon* throughout the early 1970s.² Madgett’s and Lotus Press’s publication histories mark both as having a foundational hand in the careers of many well-known Black artists and writers, publishing the early creative work of poets as diverse as Houston A. Baker, Jr.,³ Tom Dent, Toi Derricotte, James A. Emanuel, Pinkie Gordon Lane, and Haki Madhubuti. However, Madgett’s own poetry has not received much critical attention. In her autobiography *Pilgrim Journey* (2006), Madgett tries to take some responsibility for this by admitting that her “lack of confidence in [her] own ability” kept her from regularly submitting poems for publication throughout her career (475). Her lack of vigor for publishing her own work in the beginning of her career also might have had some small effect. Her first book of poetry, published in 1941 when she was just seventeen years old, precludes a fifteen-year publication gap. She published her poetry collection *One and the Many* in 1956, and its publication was again followed by another almost fifteen-year gap. Madgett then published *Star by Star* in 1970, after which her

poetry is published with relative frequency, beginning with *Pink Ladies in the Afternoon* (1972) and followed by *Exits and Entrances* (1978), *Phantom Nightingale: Juvenalia* (1981), *Octavia and Other Poems* (1988), *Remembrances of Spring* (1993), *Octavia: Guthrie and Beyond* (2002), and finally *Connected Islands* (2004).

Despite the fact that Madgett created a prolific amount of work during the 1970s, her engagement with the critical evaluation of Black poetry began much earlier. Though the BAM and its participants are perhaps the most unified aesthetic group to grapple with the task of defining the Black aesthetic, the debate itself has arguably existed since the early twentieth century, and there is no more prominent a Black art and Black poetry critic during this period than Langston Hughes. His seminal article “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926) was a response to poet Countee Cullen’s assertion that he did not want his race to define and dominate others’ understanding of his work. Hughes’s article unequivocally states that he is “ashamed for the black poet who says, ‘I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet,’ as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world” (83). The contrast between Cullen and Hughes is at the root of the debate that comes about later during the Black Arts Movement: how do we define Black art and Black artists, and what are the goals of any artist attempting to engage a Black aesthetic? The influence of these two poets on Madgett is not only a result of her dedicated career as an educator and lover of poetry; she also had a personal connection with them.

In her autobiography, Madgett describes casually calling Cullen in the early 1944 to ask to visit him and show him her work, and he spent the better part of an afternoon reading and critiquing her poems (*Pilgrim Journey* 146). Madgett also writes that she met Hughes multiple times, first in 1940 and then again in 1942 when he took the time to look over her manuscript

and offer critiques and encouragement (152). She again meets Hughes in 1964 when she is a part of Boone House, a Detroit-based group of poets and writers that included fellow poet and friend Dudley Randall; Hughes' visit occurred at the height of the group's productivity (153).⁴ Given these momentous occasions, it is easy to see why the tension between poets and critics on what defines Black art figures prominently in Madgett's early work and recurred in multiple aspects of her diverse and lengthy career, making the critique she offers in "Newblack" much more complex. Ultimately, in his article Hughes asserts that "[a]n artist must be free to choose what he does," and in respect to Black poetry's audience, he concludes: "If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either" (84). His words are a clear contrast to Henderson's assertion that the new Black poetry (as of 1972) only addresses the demands/contentment of a Black audience. This tension between a need for defining Black art and Black poetry in its form and aesthetic expression as well as in its political influences and intentions is the aesthetic and critical debate Madgett addresses in her poem "Newblack."

Madgett and her work can be defined by her homage to traditional poetic language and form as well as her deft exploration of subjects as varying as motherhood and war alongside celebrations of womanhood and critiques of Black nationalism. Her poetry expresses a fundamental tension in the critical understanding of what Black poetry was, is, and could be in addition to who is qualified to make these designations. In her autobiography, Madgett discusses her struggles in attempting to get *Pink Ladies* published, saying that "the prospect of getting a book of quiet, reflective poetry that dealt with race in more subtle ways...stood less chance of acceptance than before" (313-314). Madgett's poetry, especially those volumes published during the 1970s, had trouble finding an audience; its variety of poetic forms in addition to its lack of a clear focus on specifically Black cultural influences and racial themes made it more difficult to

market from a publishing perspective. However, one poem in *Pink Ladies in the Afternoon* is overtly political in both its ideological focus and its use of Black speech as inspiration.

“Newblack,” published the same year that Henderson releases his seminal anthology *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, takes up this issue of Black poetry’s publication, classification, and prescribed need for political efficacy in earnest, pitting Black critic against Black artist. Despite the fact that Madgett herself claims in her autobiography that “[m]y poetry has never been considered political,” “Newblack” demonstrates an understanding of a political positionality that critiqued a prescribed Black aesthetic and defended the individuality of the artist, anticipating Trey Ellis’s New Black Aesthetic of the late 1980s (*Pilgrim Journey* 370).

In “The New Black Aesthetic,” Trey Ellis describes himself and other Black writers of the New Black Aesthetic (NBA) as “cultural mulattoes,” artists “educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures” (235). In comparing his concept of cultural mulattoes to Sterling Brown’s “tragic mulatto,” Ellis says that the members of the NBA only fail artistically when “they are letting other people define their identity” (236). Ellis goes on to claim that NBA artists of the 1980s “aren’t afraid to flout publicly the official, positivist black party line” (237). He asserts that trying to find an essential, priori conception of Blackness is neither productive nor possible and that a primary motivation behind the New Black Aesthetic, the “parodying of the black nationalist movement,” is a direct response to critics and other poets who restrict conceptions of Black art (236). Ellis extends the conversation that Hughes began in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” in his description of New Black Aesthetic artists as working irrespective of critical evaluations of their work, whether those critics be white or Black.

Though Ellis aims to outline the origins, advancements, and defining factors of the NBA, he makes an interesting claim by suggesting “the NBA might not be any newer than [Toni]

Morrison's *Song of Solomon*" (237). Morrison's novel, published in 1977, is a foundational work that shifted conceptions of Black art, Black writing, and Black history. In her third novel—her only novel with a male protagonist—Morrison tells the story of the Dead family, a family defined by its economic status and inability to confront the hard truths of their pasts. In her article "‘Pass It On!’: Legacy and the Freedom Struggle in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," Laura Dubek argues that Morrison's apathetic protagonist Milkman Dead represents Martin Luther King, Jr., while his childhood friend Guitar, a cheerful boy who grows into a violent and vengeful man, represents Malcolm X. The BAM's alignment with the Black Power Movement explicitly celebrated the Black nationalism of Malcolm X by rejecting what Amiri Baraka calls "[t]he 'turn the other cheek,' 'non-violent' approach to the struggle for democracy" in the wake of both Martin Luther King, Jr.'s and Malcolm X's assassinations ("The Black Arts Movement" 12). Morrison undertakes an ideological reckoning in her novel about the legacy of these Civil Rights figures and the quest for Black political unity in the dynamic dialogue between the complacent Milkman and the militant Guitar. Morrison's novel destabilizes the ideological binary that these figures are often seen to embody through a recognition of individualism. However, Madgett's "Newblack" anticipates this ideological shift towards individualism, at least in the realm of Black poetics, much earlier than Ellis cites.⁵

In *Pilgrim Journey*, Madgett states that the inspiration behind writing "Newblack" was "a divisiveness" between critics, writers, and publishers regarding the characterization of Black poets as either "knee-grows" or "'true' blacks" (317). The speaker of the poem is a poetry critic, one who takes issue with poetry that they deem not Black enough. The poem is written in a deliberate style that mimics the use of Black speech, which inspired members of the BAM (perhaps most notably Amiri Baraka, whose poem "Dope" is just one example of how his work

famously relies upon Black speech patterns). However, Madgett uses the structural influence of Black speech in a deeply ironic way in order to, as Ellis describes in his article, parody the Black nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s and its manifestations through artistic production. Madgett's critic and her critique of said critic also have a clear lineage in Ellis's later assertion that "NBA artists [weren't] afraid to flout publicly the official, positivist black party line," something that Madgett does through her creation and analysis of her poetry critic in "Newblack" (237).

Madgett, of course, is not the only poet writing during this period who found themselves either entirely removed from or vacillating within and outside the parameters of the Black Arts Movement. Poets Carolyn Rodgers, Etheridge Knight, and Henry Dumas, who all experimented with their poetic style while also writing in more traditional European poetic forms (and, in Knight's case, the classical Japanese haiku form) throughout their careers, require a nuanced and complex Black poetic classification. For Rodgers especially, this engagement with traditional forms combined with the Black Arts Movement's patriarchal shortcomings—resting on a nationalism that "typically relies upon gender hierarchies" that "[figure] the black man as the focal point of racist oppression" (*Renegade Poetics* 6)—have potentially caused her work to be, to a certain extent, overlooked and/or underappreciated by critics of the period. Nonetheless, critics such as Tony Bolden argue Rodgers anticipated the critical work of both Stephen Henderson's *Understanding the New Black Poetry* and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s 1988 book *The Signifying Monkey* (Bolden 25-26).⁶ Rodgers's influence has begun to receive its due recognition only in recent years.

Rodgers's 1969 essay "Black Poetry—Where It's At" very briefly lists what she believes to be the various types of Black poems.⁷ In particular, she notes what she calls the "signifying poem," one that is "a way of saying the truth that hurts with a laugh" and invokes a sense of

structural and intentional irony.⁸ The classification of Madgett's "Newblack" as a signifying poem is made evident in the first three lines: "repeat that magic mutha-word/scream it loud n bad baby/(spellin wds diffрут tho we cd speak gd english if we wanted 2)" (1-3). Madgett, in her reference to "that magic mutha-word," creates a deliberate commentary on the BAM's emphasis on poems that challenge the prescribed use of Standard American English. Madgett's commentary is more explicit when seen as an allusion to Haki Madhubuti's section in *Dynamite Voices* where he, like Henderson, asserts that Black poetry is dependent upon the influence of Black speech and "cites as evidence [the] various ways in which the word 'muthafucka' ha[d] been used by poets to achieve a specifically African American poetic form" (Bolden 23). While Madgett foregrounds her poem with a criticism of the prescriptions that, in their dependence upon Black speech representations, often necessitated Black poets "[spell] wds diffрут," her critique of these prescriptions extends far beyond simple stylistic choices.

As the poem continues, Madgett makes more concrete what she believes is the flawed logic of this critic, beginning with her narrator's demand that Black artists "knock down them ole tom-idol images" because "its time" (7, 16-17). As the poem progresses into the fourth stanza, the critic's evaluation of contemporaneous Black poetry is exacting:

them kneegrow poets that aint black enuf
that jes wont lissen when we tell m
whut they oughta be n do
that wont be Blackwashed by th talk we talk
they a strange breed n due t meet they end
wid all them uther toms (19-24)

Madgett's critic denigrates those writing poetry "that aint black enuf" as creative Uncle Toms, deeming Booker T. Washington, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes as members of a larger group who "led us all stray 2 thousan yrs ago" (24-25).

The inclusion of both Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes as two of "them uther toms" is striking, especially considering the aforementioned context surrounding the publication of Hughes's essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" and Madgett's interactions with them during the early part of her career. Why members of the BAM would criticize Cullen seems more straightforward than the layered critique Madgett includes of Hughes. Cullen, as Hughes points out in his article, had no desire to link his creative work explicitly with his identity as a Black man. The critic's attack on Hughes, however, is seemingly out of place: though Hughes is not as exacting in his demand for the need for Black poetry and Black literature to *solely* rely on cultural influences such as Black music and speech, his work in large part did. In his aforementioned essay, Hughes offers a defense of jazz as "the inherent expressions of Negro life in America," and the characters in Hughes's fiction and poetry often speak in Black vernacular (84). Madgett's critic seems to imply that Hughes's writing lacked the overt political action that Neal designates as essential to the creation of Black art in his essay "The Black Arts Movement" (15).⁹ The critic's description of Hughes as a man who "laughed too much" implies a lack of seriousness in respect to elucidating the Black struggle through the subjects and themes of Hughes's work celebrates the blues' ambivalence wherein one is "laughing to keep from crying," the title of Hughes's 1952 short story collection. Madgett's grouping of both Cullen and Hughes together in a poem that criticizes the BAM is pointed, highlighting how far the demands on Black artists could be taken to exclude even foundational figures.

Another striking aspect of Madgett's poem in regard to its recognition of the individual artist is the way the first four lines delineate the prescriptions inhibiting Black artists during this period. The poets that Madgett's critic claims "wont be Blackwashed by th talk we talk" show the critic as calling back to Henderson's, Makhubuti's, and others' assertion that Black poetry of this period primarily derived its structural inspiration from Black speech.¹⁰ Madgett implies that she qualifies as one of "them kneegrow poets that aint black enuf," and the parallel between her challenging prescriptive Blackness and Ellis's designation of the New Black Aesthetic as a group of "cultural mulattoes" with varying intentions, styles, and influences is clear ("The New Black Aesthetic" 235). In addition, Madgett also implicitly anticipates Ellis's assertion that artists of the New Black Aesthetic "refuse to pander to an audience just to top the charts" in her creation of a Black critic who is unflinching in their critique of any art that stands outside of their restrictive dictums (236). Madgett's ironic evaluation of his restrictive viewpoint foresees Ellis's disregard of unwavering Black aesthetic critical frameworks.

After outlining the failings of "them uther toms," Madgett's narrator makes clear an outlook that reasserts a hierarchal classification of what makes "good" Black poetry through an understanding of the critic's own arrogant authority. Madgett's critic condemns "all them other cats/that didn't know whut we no/that didn't have all th answers/like we do," or, in other words, the critics who engage alternative aesthetic theories and refuse to circumscribe Black poets during this period (31-34). The critic's claim that there are definitively right and wrong answers about what qualifies as Black art is in sharp contrast to Madgett's own drive as both a poet and editor in proliferating a wide diversity of artistic expression by Black artists. For Ellis, the NBA focuses on recognizing Black artists as the "uncategorizable folks we had always known ourselves to be" (237). Over fifteen years earlier, however, Madgett demands that recognition

from poets and critics alike through an assertion that no one critic had “all th answers/like” Madgett’s critic seems to think they do.

Much of the early stanzas of Madgett’s poem rely on context, but her final stanza makes her critique clear regardless of the reader’s familiarity with the subject. As a layered poetic commentary on the critical prescriptions of Black art, “Newblack” culminates in a decisive statement:

thats new Blackunity baby
thats Blackexperience—
Black crab-survival in the same ole barrel:
tearin down the climber
tearin down (whitey’s last triumphant laugh
at Blackboy) each other (35-40)

In this last stanza, Madgett’s metaphor—an allusion to Booker T. Washington—makes clear her position: by referencing the “tearin down [of] each other,” she examines exactly how an aesthetic movement that relies upon Black unity and Black nationalism can produce the opposite effect. Madgett uses the literal structure of her poetic language in order to draw attention to a larger ideological point through her creation of compound works like “Blackunity,” “Blackexperience,” and “Blackboy.” By using these compound words, Madgett creates an additional commentary on Black artists’ need to be identifiably Black, so much so that the word “Black” is connected to everything and every theme, like “unity” and “experience,” they explore. The poet’s racial identity is, quite literally, only unified on paper. Rather than realizing unity, this racial imperative placed on the individual Black artist leads to the exact opposite in Madgett’s estimation: racial prescriptions will always stifle genuine artistic expression and cause artists to

be defined by their race first, their work second. In her reference to “whitey’s last triumphant laugh,” Madgett makes clear the inability of critics like the narrator of “Newblack” to make room for varied and complex understandings of Black poetry, art, and aesthetics. Ultimately, this shortcoming will only continue the white dominance of canonical literature and white supremacist views of Black art as self-defeating à la “the Black crab-survival in the same ole barrel.”

In her memoir, Madgett writes about her own political and poetic positionality as an editor in terms of the production of art more broadly:

I have always felt an intense need to respect the independence of the individual artist...I resent the assertion sometimes fervently stated by African Americans that the black artist has an obligation to his or her people and their cause. I think we are in deep trouble when some self-appointed prophet, no matter how legitimate his or her cause, seeks to determine the direction or mode of anybody else’s creative expression... (*Pilgrim Journey* 324)

This “intense need to respect the independence of the individual artist,” to never “determine the direction or mode of anybody else’s creative expression,” was a decided turn away from the specific artistic and political directives of the BAM. In contrast to Baraka, who defines “being Black” as “despising as openly as possible All White People” and preparing for “struggle and even violence,” Madgett’s focus on individual pursuits rather than a universal Black struggle was certainly a primary factor as to why her work has been relatively understudied for decades (“The Black Arts Movement” 15). But perhaps even more importantly, “Newblack” does something altogether subversive and skillful in that it uses the form and structure of poetry that, at the time, was considered irrefutably Black in order to critique what she saw as the constrictive objectives

of the BAM and Black poetic criticism of the 1970s. Beyond “Newblack” and *Pink Ladies in the Afternoon*, Madgett’s body of work as a whole anticipates and prefigures contemporary Black poets’ understanding of new Blackness, one that recognized a diversity of Black experiences. Though Madgett’s poetry was not political in the same way as many members of the Black Arts Movement, “Newblack” demonstrates a political position that Evie Shockley echoes in her book *Renegade Poetics* and that Shockley explores in her own poetry.

Perhaps the most well-known contemporary creative work employing the term “new black” and expanding upon the New Black Aesthetic is Evie Shockley’s 2011 poetry collection *the new black*. Shockley’s diversity in form, subject, theme, and poetic intentionality mirrors the creative imperative Madgett articulates in both “Newblack” and *Pilgrim Journey*. Just six months after the publication of *the new black*, Shockley published her monograph *Renegade Poetics* in which she aims to recognize “poetic innovation” through an understanding of “historical and cultural moments” (1). Shockley takes up the task of evaluating the BAM, presenting a nuanced view of the period’s Black artistic productivity and outlining three primary criticisms of the BAM as essentialist, sexist, and heterosexist, echoing Madgett’s own critique (45). Shockley’s major critical and theoretical move is to demand the need for Black *aesthetics*, plural, with a definition that “need not be inevitably linked to static understandings of how blackness is inscribed in literary texts” (7). Shockley’s call for Black aesthetics requires it be “descriptive, rather than prescriptive,” a critical understanding that is “a multifarious, contingent, non-delimited complex of strategies that African American writers may use to negotiate gaps or conflicts between their artistic goals and the operation of race in the production, dissemination, and reception of their writing” (8-9). Shockley’s primary claim is that, in the supposed need to define Blackness, Black art and Black artistic criticism has become stagnant thematically,

experimentally, and politically. By looking at poets who both renegotiate an understanding of poetic form as well as expand their thematic range, Shockley attempts to eradicate prescriptive and essentialist understandings of Black poetry, a theory that she puts into creative practice in her volume *the new black*.

Like Madgett's *Pink Ladies in the Afternoon*, Shockley's *the new black* engages a multiplicity of themes, especially themes of black female womanhood that can be seen as a response to the sexist shortcomings of the Black Arts Movement. However, the book opens with the poem "my last modernist poem, #4/(or, re-re-birth of a nation)." The poem title's reference to one of the most racist films ever made certainly necessitates an understanding of race as the collection's central theme before you get past the first page. This emphasis is reinforced further by her description of a man's "brown blackness" in an "unprecedented/place" as "like the end of a race that begins/with a gun," her play on the word "race" meaning an urgent striving, ethnicity, and perhaps the human race more broadly (1-5). Just five pages later is "*from* The Lost Letters of Frederick Douglass," an epistolary poem from the point of view of the title character. Instead of focusing on issues of racial uplift, Douglass is writing a letter to his daughter asking her forgiveness for having left her mother. Here, Shockley plays with issues of gender and class, with Douglass explaining that his wife "died illiterate/when I had risked my life to master language" and explaining that he "could not have stayed so unequally yoked/so long, without a kind of Freedom in/it (27-28, 47-49).

Though Shockley challenges our understanding of Douglass's legacy through themes like gender and class, race as a theme does also play a part in Shockley's characterization of Douglass. In the poem, Douglass writes to his daughter: "I want you to/feel certain that Helen became the new/Mrs. Douglass because of what we shared/in sheaves of my papers: let no

one/persuade you I coveted her skin” (39-43). What Shockley presents is an understanding of multiple lenses through which to view this historic and foundational figure. Although he did not leave his daughter’s mother because of her race, the fact that the reader learns he left her because she was illiterate does not resolve Shockley’s complicated image of Douglass. Shockley’s reevaluation of a foundational Black figure, though more overt in her choice to write in Douglass’s voice, certainly has parallels in Madgett’s decision to challenge the poetic legacy of figures such as Hughes and Cullen through her critique of the critic in “Newblack.” Though the critic oversimplifies Hughes’s legacy as not political *enough* in his art for his time, what Madgett demands through her critique is a nuanced understanding of these figures; here, Shockley embarks on a similar task, asking her reader to challenge their own understanding of an oft-lauded figure. This reevaluation of historical figures can be seen as a reflection of both Madgett and Shockley’s imperative for a recognition of complex poetic intentions and interpretations.

As *the new black* progresses, Shockley takes on a variety of issues and poetic styles, marking her as a poet that, in her lack of a unified theme or form, is parallel to Madgett and Madgett’s work in *Pink Ladies in the Afternoon*. Shockley’s poem “in a/non-subjunctive/mood” takes aim at the military industrial complex and Halliburton’s complicity in “every/drop of/Iraqi blood spilled,/every/woman raped,/every life destroyed” during the Iraq War (4-9). In contrast, her poem “where you are planted” is an homage to her home state of Tennessee and her identification as a Southerner, as someone who “grew up in the shadow of southern trees” and their association with the South’s history of lynching African Americans (12). “on new year’s eve,” an existential poem about the disingenuousness of New Year’s resolutions, presents a poetic formalism in its intensely descriptive and syllabic lines such as “between beloveds: we cosset the space/of a fey hour, anxious gods molding our/hoped-for adams with this temporal

clay” (8-10). Shockley, like Madgett, appreciates using and manipulating classical forms, including Madgett’s favorite, the sonnet, in her poem “a sonnet for stanley tookie williams,” a man whose legacy as one of the founders of the Crips gang in Los Angeles makes his life a sharp thematic contrast to the more romantic, traditional sonnet form Shockley employs. The diversity in form and theme in *the new black* represents Shockley’s creative ideology:

Black poetry and Black aesthetics are not one thing, but rather many juxtaposed concerns layered in a poetic consciousness. This layering of poetic concerns and consciousness is the contemporary manifestation of what Madgett herself demanded for Black poets, including herself, during the 1970s.

This juxtaposition of various poetic aspects—theme, tone, form, etc.—is one of the reasons that Shockley’s *the new black* stands as an important work of poetry today; however, these same juxtapositions were seen in the 1960s and 1970s as counterproductive to the political goals of the Black Power and Black Arts Movements. What we recognize in Shockley’s work today as an adept exploration of the complexities of human identity were once seen as romantic, peripheral concerns—and, of course, gendered, strictly womanly concerns—that had no place in the poetry of that moment. Madgett’s work, like Shockley’s, runs the gamut in terms of influence, expression, style, and theme, but because it is written in a period when Black artists and critics like Stephen Henderson sought to prescribe what the Black aesthetic was, Madgett was overlooked because of what her poetry was not. What is clear, regardless of the fact that Madgett’s work was and still is largely understudied, is that Madgett’s keen critique of the Black Arts Movement in the poem “Newblack” anticipated an entire field of Black aesthetic criticism and Black art that sought to expand rather than constrict what it means to be a Black artist, what

it means to produce Black art, and how we can have productive conversations about what a Black artist and art expresses.

Madgett's poetry was not given the attention it deserved in its own publishing moment because it challenged the artistic zeitgeist. It is still largely understudied today because her prescience in anticipating what has now become a common critique of the BAM has not been acknowledged in her oeuvre by literary historians and critics. Her continuing obscurity within the field of twentieth-century Black poetry serves as a case in point: when critics create prescriptive, stringent dictums of what Black art is and can be, there will always be Black artists who are erased from the conversation. This erasure—whether it be of the poet or a poetic theme—oversimplifies the artistic and ideological work that poetry can and does do. Madgett's fundamental artistic imperative is to respect the individuality of the artist; when this is eschewed, poets and critics alike stall or hinder poetic innovation. What Madgett expresses in "Newblack," and what both Ellis and Shockley later echo and affirm, is a fundamental desire for recognition of an artistic complexity that continues to challenge and innovate the field of Black poetry and poetry as a whole.

Notes

In my scholarship, I always capitalize the word "Black"; however, in cases where I have quoted writers that have not capitalized it, I have left it in its original form.

¹ Though Henderson's book is perhaps best-known in terms of the use of "new black poetry," there were certainly other critics who had used the term in shorter pieces prior to Henderson's book's publication, such as Bernard W. Bell's 1971 article "New Black Poetry: A Double-Edged Sword."

² In her autobiography, Madgett makes this motivation definitive: "It was because [*Pink Ladies in the Afternoon*] didn't fit the mold that even Black publishers were hesitant to publish it and Lotus Press came into being" (370).

³ This is a notable connection for Madgett because Baker's critical work *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984) has also been critiqued as overly prescriptive. In addition, Madgett's creative work, on the whole, would not be considered notable in Baker's theories of the vernacular.

⁴ Founded in 1962, Boone House was largely disbanded by 1965.

⁵ "Newblack" is first published in 1972, but it was likely written much earlier, considering Madgett's comments in her autobiography about her difficult search to find a publisher.

⁶ In the second chapter of his book *Afro-Blue: Improvisations in African American Poetry and Culture*, Tony Bolden presents an interesting case-in-point in reference to the critical reception of Rodgers's work. He notes Haki

Madhubuti “criticizes Rodgers’s satire of the Black Power movement” for misspellings but lauds her poem “for h. w. fuller” despite the fact that the latter is written in a more standard, traditional style (25).

⁷ This essay is one of the essays that Tony Bolden points to as a precursor to Henderson’s *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, particularly in Rodgers’s extensive listing of the types of Black poetry mirrored in Henderson’s own section on structure (*Afro-Blue* 25).

⁸ The idea of signifying is famously returned to later in Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) but in a more complex, semiotic understanding of how Black culture resonates and reinterprets itself over time. Though Gates’s volume is still an important book in understanding the history of Black literary criticism, it also has been described as a restrictive, reductive view of Black literature. In her article “The Crisis in Black American Literary Criticism and the Postmodern Cures of Houston A. Baker, Jr., and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.,” Sandra Adell describes Gates’s theory as “problematic” and cites both Gates and Houston A. Baker’s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* as the source of the “current crisis in the critical reading of twentieth-century Afro-American writing” (523-524).

⁹ This criticism of Hughes as lacking in political motivation was not just a fabrication made by Madgett to help establish the intentions of her critic. Harold Cruise’s 1967 book *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* re-evaluated Black figures and movements beginning with the Harlem Renaissance, critiquing its motivations and effectiveness and claiming that the Harlem Renaissance did not understand racism in a specifically American context. David Levering Lewis’s 1997 book *When Harlem Was in Vogue* counters Cruise’s critique.

¹⁰ Again, Madgett rarely writes in any style other than what we now consider Standard American English, though there is another important exception: her poem “Culturally Deprived,” also from *Pink Ladies in the Afternoon*, is a signifying poem that invokes Black speech as a primary influence. Like “Newblack,” “Culturally Deprived” is an ironic critique, though it is a commentary on the overwhelming concerns of Black mothers rather than a critique on prescriptions for a Black aesthetic.

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Singing a Dual Song: The Legacy of Phillis Wheatley and Naomi Long Madgett's Sense of Place Poetry

More often than not in literary criticism, contextualization is the starting point: we identify texts based on where they were written, how the author identifies themselves, or what genre they employ. Contextualization is the standard method for anthologies, collections demarcated by a range of publication dates or the nationality of the authors that include a thorough introduction with relevant historical and biographical information. Though this seemingly-standard process helps us to contextualize a text, it also presents a problem for writers and their work that resist the rigidity that often results from contextualization, work that does not fit neatly into temporally- or thematically-divided chapters in an anthology. Limited framing and/or cataloguing has consequences for literary history, in particular in the recognition of Black women writers whose work spans several decades or whose work is not easily defined by distinctive stylistic or thematic characteristics. Naomi Long Madgett, poet and founder of Lotus Press, is a writer whose work resists the kind of contextualization we find in anthologies. Though anthologized early in her career in Langston Hughes' and Arna Bontemps' *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1949* (1949), Madgett's poetry is rarely discussed in the post-Black Arts Movement period of Black poetry.¹

The Black Arts Movement aimed to define what is and is not Black art, and though Madgett and her work were not deliberately eschewed from the conversation, her lack of an "identifiable blackness" led to her shifting her focus from her own work to publishing the work of other Black poets during the 1970s (Baraka 244). The Black Arts Movement aimed to

¹ Madgett was also included in the seminal anthology *The Black Poets* (1971), edited by friend and fellow Detroit poet Dudley Randall, among many other esteemed anthologies. Despite the fact that she has been anthologized in more than 180 anthologies, critical evaluation of her work is still almost nonexistent.

encourage free expressions of Blackness through art, but it also set up a system of aesthetic essentialization that struggled to recognize and affirm Madgett's work. Her body of work spans time, space, and sometimes conflicting representations of personal identity. Madgett's volume *Exits and Entrances* (1978), her first volume published after the Black Arts Movement, serves as a case-in-point. Whereas Madgett describes the volume in her autobiography *Pilgrim Journey* (2006) as having "a *more* ethnic focus than any of [her] earlier books," she gives plenty of space to other concerns in the volume, such as motherhood and womanhood in her ode to her daughter, "Kin" (371, emphasis in original).

This focus on womanhood and the complexities of Black identity are also explored in Madgett's "Phillis," a narrative poem from *Exits and Entrances* written from the point of view of the late eighteenth-century African American poet Phillis Wheatley. While Madgett's poem engages with these nuanced issues of contextualization based on race and nationality through her imagined perspective as Wheatley, it also puts issues of contextualization in conversation with Madgett's understanding of what she describes in the poem as Wheatley's "dual song," a tension between Wheatley's connection to Africa and her success as a poet in America. Madgett's understanding of her own dual song is more complex, invoking compound understandings of Black identity, spirituality, and womanhood. Madgett's Wheatley defies a conception of physical space and creates a spiritual place where these identities can be explored in tandem rather than in contradiction. This spiritual space is demonstrated through Madgett's re-telling of Wheatley's story, but Madgett's poem has far broader implications in that it creates a space for spiritual connection between Black women writers across time and place.

In respect to Black women writers and their work, Barbara Christian takes up this issue of contextualization and challenges "categorization" in her article "The Race for Theory" (1987).

Because literary criticism in the academy pressures scholars to constantly produce new theories, a critical analysis of who these theories are serving is overlooked, often leaving Black women's writing out of the conversation. In contrast to theory that provides exactions of a text, Christian proposes an approach to theory that does not dictate "how we *ought* to read" but rather to read "in various ways and remain open to the intricacies of the intersection of language, class, race, and gender in literature" in order to avoid "gross generalizations about culture," especially in Black women's writing (53, emphasis in original). Carol Boyce Davies also notes this tension between theorization and Black women's writing in the introduction to her book *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (2004). According to Davies, we must read Black women's writing through an understanding of "migratory subjectivity," a concept that insists that Black women's writing "cannot be framed in terms of one specific place, but exists in myriad places and times, constantly eluding the terms of the discussion" (36). Noting that theorization makes the "polyvocality of Black women's creative and critical speech" difficult to grapple with through traditional theoretical approaches that rely on temporal distinctions, geographical locations, or racial identity, Davies marks the concept of polyvocality as unique to Black women's writing, as it links Black women writers across space and time (23). Instead of relying on strict theorization, we must read Black women's writing "as a series of boundary crossings," both physical and metaphorical, and must "accept the practical realities of 'incompleteness'" to consciously read in a way that "always resist[s] closure" (34, 35). By resisting closure, we can avoid what Barbara Christian warns us against: creating theory that delimits engagement as well as interpretation. Both Christian's call to approach Black women's writing from an expansive rather than delimiting understanding of theory and Davies' concept of polyvocality is particularly useful in evaluating Madgett's poem "Phillis."

Madgett's polyvocal work engages a womanist perspective, a term made famous by writer Alice Walker in her volume *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1983). Walker opens her book with a definition of womanist as "[a] woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually" someone who "appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility...and women's strength" (1). Walker's definition of womanism takes care to distinguish itself from feminism, saying that "womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (1). Though Walker gave womanism its name, Layli Phillips' writes in her introduction to *The Womanist Reader* (2006) that "womanism...nevertheless articulates a long and unique history of Black women's thought and activism" (xxiv). This "long and unique history" is one womanist aspect of Madgett's poem in its connection between two Black women writing over two hundred years apart; however, womanism is even more complex than a means of speaking across time. Womanism as a concept, Phillips reiterates, is tricky to outline, and purposefully so; similar to Davies' polyvocality, it calls upon a recognition of multiple voices, voices that potentially contradict each other. Instead of attempting to find a binary answer to these contradictions, womanism, according to Phillips, "seeks to harmonize and coordinate difference so that difference does not become irreconcilable" (xxii). In what Phillips calls "the most unique and potentially controversial aspect of womanism," womanism is "spiritualized," "openly acknowledg[ing] a spiritual/transcendental realm with which human life, livingkind, and the material world are all intertwined" (xxvi). It is within this spiritual realm that Madgett creates her narrative of Wheatley's life, encouraging a navigation of difference in the poem that allows for a fuller understanding of complex notions of identity.

This spiritualized idea of place is all-important in Madgett's poem "Phillis" although Madgett claims her body of work is completely "devoid" of "a sense of place" in her autobiography *Pilgrim Journey* (2006). Madgett's memoir is worth quoting at some length here:

I have always enjoyed reading novels and poems that have a strong sense of place, of land. I like reading about the rural South although—or perhaps because—I've never lived there. After my father died, I found a comment he had written at the top of a newspaper article he had saved: 'I dearly love the South.' I was amazed to learn of that love, especially in view of the treatment that African Americans received there. But that love goes beyond the segregation, injustice, and racism; it is an irrevocable relationship with the very earth itself. My poems are devoid of that sense of place and land. (456)

It is true that much of Madgett's poetry lacks a definitive geographical location. Her most-anthologized poem, "Midway," is a lyric expression of solidarity written in the early years of the Civil Rights Movement. Its title references the movement's continuing journey in abstract rather than physical terms. Nevertheless, Madgett's work defies an understanding of place as geographic or physical. In "Phillis," Madgett creates a "sense of place" through her connection to other Black women writers like Wheatley. This is not to say that an understanding of geographic location is not important in Madgett's exploration of Wheatley's story; Wheatley's relationship with the American landscape and her journey across the Middle Passage are both central events in the poem. Wheatley's relationship with place is important in the poem in a biographical sense, but it also taps into the spiritualized aspect of womanism. I contend the poem itself becomes a place where Wheatley's childhood in Africa, her life in America, and Madgett's own writing inspired by Wheatley's story all are "intertwined" (Phillips xxvi).

Madgett's choice of Wheatley as poetic subject reflects a critical conversation about Wheatley that was taking place while Madgett was working on the poems for *Exits and Entrances*. Though Alice Walker's seminal essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" was published in the collection with the same name in 1983, her article was first published on its own in 1974, just four years before Madgett would publish *Exits and Entrances*. In her article, Walker takes up the issue of Wheatley's critical evaluation, in particular the criticisms against Wheatley's poetic style and her seeming lack of engagement with issues of enslavement. Early twentieth-century Black literary critics gave Wheatley mostly backhanded recognition.² In James Weldon Johnson's preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), for example, Johnson begins by attempting to uplift Wheatley's reputation before immediately negating her poetic ability, writing: "Phillis Wheatley has never been given her rightful place in American literature...Of course, she is not a *great* American poet...but she is an important American poet" (433 emphasis mine). As understandings of Black poetry continued to evolve in the 20th century, the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s sought an explicit definition of what qualifies as Black Art, particularly in reference to Black poetry's reliance on the "traditions of black orality and musical improvisation" as inspiration (Nielsen 9). Wheatley's work—criticized early in the century for its reliance on Alexander Pope as a poetic model³—decidedly did not rely on these influences, and in 1979, Black Arts Movement leader Amiri Baraka definitively accused her poetry of "evinced gratitude at slavery" and promoting the idea that enslavement "had actually helped the Africans" ("The Revolutionary Tradition" 243).

² In *The Negro in Literature* (1918), Benjamin Brawley claims that Wheatley's love of Alexander Pope causes her to revert "into his pitfalls" and leads to a supposed "sense of repression" from writing according to white European models of poetry (36). J. Saunders Redding also provides a less-than-favorable evaluation of her work in *To Make a Poet Black* (1939), describing her as "the fragile product of three related forces—the age, the Wheatley household, and New England America," depriving her of all agency, both artistic and human (11).

³ See previous note on Brawley.

Walker, writing immediately after the Black Arts Movement began to wane, takes issue with these criticisms against Wheatley in her work “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens.” This type of essentialization—where Wheatley *must* be concerned with issues of enslavement in every poem she writes, *must* provide a more complex commentary than what she does in her most famous work *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773)—is exactly what Barbara Christian warns against in “The Race for Theory”: literary theory’s tendency to make “gross generalizations” in regard to Black women’s writing (53). Walker instead creates a complex picture of the “most misunderstood” Wheatley: “The key words, as they relate to Phillis, are ‘contrary instincts’ . . . Her loyalties were completely divided, as was, without question, her mind” (235-236). Walker goes on to outline the biographical evidence of these contrary instincts: “[c]aptured at seven, a slave of wealthy, dotting whites who instilled in her the ‘savagery’ of the Africa they ‘rescued’ her from.” Even more important are the “contrary instincts” present in the substance of her work (236). In “To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth,” Wheatley writes of her “love of *Freedom*” despite still being owned by the Wheatleys.⁴ In “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” Wheatley acknowledges the “mercy [that] brought me from my *Pagan* land” and “taught my benighted soul to understand,” but the poem proves more than an ode to a new life in America.⁵ The final two lines are a nuanced critique of whiteness: “Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,/May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train”

⁴ In his entry on Wheatley in *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* (1997), John C. Shields quotes from Wheatley’s letters that “not until her pen brought her into the scrutiny of the British public did John Wheatley see fit to ‘give me my freedom,’” marking Wheatley as “the first African American to free herself by means of her own writing ability” (770). Here, we can see Wheatley’s creation of a creative space to freely explore the artistic and spiritual concerns of the artist as manifesting a very real, legally-defined freedom.

⁵ June Jordan argues in “the Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America or Something Like A Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley” that Wheatley’s line “Once I redemption neither sought nor knew” in this poem moves beyond a simple recognition of coming to a more “enlightened” place. Rather, Jordan argues Wheatley is here asserting that “once I existed beyond and without these terms under consideration. *Once I existed on other than your terms*,” providing a more expansive understanding of Wheatley’s perspective than a simplified understanding of Wheatley as grateful, gracious, and amenable rather than critical (200, emphasis Jordan).

(emphasis original). Here, Wheatley provides a critique of white Christians who doubt the humanity and capability of Black people, offering her artistic skill as proof. What Walker argues for, and what Madgett also explores in her poem, is an understanding of Wheatley's perspective as more critically complex than simply grateful, gracious, and amenable. Wheatley, to cite Walt Whitman, contains multitudes, and these multitudes include potentially contradictory facets.

Because Wheatley's work contains contrary instincts, it is not easy to grapple with, especially if we start an analytical reading of Madgett's poem by looking at both Wheatley and Madgett through standard classifications. Madgett herself felt the work that she attempted to publish in the early 1970s had issues finding an audience because of its lack of thematic unity and style on particularly "Black" and/or "political" issues, both among Black and white publishers (*Pilgrim Journey* 369-370). Madgett's poem about Wheatley effectively demonstrates how this issue of categorical essentialization spans place and time in respect to Black women's writing.⁶ But Madgett's poem demands that those who would criticize Wheatley for her reverence to the work of Alexander Pope and her subscription to a white Christian religious morality, for example, give her literary ancestor space for agency. We have to recognize Wheatley as containing contrary instincts, including a love of Pope and the sonnet alongside her pointed—if sparse—critiques of whiteness and America. Thus, there is a relational understanding of Wheatley's and Madgett's work; but there is also the all-important spiritual connection between these two poets.

⁶ Madgett's inability to get *Pink Ladies in the Afternoon* (1972) published demonstrates a creation of space in a different way. In her autobiography, Madgett asserts that "because [*Pink Ladies*] didn't fit the mold that even black publishers were hesitant to publish it and Lotus Press"—the press she founded in her basement in 1974—"came into being" (370). Madgett, quite literally, created space through her work in the founding of a press that sought to publish Black poets whose work had difficulty finding space in mainstream publishing.

Madgett's poem "Phillis" probes Wheatley's complex identity and legacy. Madgett imagines Wheatley's memories of Africa, as represented by memories of her mother and the sounds of ancestral drums. The poem begins with Wheatley thinking back to her earliest memories while overlooking the New England shore:

I hardly remember my mother's face now

But I still feel

At my bosom a chill wind

Stirring strange longings for the sturdy back

I used to lean against for warmth and comfort... (1-5)

In the first line, we get a sense of Madgett's approaching Wheatley's story with an understanding of its polyvocality. The fact that the poem is Wheatley's perspective written through Madgett's voice is, though literal, a clear demonstration of polyvocality. More than a simple linear biography of Wheatley's story, Madgett imagines a reflective Wheatley, a woman who begins with memories of her mother and Africa despite the years that have separated her from her homeland. Toni Morrison's concept of memory from her piece "Memory, Creation, and Writing" (1984) resonates here in respect to a distinction between what we might consider Wheatley herself and what is Madgett's imagined Wheatley, a retelling of Wheatley's story that calls upon a spiritual connection that exists between Wheatley and Madgett in the act of Madgett's writing. Though Madgett writes Wheatley as "hardly remember[ing]" her mother's face, the fact that Wheatley still carries a memory of her mother's "sturdy back" as her earliest conception of safety and support is Madgett creating a spiritualized space in which past and present exist together, in this case a spiritual place of self-reflection charged by a tactile memory. Morrison writes that memory encompasses "an entire galaxy of feeling and impression" and that, in her

own writing, she attempts to “pursu[e] [her] memory of [a woman], not the woman herself” to “creat[e] [a] discomfort and unease in order to insist that the reader rely on another body of knowledge” (386-387). Madgett’s poem from the start asks that we approach Wheatley’s work, life, and legacy in a new way, relying on another body of knowledge other than biographical information, her categorization as an American poet, or previous critics’ harsh estimations of her work. Though Madgett’s imagined Wheatley sits on the New England coast as she writes, Wheatley’s thoughts are in Africa, which symbolize the divided loyalties that Walker notes in her essay.

The second stanza of the poem reiterates this tension between physical space and memory when she describes her surroundings while writing this poem in New England. In this stanza, the concept of “home” is both locational and emotional, serving as another example of Wheatley’s contrary instincts.

...I am blinded by
The glint of sunlight
Striking golden fire from the flint
Of seafoamed rocks below me
On some island not too far from home. (7-11)

Madgett locates Wheatley on the New England coast, one that “blind[s]” her from seeing her present surroundings as well as perhaps metaphorically seeing her birthplace across the Atlantic Ocean. In the final line of this stanza, Wheatley claims she is “[o]n some island not too far from home,” which could be both in a literal, geographic sense one of the many small islands in the bays surrounding Boston, Massachusetts, where she spent much of her life, or an understanding of her home in Africa. Madgett’s use of the word “home” in her story of Wheatley requires us to

ask ourselves as readers how the conception of “home” requires a much more open-ended inquiry into its relation to identity. Madgett locates Wheatley’s story in multiple places at once, and the only place that Africa and New England can be explored as both physical places and personal memories that incite “a galaxy of feeling,” in Morrison’s terms, is in the spiritual place of imagination and reflection (386).

As Madgett moves into the third stanza, she shifts tenses from the present to past, exploring more directly Wheatley’s experience recalling a memory as Madgett’s imagined Wheatley narrates her journey from Africa to America:

...the only light I saw
Was a few wayward chinks of day
That somehow slanted into the airless tomb
Where chains confined me motionless to a dank wall.
Then the sun died and time went out completely.
In that new putrid helltrap of the dead
And dying... (12-18)

The memory of the Middle Passage is visceral. Concerns about historical authenticity, like whether or not this is an accurate representation of Wheatley’s journey since she rarely spoke about it,⁷ or the fact that her age would render it difficult to recall in such detail, are not important. Madgett, through Wheatley’s imagined memory, complicates history, in particular a history that has potentially reduced the complexity of Wheatley’s own artistic motivations and personal identity to a poet who wrote quiet missives on piety and elegies for important white

⁷ In his entry on Wheatley in *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, John C. Shields notes that there are only three explicit instances in Wheatley’s work—poetry, prose, and letters—where she mentions her childhood in Africa and/or her journey on the Middle Passage (though much of her personal correspondence has been lost).

men. We see polyvocality and layers of re-memory through Madgett's imaginative recounting of Wheatley's story and, though perhaps less obvious, Madgett potentially remembering her own experiences and feelings resulting from hearing Wheatley's story.⁸ This re-memory of the Middle Passage connects with placelessness: Wheatley's physical journey on the slave ship, for which she is named, is liminal, literally without place. As Hortense Spiller's notes in her article "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987), "these captive [African] persons ... were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also *nowhere* at all" given that their identities were erased by their European captors and they had no sense of their destination or fate (72). Madgett's use of words like "tomb," "died," and the phrase "helltrap of the dead" identifies this journey as a death in multiple senses, particularly in a physical sense, but not in regard to the spiritual. Wheatley cannot ever be the child leaning against her mother's back again, but Madgett's poem gives Wheatley's childhood spiritual significance in the narrative. Moreover, Wheatley connects herself to Madgett in the spiritual space of the poem, establishing herself as a Black women writer in Wheatley's literary lineage. The vivid language of the scene works towards constructing a space that is devoid of conceptions of time to "create spaces where one is able to redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering, and triumph in ways that transform the present" (hooks 147).

As Madgett creates the spiritual space for an imagined Wheatley in the poem, Madgett also allows for a conversation about how we can challenge, reclaim, and redeem Wheatley's legacy through our own present connections with Wheatley and her work. Reclamation and

⁸ Madgett began teaching English literature classes in the Detroit Public School system in the 1960s and also describes in a July 2017 interview how her father ensured she knew black poetry, so she was certainly familiar with Wheatley well before she wrote this poem. However, in her archives at the University of Michigan, there is a pamphlet for Jackson State College in Jackson, Mississippi's Phillis Wheatley Poetry Festival in celebration of the bicentennial publication of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in November of 1973. Madgett's interest in Wheatley was perhaps further urged on by her attendance to this conference, resulting in the poem "Phillis."

redemption for Wheatley were Alice Walker's goals in her aforementioned "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," and Madgett takes up a similar task. Instead of viewing Wheatley's legacy through a singular lens, Madgett invokes Wheatley's connections to Africa, Christianity, and memory all in one poem, giving her imagined Wheatley a spiritual space to explore these contrary instincts. As the poem moves forward, the process of reclamation and redemption begins:

One night—or day, perhaps—
Revived by a consciousness of sound
I heard
The pounding of the waves against the shipside
And made believe its rhythm
Was the speech of tribal drums
Summoning in acute need the spirit
Of my ancestors. (24-30)

Madgett signals a poetic shift in her indentation of the line "I heard," representing a new awakening, a new birth, despite the fact that Wheatley is still physically located in the same place. Wheatley remembers "the speech of tribal drums," and in the midst of the "putrid helltrap of the dead," reclaims her memories of life in Africa, an ancestral memory that demands something of her:

...I thought I heard
Their voices thundering an answer
To my supplication: "Hold fast.
Sur/vive! Sur/vive! Sur/vive!" (32-35)

Because Wheatley's most famous work *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* takes Christian religion as a primary theme, this invocation of tribal drums and the voices of her ancestors as essential to her survival and, therefore, her ability *to* write about Christianity in poems such as "On Being Brought from Africa to America" serves as a stark example of Wheatley's contrary instincts. By recognizing both her ancestral connection to Africa and her Christianity as aspects of her personal history, Madgett's imagined Wheatley thus has the ability to challenge and transcend our current understandings of Wheatley's identity.

After Wheatley arrives in America, Madgett portrays her as fully aware of her positionality as an enslaved Black woman, unique in her access to education in a country that has a capitalist system dependent on enslavement. Madgett's Wheatley describes America as "the indifferent New England coast," but Wheatley also finds some solace here in it being "good to see the sun at all" (39-40). Madgett goes further in describing Wheatley's feelings regarding her education by her white owners, John and Susanna Wheatley, in Boston:

...it was something
to find myself the bright dark mascot
Of a blind but well-intentioned host—
A toy, a curiosity, a child
Taking delight in anyone's attention
After so long a death. (41-46)

This is seemingly a defense of Wheatley, whose work according to Walker is "misunderstood" because of her writing style, subject matter, and theme. Madgett's oxymoronic juxtaposition of both "bright" and "dark" to describe Wheatley symbolizes an understanding of Wheatley as containing contradictions. Wheatley is fully aware she benefits from a "blind but well-

intentioned host” while also clearly aware of the ways she was objectified as “[a] toy” and “a curiosity.” That does not, however, make Wheatley’s voice and her exploration of identity in her own work and in Madgett’s poem any less valid. Even though Wheatley demands recognition of her agency in the previous stanza, Madgett further complicates Wheatley’s understanding of self in the next:

As I grew older, it was not enough.
That native lifesong once again burst free,
Spilled over sands of my acquired rituals—
Urged me to match the tribal rhythms
That had so long sustained me, that must
Sustain me still. I learned to sing
A dual song... (47-53)

The “it” of the first line of the stanza refers to the praise that Wheatley received from the Wheatleys and from white literary America more broadly; yet Wheatley eventually recognizes that white patronage and recognition of her work does not fully elucidate its substance or “sustain” her. She reaffirms that it was, instead, “the tribal rhythms/That had so long sustained [her]” and “that must/Sustain [her] still.”

In “learn[ing] to sing/A dual song,” we can see a clear parallel between Madgett’s exploration of Wheatley’s multifaceted identity, Davies’s aforementioned concept of polyvocality that invokes “the polyrhythms” of “Black women’s creative and critical speech,” and Walker’s contrary instincts (23). Wheatley’s “dual song”—the “native lifesong” of Africa and her ability to “sing” through her poetry, a skill she developed in America—lives in the same spiritual space. Madgett writes Wheatley as both fully present in white America while also

deeply connected to Africa and as a woman who is grateful for but skeptical of the way her work is received by white America. She is also a person who is vulnerable and deeply human in her confession that she “[took] delight” in the attention of her white patrons. Madgett, through her demonstration of the polyvocality within Wheatley’s life and work, answers questions about black women writers’ liberation through constructing a personal history of Wheatley that redeems, reclaims, and ultimately triumphs over strict interpretation.

As Madgett’s poem culminates with her imagined “dual song” of Wheatley’s ancestors, it invokes two other famous Black poets’ work: Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask” (1896) and Countee Cullen’s “Yet I Do Marvel” (1925). Both Madgett’s poem and Dunbar’s reference the “lie,” the concealing of oneself in order to survive in white, racist society. Cullen’s sonnet ends with the famous lines, “Yet I do marvel at this curious thing: to make a poet black, and bid him sing!,” and acknowledges the pressure of being both Black and a poet, an experience shared by Wheatley and Madgett due to others’ evaluations of their work.⁹ Whereas both Dunbar’s and Cullen’s poems end on an unresolved, if not somber, note, Madgett’s ends in triumph, symbolizing a confrontation with the past that is complex yet revelatory in its assertion of “I am!”:

*My fathers will forgive me if I lie
For they instructed me to live, not die.
“Grief cannot compensate for what is lost,”
They told me. “Win, and never mind the cost.
Show the world the face the world would see;
Be slave, be pet, conceal your Self—but be.*

⁹ Cullen, also, was famously criticized for his assertion that he wanted to just be a poet, not a black poet, by Langston Hughes in his article “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926).

Lurking behind the docile Christian lamb

Unconquered lioness asserts: "I am!" (54-61)

We here again get a literal interpretation of polyvocality: Madgett, writing as Wheatley imagining a spiritual interaction with her ancestors, creates a lineage of memory and re-memory essential to understanding the relationship between all the facets of Wheatley's identity.

Wheatley's contrary instincts are again emblemized through metaphor, with Madgett characterizing Wheatley as both "the docile Christian lamb" and the assertive, powerful "lioness." The lioness Wheatley, in her assertion of "I am!" is the culmination of this triumph over outside forces that constrict conceptions of Wheatley's public work and identity.

Wheatley's true self is concealed, and only she can assert what she is and therefore what she can be. In the spiritual space created by the poem, "Phillis" invokes a legacy of Black writers that includes as diverse a group as Wheatley, Dunbar, Cullen, and Madgett. However, Madgett's insistence on Wheatley as her subject as well as the origins of her own polyvocality is a deliberate facet of her womanist perspective.

By invoking Wheatley's story, Madgett makes a subtle commentary on her own identity as a Black woman poet, as Wheatley's story is a part of Madgett's own history despite their historical separation. Madgett's final lines are definitive, with her imagining Wheatley asserting an agency over her own identity. Madgett's final words "I am!" mirrors Layli Phillips' ultimate estimation of womanism in her introduction to *The Womanist Reader*: "'womanist' is a term of avowal: once you claim it, it's yours, and you decide what it means and how to enact it" (xli). With those final words, Madgett reclaims Wheatley's legacy, creating a spiritual space as well as an interpretative space where we as readers can grapple with the multivalent aspects of Wheatley as a poet, Christian, enslaved woman, mother, wife, and daughter. By reclaiming and redeeming

a literary history that stands outside of the standard means of categorization and essentialization, Madgett challenges our conceptions of Black women's writing and our ways of evaluating and engaging with Black women's writing as a whole.

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Transcript of Interview with Naomi Long Madgett: Detroit, Michigan, July 15th, 2017

MLM: My name is Morgan McComb, it is July 15th, 2017, and we are at the home of Naomi Long Madgett: poet, editor, publisher, teacher, educator, and Detroit Poet Laureate. So today I wanted to talk to you about all facets of your career, but just to start off: When did you first feel compelled to write poetry?

NLM: Well, I can remember the first poem, probably the first poem I ever wrote. I had two brothers, and all the boys—kids in the neighborhood were boys, and they didn't want a little girl tagging around behind them. So, I felt very alone, and when I was in third grade, one of my aunts, my mother's sister, and her daughter, who was not much older than I, came to live with us. And that was pure heaven, for then I had a girl to play with. But they stayed only two years. And when they moved and went to another city, I was devastated, because I was back to where I was before with no one to play with. And that was when I wrote, "The Reason Why I'm Lonely." And then in 1934, the church sent my father to Berlin to the World Baptist Alliance as a delegate. And nobody traveled by plane at that time—that I knew of. And the ocean seems so wide and so dangerous that I was afraid his boat was gonna sink. So I wrote another poem about that. And then I just kept going.

MLM: In your poetry there's a strong emphasis on the importance of history, and through reading your autobiography as well as reading all of your work, you do seem to really place an emphasis on knowing history and understanding history and remembering history. So how has that affected your writing?

NLM: Well, I do write some things that are historically based, I wasn't aware of that until you brought it up. But uh, it's too bad that so much that was considered worthwhile in the past is lost as styles change, as poets die and are forgotten eventually, and it's really too bad because

everything is here and now. But I guess some of the things that I have written although I haven't identified them have historical backgrounds, but the past is very important. If you don't know the past, you really don't—can't anticipate the future or understand the present.

MLM: Especially I'm thinking of your aunt, of *Octavia and Other Poems*, and I was reading a letter in your archives yesterday—unfortunately I forget who it was to—but you describe to them that writing that collection of poems was what you said was your most rewarding collection of poems. Could you talk a little bit more about that?

NLM: Yes, well I got so emotionally involved in the whole thing. The way that started out was the literary magazine at the University of Kansas would evidently put out a call for material by African American writers. And I said, oh, Octavia graduated from there, I could write a poem about her. Well I never sent the poem in because it just kept growing. And I uh—I used to keep a portrait of her on my dresser for inspiration, and it just kept going and going and going and so I never sent a single poem. But the first lines that came to me was, “When as a child, I wore your face Octavia.” And I remembered how much I felt that I didn't have any identity of my own when I was younger because my father—I was said to have looked like her as a child and she was only 34 when she died. And I was a skinny little kid, and my father was always talking about Octavia—“If you don't take better care of yourself you're going to go the way Octavia did.” And he fed me all of these horrible tasting tonics, trying to keep me. So I felt as if I was Octavia reincarnated. And, uh, it all—that sense of identification all came back to me while I was writing the poem. But I had never been to Oklahoma, and thank goodness, my father saved so many letters that family members wrote to each other. I didn't know my father's side of the family. I didn't meet my cousins until I was about 15 years old. Although I knew my mother's people very well because every summer we went to Richmond to visit them. But, uh, I was

trying—I learned a lot about the personalities of these family members by what they said to and about each other. And I saved all the pictures that I found when my mother and father were getting ready to move from New Rochelle after he retired from his church there to Detroit. And I went through a trunkload of material. I didn't throw any of the picture away. In my bedroom, I have a picture of Octavia framed with some of the lace that she had made. Diagonally across.

But I was writing a poem about her going to her fifth-grade class to teach and I thought I don't know anything about Guthrie. I don't have a feeling for the land, I can't be authentic without actually going there myself. And so, I did go there not expecting to find anybody that, uh, knew any members of the family. But I had letters from 4 different addresses and I had some pictures and I found two of the houses had been torn down. And I saw where they had been, and then I ran across this boarded up little shack so small I wondered where five people lived. But I took a picture of it and I went around the back looking to see how it looked in the back and the man who was up, lived in one of the only occupied areas houses in that area came was coming out and he looked at me curiously. So I introduced myself to him and told him what I was there for and he said ,”Well you need to get in your car and follow me, I know somebody who might be able to help you.”

There was a little old lady in a house just sitting on the porch...and I told her why I was there and she said well I can't help you but my husband might be able to. While we were waiting for him to come out I said my grandparents were Frank and Sarah long and they had four children, Octavia—and she said Octavia was my high school English teacher! I thought she must have been mistaken because my father had told me that she had only taught fifth grade. But he had left by the time the first black high school was built, so it didn't occur to him that she also taught high school. By the day was over I had found about 4 of her former students. And one of

the pictures I took with me was a picture of my grandmother teaching her first-grade class and one of the former students of Octavia had the same picture and she said my grandmother taught her in first grade and Octavia taught her in high school and she pointed to herself and her sister out to me and I—I learned so much that first day that I really didn't expect to find. And then this 95-year-old lady whose nails were painted red was sitting on her porch smoking a long brown cigarette and I was told later that she wore the highest heels in town. And I talked to her and she said I knew the whole long family. Marcellus [Madgett's father] tried to go with me but I was too young for him. And I said Marcellus is my father. And she said well you need to send me your picture.

And I found out—I went to the Oklahoma territorial museum to see Guthrie, because when they moved there Ok was not yet a state and I found some educational information that day. And I called my sister-in-law later that day and told her all the things I had found in one day. And she said well I expected to be going on a wild goose chase. And I said well I really didn't expect to find anyone who had known her, but just to have been there, I never would have been able to picture the place, some of the streets unpaved, cows grazing within the city limits, very small town. Uh, the red clay soil I never would have been able to describe it without having been there. So it was a very productive trip.

MLM: I read in your teaching materials in your archives, you have a list that called some observations on writing good poetry, and in one part it says, "poetry is not journalism." So even though Octavia was rooted in your visits and in these letters, all of these archival and really interesting artifacts, it also said at the end of that there's nothing poetic in telling things exactly as they are.

NLM: Exactly.

MLM: So what is that jump, that creative process of jumping from these hard facts, these concrete images, to creating a really poetic story?

NLM: I rely very heavily on the letters, uh, even to the point of trying to reproduce the speech of my grandmother who was, she went to Leland university and that's where my grandfather met her. But she was not as well educated as he was, and so some of the language I tried to preserve using the letters as well as the content. But there was a lot of imagination that went into that because I hate to remember that when my parents were getting ready to move here my sister-in-law went through a trunk in the basement filled with letters and pictures filled with the family members, and I saved a lot of the letters, I saved all of the pictures, but I think I said to Laverne, we can't go through all of this stuff and I threw away so many of the letters because I didn't know, really didn't have that much interest in it, in family history at that time. And I could kick myself when I think about that bag of letters that I threw away. But I had to use my imagination about a lot of things and, uh, being a poet that was the only the natural form that I could write the book in because I was not interested in just writing the story. I could have done that easily. But writing is—poetry is what I do.

MLM: I wanted to talk to you a little bit about your parents. Um, you discussed how influential they are in cultivating your poetry. Will you speak a little bit more about your mother and father, your mother as an educator and your father as a minister, and kind of the influences that wove their way into your poetry?

NLM: My mother grew up in Richmond, VA, and evidently, they didn't have a high school for black kids there. So, she went to what is now Virginia State University when she was 13 years it. And it was a normal school at that time. And she graduated in 1902. And she taught in one-room country schoolhouses until she met my father. She never worked outside the home again.

My father, you know, had a number of degrees, and was very well-educated. But my mother was very encouraging, she was very proud of the fact that I was writing poetry. And they didn't make a big deal out of it, uh, my father study was lined with bookcases and when I didn't have anything else to do he would give me books that I could understand or weren't about theology. I remember in particular *Aesop's Fables*, number 17 of Harvard classics, and *Pearls from Many Seas* which had a lot of stories, essays, and poems, and I just automatically went to the poems first. And then of course I had access to *Negro Poets and Their Poems*.

In a poem that I wrote about my father, I said "light of skin, he was the blackest man I knew" because we knew—he continued after we left Norfolk to subscribe to the Norfolk Journal and guide of black weekly and they freely discussed at the dinner table what was going on with black people nationally. So I knew about lynchings, every prayer he prayed he prayed for the Scottsboro Boys. We were very well aware of not only what was going on nationally but of black writers, we knew that it was possible for us to be black and also successful as a poet or writer. One of the saddest things—I mean, he preached black pride. I just recently gave Herbert Woodward Martin, who is a poet I published who lives in Dayton, OH, and he is a Dunbar scholar. On one of my father's bookcases was a bust of Paul Lawrence Dunbar and I held on to that for years and years. And I finally gave it to him because he said, well don't you think your daughter might want it? And I said it wouldn't mean the same to her as it does to you. And when he puts on that old-fashioned suit, and recited Dunbar poems, he is Dunbar. So I know that he treasures that.

But when I was teaching in high school, the American literature textbook had very little written by or about African Americans. They had one poem by Gwendolyn Brooks, the creation by James Weldon Johnson, an article about Mary McLeod Bethune, and something about George

Washington Carver, and Carver's picture was in there. Well that was not sufficient for me, so I started bringing in my own books because the student body was almost 100% black. And I divided the class into groups, and each one was responsible for researching one black poet. And in the process, I read a poem—I don't remember whose poem it was—and this boy in my class said, "You mean a negro wrote that?" That was one of the saddest things I have ever heard, because he'd been brainwashed into believing that we were not capable of doing anything like that [...] we didn't have a chance to choose our own textbooks in high school, but I got away with doing what I wanted to do.

When I saw the table of contents of the new edition that was coming out, they had removed everything except, uh, the creation [by Johnson]. And I wrote to the editor and I said I will not use this book and told him why. I said there was too little representation by black writers in the first place, and now it's even worse. And he said well when we remove something, we're not aware of the race of the person. I said oh yes you are! Because George Washington Carver was a dark-skinned man and you could not remove the material about him without knowing what race he was. And their excuse for taking the Gwendolyn Brooks was that they tried to include somebody young and they realized she wasn't young anymore. And so, I said I would refuse to use their book. Well I wasn't supposed to do that but I did it anyhow, and I went and bought some paperback anthologies that had a much better representation and instead of having the students buy books at the book store because they were never in the bookstore, I had them buy them from me. And I got away with that. [laughs]

But I was a speaker at the National Council of Teachers of English convention one year and I talked about the omission of African American literature, and after I spoke, an editor of one of the publishing companies came up and said, well my senior editor agrees with you, but

because we had that rabble rouser James Baldwin in one of our books, some school systems in the south cancelled all of their books. She said we're in the business of selling books, not education. And so I had to do something about that, and I protested in 1965, I won the statewide competition to become the first Mott fellow in English, which was administered by the officials at Oakland University in Rochester, MI, and my project was to write an American lit[erature] type textbook that integrated black writers, not a book of black writers, but American history and to incorporate them. And unfortunately, the book never got published because it was not in a series. We went through the publisher and I went through a period of editing the book, and we edited almost a large part of it and then they stopped contacting me and someone said, "Well, I don't think they're going to publish the book because it's not in a series." And so I sued them, but the book never got published.

But things are a lot better now. When I went to teach at Eastern Michigan University, we could choose our own textbooks and two of the professors whose offices were across from mine, they didn't recognize the names but I told them about the problem. And they would bring sample books that publishers had said for me to comment, to identify black writers, and see which one was the best one to use. And I would tell them. But things started getting better gradually, but there is still a need for courses in African American literature to be taught.

MLM: I definitely agree. That also makes me think of your textbook *A Student's Guide to Creative Writing*. What was the process for writing that textbook?

NLM: Do you already have that?

MLM: No, I would love to have that.

NLM: I'm going to give you that. Um, I introduced the first course in African American literature in the city of Detroit when I was teaching at the high school. And it was on an

experimental basis. Students from various high schools came that summer and Melvin B. Tolson was in town and he came to our class. I only could get \$25 to pay him. But that was an experimental course and then it was adopted as a permanent course and I also introduced the first accredited course in creative writing. I was able to handpick the students, so there were only 12 in the class, and Pearl Cleage was one of them.

Then when I went to Eastern Michigan I introduced the first class in African American literature and later a graduate course in the Harlem Renaissance. And the department had to approve the addition of both of these courses. I was the only black professor in the English department at that time and one of my coworkers said, “I don’t know why you want to teach a class of that third-grade stuff.” I said, “You ever read anything by Robert Hayden?” “No.” “Have you read anything by Melvin B. Tolson?” “No.” “Well you need to educate yourself before you decide that this is third-grade [writing].” But they automatically thought that if there was anything worth teaching—they got their PhD from some of the best universities in the country and they would have been taught that.

When I got started with Lotus Press, someone said, “well if you’ve read one [black writer] you’ve read them all.” So that started me out doing a series of 20 poster poems, or broadsides, by living black poets to show the variety in poetry written by African Americans.

And I had to prove her wrong.

MLM: I’m going to shift back a little bit, kind of happening organically as we’re jumping around—

NLM: Oh! You asked me how I started writing, yes, the textbook—

MLM: *A Student’s Guide to Creative Writing*.

NLM: Okay, I was—when I taught African American—no, imaginative writing at Eastern Michigan University, there was a textbook that dealt with writing fiction and then that went out of print. So I started passing out my own material—pages that they could keep. I kept going and kept going and realized that I was actually writing a textbook. So, it did very well. It covered short story writing but it also covered poetry, and I used some of the students' poems and short stories so that anybody reading it could, not aspire to the real professionals in their field, but they could aspire to the writing done by students. So it went through a number of printings and it's very specific, so I think the last printing was done by Michigan State University Press. So that's how I came to write that. But they were just things that I knew about poetry and how it differs from prose. So I was teaching without a book.

MLM: I didn't realize you were teaching without a book, and then made—

NLM: That's why I was passing out different lessons.

MLM: So who are some of your poetic and literary influences? I know in your book you talk a lot about Robert Browning, and—

NLM: I'm not sure if he was an influence. He's my all-time favorite poet. But I don't think I was influenced by him. I discovered him when I was in high school, and I like Walt Whitman's poetry, and I also like Emily Dickinson's poetry. Among the contemporaries, I like Lucille Clifton's poetry and Robert Hayden's, but I don't think that I was influenced although at one time, I got to know Sterling Brown well also. I found myself imitating his style and that was before I found my own voice.

MLM: What is it about maybe Sterling Brown and Robert Hayden and Lucille Clifton that you are drawn to?

NLM: Bob was...used a specific word. He was so careful in the words that he selected because there's really no such thing as a synonym. Two words may mean the same thing on one level, but on another level, they don't mean the same thing. And I think I probably learned something from reading his poetry because he was so specific. Dudley Randall, Robert Hayden, and I did a joint reading one year at Oakland Community College and it was taped. When it was over, Dudley was driving him back to Ann Arbor because he had very poor sight, so I went along for the ride and he sat in the back seat and talked and we both strongly, strongly agreed that nobody has a right to tell a poet what to write about or how to write it. I mean, you have to use your own voice, you have to make your own choices. But there was a period of time when—I refer to this in “Newblack”—when other black poets, who I won't in particular, won't name, insisted that we owed it to the race to write racial poems, and I disagree. That, that taping of that joint reading somehow got lost and I am so sorry because the three of us reading together would have been really rare footage.

MLM: That makes me think about one of the questions that I wanted to ask you most. You talk about trying to get *Pink Ladies in the Afternoon* published and that it was essentially impossible because it was quiet, and reflective, it wasn't dealing with race or politics in this very explicit manner. So can you kind of talk about that process?

NLM: That was during a period when everything was rage and anger. And so nobody seemed to be interested in that poetry. Either the white publishers, either you were too black or not black enough and I wasn't black enough. But I was determined to get the book published, I didn't know how, but three people who were interested in my work decided to pay for the printing of the book. And I did all of the leg work, and that was all I was, the only thing I was going to publish, but I was determined to get that published. So that's how Lotus Press got started.

I didn't intend to publish anything else, and I thought that these three people were going to be, would help distribute the book, but I guess they figured that that was all they need to do so I came up with the name of the new press, "Flower of a New Nile." In other words, black poetry transplanted to American soil.

And then I met Barack Sele, a student, an English major at Eastern Michigan, and she also got her master's there and she would bring me her poetry. I used to do strange things like buying some piece of equipment, not knowing what I was going to do with. So, I had bought this duplicator—long time before computers and printers—and I thought if I made up a little chapbook of her work, she would bring her work to me and I would critique it and then she would make changes. I just wanted to encourage her. So the book was a disaster, it was going to be saddle-stitched and I numbered the pages, folded them over, and found out the pages were not in order. So I had to make a dummy for page faces and start all over again and the book was just horrible-looking. The duplicator did one color at a time, used tubes of color, and if you wanted it in two colors you had to do one color first and then take that tube out and put in another color. It was horrible, and I wanted to take advantage of the color, and it was printed on medium blue paper and dark blue ink but there was some red on the cover too. It was the most horrible-looking thing.

I also bought, even though I had a typewriter, I bought a used typewriter that printed in proportional size letters. That was when I used—she was very happy with it, but I reprinted it later in much better form. She and I got to be very good friends and later on she asked me if I would be her godmother. So, we're still very much in touch now.

Then it was *Pink Ladies [in the Afternoon]* and then it was this set of poster poems by contemporary authors and I wrote a teacher's guide for that. Then I met May Miller who is an

elderly woman, she was the daughter of Kelly Miller who was once the dean at Howard University. She grew up on campus and visits from Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Dubois and people like that were constant visitors at her home. Well we were somewhere together, we did a reading sometime, somewhere, I don't know where it was, and I liked her poetry. She had been through writing plays during the Harlem Renaissance and then she turned to writing poetry, and I just took a liking to her poetry and I asked her about publishing a book of hers, which I did. And then before it was over I had published about 4 books of hers and the last one was her collected poems and when I sent her a copy, she said "I never thought I'd live to see this book in my hand." And I thought about how few poets have their collected poems published.

So, then I just went on from there finding poets, people started sending me poetry. I would publish what I liked and it grew from there. But I was always, I wanted to point out Dudley Randall, and uh I'm getting ahead of the story I think, but we had so many similarities and at one time I wrote these down. Neither was born in Detroit. Both lived in several cities before settling permanently in Detroit. Both were children of ministers. Both published their first poem at 13, he in the *Detroit News*, I in the Orange, New Jersey *Daily Courier*. Both earned degrees in English from Wayne State University. Both taught one class a semester in African American literature at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor but at different times. Both married 3 times. Both parents of one daughter each. 1956 marked a special even in each of our lives: he returned to Detroit, my second book one and the many was published. Both founded poetry presses in Detroit. Neither ever intended to be a publisher. Broadside Press published one of my poems as a broadside, Lotus Pres published Dudley's last and largest book. Both appointed poet laureate of Detroit, he by Mayor Coleman Young, I by Mayor Dennis Archer. Both are subjects of documentary films about our lives and work. Randall was buried in Elwood

cemetery. I will be buried in the same section of the same cemetery. Both shared a deep respect and friendship. And there was something else...

[papers ruffle]

You asked me something about the Boone House poets?

MLM: Yes, could you talk more about Boone House?

NLM: When I—what was my book? *One and the Many* came out in 1956, I knew of no other Detroit poets and for a book of poetry by an African American—I mean national, there were not that many books being published. It was a real major event; all of the newspapers wrote something about it. The *Michigan Chronicle*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Detroit Metro* had feature stories. And I was interviewed on the *Dick Harris Show* on the radio. I was invited to read in Grand Rapids and Philadelphia. A glowing review by J. Saunders Redding in African American newspapers appeared. I eventually met Oliver LaGrone who did that particular sculpture but he was also a very good poet. We were sometimes interviewed together on radio.

And then Rosey Poole, who was from the Netherlands, came to America and she was the catalyst that brought us all together. She—somebody told her about me and she came to see me. She had a radio program called *Black and Unknown Bards*. She had discovered, I think she had an assignment to do a report when she was at the University of Amistad on an American poet. *Color* had just come out, and she discovered Countee Cullen. And then she went on to look for additional black poets. And she became really an expert on African American poets. And she had already published a book in Dutch with the English translation on the other side, I think it was called *I Saw How Black I Was*. So, we would listen to the radio and somehow the black poets came out of the woodwork, there were a lot of them here. But we were not aware of each other until she came. And, let's see [papers shuffle]...we started meeting at each other's homes.

And I don't know when exactly Margaret Danner came into the picture, she had been given a grant to go to Africa. She lived in Chicago, but instead of going to Africa, she spent the money and took a fellowship at Wayne or something, so she eventually asked Reverend Boone, whose church was on 12th Street somewhere, if she could use the house that the church owned next door to live there and to start an arts center. He gave her permission to do that and then we started meeting at what we called Boone House every month, and it was mostly just the poets reading to each other. There were no other arts that I can recall. But we would read and critique each other's poems, which was very very helpful, because you know what you mean, but is it coming through to somebody else? And I remember Dudley criticized one word in a poem I wrote about my father, "sunny from an old photograph," the word "scheme" was not the right word. And I thought about it, and I thought that really doesn't—that's not the right word. But I could never figure out what was, so it stayed that way. And he printed one of those as a broadside.

Let's see—we found out that there were some very good black poets in this country. We kept reading, and there were usually only two other people, a husband and a wife, who came to listen to our readings. The house was in very poor repair. The heating system didn't work, and we would read in front of the fireplace. The toilet upstairs didn't have a cover on it, but we had a place to meet and suddenly Margaret disappeared, and evidently she was now on her way to Africa so the group finally broke up. But we did still stay together as a group as long as we could, and then Harold Lawrence went to Africa and changed his name to Cofee Wangar and James Thompson moved to New York so the group finally fell apart. Then we had—Oliver and I and Dudley—were part of another small group of poets who met informally, and it was an interracial group and that lasted for a while until one of the poets really was not up to the

standard of the rest of us. We hesitated to tell him how bad his poetry was [laughs]. But he just...you know, we just fell apart, because if you can't be honest with each other then there's no point in critiquing each other's work.

MLM: Did that group have a name?

NLM: No, they did not have a name.

AKH: Morgan, do you mind if I ask a question?

MLM: No not at all.

AKH: What do you think were—why do you think you all didn't know about each other? There were so many of you, why do you think it took someone from the Netherlands to come in and kind of put you all together?

NLM: Well you can't know everybody. And some of the poets continued to write, but Dudley and Oliver and I and James Thompson were really the most serious poets who kept writing. Ed Simpkins was editor of a magazine I forgot what it is now—I still have a copy of it that featured the Detroit poets. But we met through Rosey Poole and I remember that we went to, she was going to speak at a different high school and I—she would always end her broadcasts with one of my poems. It was interesting that the teacher of the class who brought her there was Jewish, but he was aware of the black poetry. We thought that, or Rosey thought, that American poets knew about other American poets, and she was surprised that they didn't. So it was like bringing coals to Newcastle. I have a poem in one of my books, "Poets Beyond the Blues," which is about her. She left and then she came back a second time and she played such a good part...you know, you don't know every person in a city, and if they're not publishing books, which they weren't, it was a period of drought, because even nationally, there were not that many books of poetry being published by African Americans. So, we had no way of knowing [each other].

MLM: I actually was able to get my hands on an original copy of Rosey Poole's *Beyond the Blues*—

NLM: Oh.

MLM: Yeah, and I kinda wanted to ask what the story behind that name, "Beyond the Blues"?

NLM: I don't know...maybe that black poets were writing, there was some literature other than the blues that black people had composed. That's all I can think about.

MLM: Earlier, you talked about the similarities between you and Dudley Randall, but I was also reading an article in 1971 in the *Detroit Free Press*, and it opens and it has a picture of the two of you, and it opens and it says, even though they may disagree on the process of poetry, they have a great relationship together, a great friendship together, so what are some ways that you differed when thinking about poetry, writing poetry, judging and evaluating poetry?

NLM: Well it was not only the writing but also the publishing, because he established Broadside Press a few years before Lotus Press. His was more local, he published more local, he didn't have the national view, and the poets that we published were national. Very few of the poets that we published were local.

Well, we wrote different kinds of poetry, and Dudley went into a suicidal depression at one time, and you couldn't even find his books, you couldn't—there was no place. He was just, Broadside Press was inactive. And during that time, Lotus Press inherited some of his poets. James Emmanuel, who was living in Paris permanently. Lance Jeffers, I can't think of who else, but we inherited some of those poets. But Dudley's and the present Broadside Lotus press has a more local view.

But I remember that after Dudley came out of the depression, I published his last book and his largest book *A Litany of Friends*, and he wanted to include some awful, awful erotic

poetry in there and I said I'm not going to publish that. He said well I'll get someone else to publish it and I said well you'll have to because I'm not going to publish that. And I told Gwen Brooks about it, and she said I'm glad that you didn't. [all laugh] But we were good friends, and when *Star by Star* came out, I think that was the book, he sat with me in my den while I autographed about 100 copies of the books that had been preordered. Yeah, we were very close friends.

It was through him that I met Gwen Brooks.

MLM: Can you talk a little more about your relationship with Gwendolyn Brooks?

NLM: Uh...I met her at his house, I can't remember the occasion. But I admired her very much, and I remember she was doing something at Wayne and staying at a hotel close by. I was waiting for her because we were going to do something afterwards and she came in while she went upstairs to change her clothes, I gave her a copy of my latest book—it might not have been *Star by Star*, it might have been *One and the Many*—and she gave me a copy of *Maud Martha*, which she said was—for years, she insisted it was not autobiographical, and I knew that it was and she finally admitted that it was. But I was in a parking lot at Wayne, and you had to use quarters to get out, not when you went in the parking lot, and I didn't have any quarters and she gave me a couple quarters. Well I got the quarters from somebody else because I wanted to keep the quarters that she gave me. And when I told her that, she said that was a stupid thing to do. [all laugh]

I don't know, we really weren't that close until we started—she came to [Eastern Michigan University] once and I introduced her. We started talking about our elderly mothers that we were taking care of. And all of the sudden something clicked, and she would write me little notes...about almost nothing, but all those notes are at University of Michigan at the library

there. But we became staunch friends and my church, a club in my church, the Pilot Club, every year has black achievement Sunday in July and we have a special guest in a particular field and I was responsible for getting her here for that one year. We became good friends after that, and she was always writing me little notes.

MLM: Who was—the black excellence Sunday—

NLM: Black Achievement.

MLM: Yes, sorry, Black Achievement Sunday, that's tomorrow?

NLM: Yes.

MLM: Who is it this year?

NLM: Um, it's someone in finance.

MLM: I know that this will seem counterintuitive to the question that I'm actually asking, but I have to ask you and talk about your poem "Midway," which is your most anthologized poem but it's one that you're really ambivalent about, and you say that it's your least favorite poem that you've written.

NLM: Right.

MLM: Why is that?

NLM: It's flawed.

MLM: How is it flawed?

NLM: The line was just not consistent. I got stuck with this rhythm, it's been set to music. I'll give you a copy of the sheet music, if you'd like. It's lived a life of its own. I don't like the rhythm but I got stuck with it because the first line came—"I've come this far to freedom and I won't turn back"—and I got stuck with that, and I just...it's not one of my best poems. Some of

the language in it is really too stilted. Let's see...can you hand me a copy of *Connected Islands*?

The yellow book.

[ruffles through book]

NLM: I think it's in this. [continues flipping through pages] When people say they like my poetry, the chances are they've only read one poem of mine and that's "Midway."

"Whether you abhor me"—that is too formal a word for the rest of the poem. I never thought of this as being anything but a Civil Rights poem. But I went back to St. Louis to my 50th high school reunion. One of my classmates said, "Oh you've got to go by my church because my pastor just loves your work." Well, he didn't know my work except for "Midway." To him, that was the story of his life. He came from nothing in the south. He made all his children memorize this poem. What I intended and the way he saw it was something different, and any poem should be, have different interpretations by different people, various people who read it. Because the central idea can't be changed, and yet the reader brings something of his or her own experience into the poem so that it means something different.

Another one of my poems, "Alabama Centennial," I did a reading one year at Oak Park High School which was predominantly Jewish and I asked the students who or what did I think was talking in this poem? And one young man said you were obviously talking about Jews. I could have been. Someone else in another class said you could have been talking about truth itself. I could have been. Another student at another time said you could have been talking about the persecution of the early Christians. All of those are valid answers, and because I was not too specific, it left it open for interpretation. And that's a good thing. It's as if I hold out the poem to you and you have to come and get it with your own experience and read it in that light.

MLM: What do you think—what are some of your personal favorite or you think strongest, or most fully formed poems?

NLM: Well... a poem I wrote when I was 19 years old. My early poems were all very melancholy and I only wrote when I was sad or upset about something. The poem “Quest” promises to sometime write a happy poem. I liked that, I liked the lyricism: “I will track you down the years...” I think that might be in *Star by Star*. [grabs book] Here’s a copy of it.

MLM: I think that’s the first or second poem in *Star by Star*? [flips through book] Yes, the first one.

[hands book over]

NLM: [reads poem]

I still like that poem. And there are some others I like, like in particular I like the one I wrote about my mother that’s in *Connected Islands*. [flips pages] The poems that I reprinted—and I’ve written in different styles, the only poem I have written in this style has no capital letters, no punctuation, but it’s about going through a dry period and not being able to write and I’ve gone through some dry periods when I thought, “Well that’s it, I can’t write anymore poetry.”

Eventually I come back and there’s a difference. It’s called “Abandoned,” and Uturpe is the goddess of lyric poetry.

MLM: Can I ask you to read one of your favorites of mine? I love the poem “Dedication” from *Pink Ladies in the Afternoon*.

NLM: Oh. [reads poem]

Now don’t ask me what it means. [laughs] This is the book I like least of all.

MLM: Really? Why?

NLM: I don't know. I felt like I was forcing some things.

MLM: That's interesting that it's your least favorite book since it does seem to be the impetus for creating Lotus Press—or trying to get it published was the impetus.

NLM: Right. Well, I didn't dislike it in the beginning, obviously. But I don't know the selection here...oh, "Sunny from an Old Photograph," this is a locket that someone gave me when I was born. I used to have a picture of my head and my mouth open probably crying inside, but it faded eventually because I would take baths with this on and the water didn't do it any good. It was a very autobiographical poem because my father used to call me his little sunshine girl and my brothers would tease me with that. "Daddy's little sunshine girl!" I hated it.

Once when I was reading at Mumford High School in the library, my father was visiting and he went with me. He said, "Well I didn't know you felt like that, you just saw the negative part of it." This was a very difficult poem to write because I found the second and third lines of each 4 rhyming, and then—when I finished writing it, the rest of it didn't rhyme, so I had to spend a lot of time keeping the thought and rhyming every second and third line of four lines.

[reads poem]

That was very literally true because sometimes we would, he would tag me and I would run, or I'd tag him and we'd chase each other all around the block. The neighbors must have thought we were crazy.

MLM: I did want to ask you about your thoughts on political poetry and the politics of poetry. You mention several times in some interviews that I've read that you've done that your poetry was very much not political, but you were writing during a time when that was the de facto kind of motivation behind poetry. So, could you talk a little bit more about the absence of politics in

your poetry compared to the presence of it and a lot of people you knew who were writing at the same time?

NLM: This goes back to the period when a lot of black poets thought everybody ought to be political—all black poets should fight the battle. I don't fight battles in my writing. There are other ways of doing it. Some are very political, very specific, but most of all the references to race are subtler. That's the way I write.

MLM: There's no explicit intention to be or to not be political.

NLM: No...no.

MLM: You've also talked about your poem "Newblack" and the motivation behind it, which kind of goes along with what you were just saying, which you describe as "the divisiveness of critics, writers, publishers"—

NLM: Well mostly other poets.

MLM: Other poets?

NLM: Yeah.

MLM: --the classification between 'negroes' and 'true blacks.'" Would you talk a little more about what inspired you to write that poem, since it does seem to be a little bit different?

NLM: Again, there was something that one particular poet said who I won't identify, but he was one that felt that we all needed to be political and we all needed to fight the battle in our poetry. It was a very divisive attitude. I think Gwendolyn Brook's later poetry would have been better if she hadn't fallen into that trap of writing "black" poetry. Poems like "To All the Sisters Who Kept Their Afros" or something like that, that's not a very good poem and she was an excellent poet. That was just not my choice.

We don't need to be—we write in different styles and about subject matters, but there is a place for all poetry. We don't have to be alike. Any effort to try to make us all alike is more destructive than it is anything else.

[small restroom break]

MLM: So, we were talking about “Midway,” and I believe you characterized it as a Civil Rights poem. Will you talk a little more about that and the absence of Civil Rights poetry?

NLM: Yes, I don't know why, but I haven't read any other poems about the Civil Rights Movement. And that's strange. But it's interesting to me, when I went to my 50—I never thought of it as anything else but a Civil Rights Poem. But when I went back to my high school 50-year reunion, one of my classmates said, “Oh I have to take you by the church to meet my pastor, because he's crazy about your poems.” Now when people say that, probably the only poem they've read is “Midway.” But he had made all of his children memorize it, and he said that that was the story of his life: from where he came from in poverty in the South and his determination to get out of it. It's interesting how people interpret poems a different way, and I didn't think that was open to any other interpretation, but it was.

And then another one of my poems, “Alabama Centennial”: I was doing a reading at Oak Park High School which was predominantly Jewish at the time. After I finished reading it, I asked who or what did they think was talking in that poem? It got started because we had a diseased apple tree in our backyard. We had a so-called tree of heaven which was really a misnomer. It's also called a weed tree, also called the stinkweed. It grows very fast and it was already pushing a new fence out of line. We had that cut down too, and the apple tree died a decent death, but the tree of heaven refused to die. My daughter went out to take the trash one day and said, “Mama, there's some little new sprigs growing up around the trunk of that tree.”

And as I pulled and pulled, I realized I was not getting the root. They kept spreading, and finally they were growing all around the front of the yard and I was very frustrated until the idea came to me that this was like the spirit of black people.

When I read it at Oak Park High School, one boy said you were obviously talking about Jews. And I said I could have been. And then someone in another class said I could have been talking about truth itself. I could have been. Or I could—someone else said you could have been talking about the persecution of the early Christians. I could have been. And if you didn't know that I was talking about the spirit of black people, you could bring your own interpretation there. They didn't know I was black, they wouldn't know—that's one mark of a good poem, that it doesn't tell everything. It leaves something to the imagination so that the central idea of the poem can't be disputed but the details can be interpreted in different ways.

I had been out of school for surgery and was not quite ready to go back when—there's a downtown church that has noon Lenten services every year. I don't know if they still do or not. Every day they have a different high school choir singing. I went there intending to give him [Martin Luther King, Jr.]—well, fortunately, that was the only time I ever saw [Martin Luther King, Jr.], although I knew his father, because he and my father became friends when they went to the World Baptist Alliance, and I remember his coming to my house years and years ago when my father and he were both there in Detroit for a convention and he asked me to type some letters for him. I guess Junior was aware of their friendship and he might have preached at my father's church sometime or my brother's church in Washington, I'm not sure. The day that he was scheduled to preach, he wasn't there because he had been delayed someplace else. I went back the next day and said there was such a crowd, I knew I wouldn't have time to talk to him. I took a copy of—I don't remember which one...

MLM: I think it was *One and the Many*.

NLM: Okay, and I wrote a note identifying my family and directing his attention to the page because I didn't mention him by name in the poem, but he was the voice I mentioned. So, I got through the crowd and handed him the book and said this is for you. Then I left to go to the room where the choir was unrobing because it was my high school choir, and I had preached so much black pride that I was so happy that they had a chance to sit on the podium with him. I was going on my way back to greet them and he and the pastor of the church were walking slowly and I passed them and he turned and looked and that was it. I talked to the students.

Two weeks later, he was killed. By that time, I had gone back to school, but I was taking a nap every day and the day before his funeral, a man called me and he said, "I was a friend of Martin Luther King, and he told me to call you." It was like a voice from outer space. He said "I read the poem to him," because I wondered if he'd had a chance to read it, he said "I read the poem to him and he said he insisted that I call you and thank you for it. I'm on my way to the funeral now, but I've just been so upset." He said, "we knew something was going to happen to him, either in Memphis or the next stop, but when it happened, you know, it just threw me for a loop." So, I did have the pleasure of knowing that he was aware of the poem. I didn't know if it was still—if it was in his possession, or if the man who read it to him had it. On another occasion, Coretta was speaking at Oakland University and I gave her a copy of the book. At a convention later on, I gave his father a copy of it, so they would have it.

I went—I had an engagement to do a workshop in Memphis after that. Before the lady who picked me up took me to the hotel, I said I want to stop by the florist and get some flowers and go to the Lorraine Motel. I took a picture, moving picture, of the sign. Then I gave the camera to her and she filmed me going up the stairs and putting the flowers in front of the room

that head occupied. Then I took the camera back and I panned the area because there was some dispute as to where the shot came from. Then she filmed me coming back down the stairs, and then I had to change the reel, and as we left, I took another picture of the sign through the back window. At that time, you had to send your film to Kodak Company to be developed, and when it came back, there was no note on it, but everything was blacked out except the sign. Now I believe because they were trying to get so much dirt on him so badly, and they—whoever developed it didn't know who I was, and I guess thought of the possibility that I might have been one of his women that I think they stole that film and I never did get it back. Usually, if I—if there was something wrong with the film, the Kodak company would put a note in there: you didn't finish using the reel, or something like that, but there was no note in there.

MLM: That's wild.

NLM: Somewhere, somebody's got that film.

MLM: So, I also wanted to talk to you about your career as a teacher, and I've read several places that you never meant to be a teacher. How did that come to be?

NLM: I think that was expected of me, because my mother had once taught, one of my aunts in Richmond was a teacher, my father's sisters and his mother were teachers, and there were very few things that a black woman could do other than to be a secretary or a nurse or a teacher.

When I was at Virginia State, I dodged education courses. I think—we had a school, high school and elementary school on campus, and everybody in my class took student teaching and education classes as electives no matter what their major was. I wasn't interested, so I didn't take any education classes at all. I was only one of two people in my class that didn't take education classes and do student teaching. And so when my father found out, I had a degree that I couldn't

do anything with, it was not likely that I would get hired as an editor, he was really disgusted with me. [laughs]

I remember now that when I was playing as a little child, I would make up classes and make up students' names, and I would teach these imaginary students and then after my daughter was born, I was constantly teaching. Eventually, I realized that this is what I was supposed to do. So I got my masters. Before I could get a teaching certificate, I had to do student teaching, and I had to take some undergraduate courses in education. My major was English Education, but there were absolutely no courses in English Education on the secondary level. So I had to end up taking liberal arts courses anyhow.

That year, I took education classes, I did my student teaching, I completed my Masters, and I was going back and forth to school so many times. I'd come home and cook dinner and go back for a night class. There was a numbers man in our neighborhood, and he told my father-in-law, tell your daughter I don't care what kind of deal she's got, I'll give her something better. [everyone starts laughing] He thought I was running numbers, because he saw me in the car with no books. He said that girl is in school!

MLM: That's really funny. How has—we did talk a little bit earlier about *Students' Guide to Creative Writing*, but how did starting to teach creative writing affect your own creative writing process? Do you feel it changed you at all, made you a better poet?

NLM: I don't know. All of my careers work together, and reinforced each other. Being an English teacher and then being an editor and being a poet myself, they just really reinforced each other. I was really when I was running Lotus Press I was really a nitpicking perfectionist. When I got a book, a manuscript, and we decided to publish the book, there was usually some editing that needed to be done. My method was most of the poets were not local, so I would have to do

things by writing. I would point out things—this particular word doesn't seem to be what you want to use, doesn't mean what I think you are trying to say. Or some phrase. I would really pick out sometimes it was just a matter of punctuation, but usually it was more than that. This would be better said in a different way, but I promised them that I would never change anything without their permission unless it was an unintentional grammatical error or misspelling. If the poet told me, this is exactly what I want to say, I would respect that. I just didn't—I wouldn't want somebody to change something in a poem I wrote if that's not what I wrote. If they pointed it out to me, I would be willing to make the change myself, but I didn't want somebody else doing that. That was my process in editing.

MLM: I think I remember you talking about an incident where Langston Hughes did change your poetry for an anthology?

NLM: Ah, yes. I liked him so much, and he was the kind of poet that I wanted to be. If he—he was so down to earth, so easy to get to know, and if he walked in here today in 5 minutes you'd be calling him by his first name. He was always encouraging other poets. Every time he came to Detroit, somebody would have a house party for him, and he would always insist—I remember Oliver and I were the only poets there at one of the parties, and he insisted that we read something of our own. That was the kind of person I wanted to be, to encourage other poets. One time, I got to the house and Oliver went to meet him at the airport. He hadn't eaten, so they stopped to have dinner and it took so long that the hostess was serving martinis. I didn't know—I was not accustomed to drinking martinis. I didn't know it was all alcohol. And I asked whoever was serving them if they would weaken it but you can't weaken it. By the time he got there I was three sheets to the wind. Fortunately, there was an anthology on the coffee table that had

something of mine in it. I would not have been able to pronounce my name otherwise. And then I had the nerve to drive somebody else home before I went upstairs and got sick.

He was just so encouraging. Just a wonderful down to earth man, not full of himself as some poets I've known.

The last time I saw him, he came to Boone House. We weren't doing a reading, but I think Margaret Danner wanted to show him the facility. He said, "Naomi, I think you're going to like the way your poem looks on the page." Well I didn't know what that meant, I thought there was some artwork or decoration or something. When I got *New Negro Poets USA* (1964), he had run "Midway" down with no stanza breaks, no indentations. [sighs] They did the same thing with "Mortality," but I thought that was an improvement. So I left it that way. I was really upset about that, and I would see it reprinted other places the way he had changed it. I didn't want to respond in the mood that I was in. I wrote him, and said something like "I appreciate your including two of my poems in the anthology, but if I had known that you were going to change the way the poem is set up, I would have preferred that you not do it." I liked him so much I didn't really want to be critical of him. He never responded, and shortly after that he died. I had a hard time getting it back to the way I wrote it because the pattern is visible even if you don't read the words, the way the stanzas are set up. But he was just a wonderful, wonderful individual and he would send me little notes sometimes, to tell me—I don't know what. His letters are at the University of Michigan.

MLM: You also—

NLM: And you know, I thought Langston Hughes was immortal. Because I had read his work at a very young age, and I just thought he would be there forever and ever and ever. I know where I was—I was attending seem poetry reading, and the word got around that Langston Hughes was

dead. I just thought that was impossible. It really affected me. And that was when I wrote the poem “Simple.” I liked those columns, and they were gathered together in one book called *Simple Speaks His Mind*. I just imagined this friend of his, this imaginary friend of his, sitting at the bar and waiting for his friend and just gradually melting away because without the creator, he didn’t exist.

MLM: You also met Countee Cullen.

NLM: When I was at Virginia State, I noticed in the library that there was a handbook that listed—I guess it was various poets’ addresses. I found out that he lived in Tuckahoe [New York], which was not too far from New Rochelle at the time and we were living in New Rochelle. I wrote him a letter and asked if I could come to see him while I was home on vacation. He wrote me back and gave me his telephone number. That’s the letter that Fisk [University Archives] separated from the envelope. When I got back I called him—I liked his work so much, and there are two juvenile books that were in our library *My Lives and How I Lost Them* as told by Christopher Cat, and *Lost Sue*—Christopher Cat was supposed to be writing the book, and I hate to tell you that I stole it from the library and never returned it.

Tuckahoe had a lot of winding streets, and my father stopped and asked for directions. They knew immediately who we were talking about, so we finally got there and his second wife opened the door and a kitten was standing near her feet. My father and his father who was also a minister stayed in the living room and talked and we went back in the den and he read some of my poems and he said, “well, you’re a poet!” He told me not to be discouraged by rejection slips, he said plan to paper your wall with them. He told me some poem that as famous as he was he was never able to get published—I wish I could remember. He was very encouraging. He told

me that the kitten was Christopher's grandson, which I was glad to know. [laughs] I probably still have that stolen book someplace.

MLM: I wanted to also ask you about *Adam of Ife*, because I think that's a really fascinating book, a book of poetry collected in praise of black men. And as I was doing my research for this interview, I can't find another book that has ever been published like that.

NLM: I haven't either. I think that's the most important book I've published through Lotus Press. Because my father was my idol, he was the single most positive influence in my life, and my brothers were good men and there are a lot of other good black men out there whose pictures never get in the paper, only the ones that are criminals and doing wrong things get publicized. It would give an impression that a black man was no good. Somebody needed to say, "We appreciate you in our lives, we appreciate what you're doing." Somebody had to say that. So I got the idea and Carl Owens who did that drawing of Octavia, he let me use some of his drawings in that book. He got in touch with Paul Goodnight, another artist, and told him what I was planning to do and Mr. Goodnight sent me 3 different pictures that I could choose from and the one on the cover was just perfect. I got the name from Adam the first man. Ife is a city in Africa that is said to be the birthplace of man.

I guess you read the introduction—I thought everybody knew that, how the black man got into the position he's in now. So many imprisoned and whatnot, but I realized they don't know. So I had to write this introduction that gave the history of black men in modern society going back to slavery when families, black families were separated and the man believed that only women could raise the child, he had no responsibility to raise his child. It was harder for him to get a job because the wife—I knew so many black men in my childhood who were college educated and could not get a job in the office because they were considered a threat

while a woman was no threat. Unfortunately, women contributed to the emasculation of the black man because some of them would say, “You can’t tell me what to do because I make more money than you do,” and what’s a man supposed to do to make himself feel better except knock her down to size?

Somebody told me that introduction was worth the price of the book. I was telling somebody what I was going to do and she said, “You must be expecting a teeny tiny little book!” I said “Why? You must’ve known some good black men in your life?” I said, “Your father’s a good man,” and she said, “He’s the only one.” Somebody else said, “Do you think you’ll get any material?” I didn’t know what to expect. I contacted all of the black women poets that I could locate, told them what I wanted to do and asked them to submit something if they had it. Word got around and people in the Bay Area in California, a lot of the poems were written by some of those poets. It sold—black men would look at the subtitle and say, “You mean the sisters have something good to say about us?” People were buying 2 or 3 copies to give to husbands, brothers, whoever. It went into a second printing before the year was out. As you said, I have never seen anything else like it, but it needed to be done and I might as well do it myself. MLM: I feel like maybe it needs to be done again, in our current situation especially in our country. But I do love that volume.

NLM: As the poems came in, I thought I might have enough for maybe 50 pages, but the poems just poured in. And then they started separating themselves into divisions: brothers, sons, husbands, lovers, and some other sections in the back because I didn’t want to give the impression that I thought all black men were good. There are some other sections, too.

Lotus Press’s anniversary that year I wanted to be all readings from *Adam of Ife*. I didn’t invite poets to come, but a lot of them heard about it and they came anyhow. Some of the major

poems that I wanted to read I assigned to the poets who were there so that they would read their own poems and some other poems too. Dr. Wright, after whom, you know, who founded the museum, he was in the audience, and we had this anniversary at my church. Before the benediction, he stood up and said, “I’ve just got to say something.” And he went to the pulpit and said how it warmed his heart to see all these black women standing behind their men. He wrote me a letter too, praising me for getting this book out.

MLM: I did want to ask you a little bit more about being an editor. There was this great Toni Morrison and Sonia Sanchez interview [from 2016] where Morrison asks Sanchez if editors are curators of culture. Going along with editing books like *Adam of Ife*, do you believe that your capacity as an editor was to kind of curate the culture of black poetry? How did you view yourself as an editor?

NLM: That ties in with what is a good poem—I mentioned that when people ask me what kind of poetry I was looking for, good poetry didn’t have to be about race and some of the books I published were so nonracial, in general, that you would not know that they were published by a black poet or written by a black poet. I felt that because white publishers were not publishing books by black writers that somebody had to do it. The poems were out there, they needed to be published, and why criticize the lack of publication when I could do it myself? I always considered myself—there, you know, I didn’t have, I started out with money I contributed myself. Eventually we got the 5013(c) status where we could solicit funds from other people. Somebody else might have published, but the fact is that I did, and I was going to fill this gap because the poems needed to be published. They were good poems that—I’m very proud of the sacrifices that I made. I never paid myself a penny, because poetry does not sell well unless it’s

very easy to understand poetry. I never expected to break even, so money, making money was never a possibility in my mind. It was just to break even if possible.

I get letters from black poets whose poetry I never even published thanking me for giving them this opportunity to have their voices heard. I'm very very proud of that accomplishment.

MLM: One of the poets who won the NLM Poetry Award, Bruce Jacobs, he said that you do not have too heavy a hand as an editor and that you're a collaborative editor. Do you use the same editing process with each poet or is each book dramatically different?

NLM: Even though each book is dramatically different, I use the same process. I will point out things that I see as a problem, but I will not—if they want to keep it that way, I would not change anything without their consent. Most of them thanked me for—I mean some of them didn't need much editing, but there was always some little something. Bill Harris, who was a local playwright and poet, he won the Kresge Eminent Artist award the year before I did, he invited me and a guest to his 50th wedding anniversary. I read something that he had there and I found fault with it. He said, "You are a good editor! I never caught that!" But I would be remiss if I saw something that was not right and didn't tell them. I used the same procedure: I will not change anything without your consent. And most of them thanked me.

Now, one of the local poets took me out for dinner for my birthday the other day, and because she was local I didn't have to do the editing by writing. She came to my house, and she was stubborn about the use of commas. I really like her, I said, "What am I going to do with this crazy woman?" [laughs] but she said that she was so grateful that I gave it such a careful reading, and she finally agreed to use commas properly, and so have—she's the only one that gave me any opposition. They thanked me for doing the careful editing that I did.

MLM: I did also want to ask you about Lotus Press and Broadside Press merging and how that came to be.

NLM: Well, I'm 94 years old now, and I knew that sooner or later I was going to have to stop doing this just because of my age. I wanted the award in my name to continue, so since Broadside and Lotus, we'd never been in competition with each other but very supportive of each other, and they were local and they specialized in poetry. So I thought that was the natural publisher to take over because when a 5013(c) organization goes out of business, all of their assets have to go to another 5013(c) organization. I had to do something with the money that I had. I couldn't distribute it among our board—I had to give it away, and they were also 5013c and so it was natural. We met periodically and ironed out our differences, but by contract they are required to continue the annual award in my name.

I am not really happy with the way things have turned out. We used as judges some of the best known black poets, and the process of judging would be when I picked up the entries from the post office, I had 3 boxes. I would look at a few pages of one, and you could tell that this person didn't have any idea of what poetry is supposed to be and that would go in the no box. Then there was a maybe box, and then a yes definitely yes box. I would reread the maybes and narrow it down to about 6 or 8 possibilities and that would be what I would send to the judge. There was no point in sending books that didn't have a chance to win anything, and so Lucille Clifton served as a judge once, Toi Derricotte, Yusef Komunyakaa, Elizabeth Alexander, all top-notch poets who were fully capable of selecting a winner. This group that owns Broadside Lotus Press now, they are still thinking only locally. Annette Glory House, the one who I'm in closest touch with because she's the editor, she was going to select another local poet as the judge. I mean, this—she's a good poet, but nobody knows her outside of this area. I told her think

nationally, because I would tell the person when I asked them to be the judge that we could afford to give them \$200 but when they realized that we were struggling just to break even, they all turned it down. I don't think anybody accepted the \$200. We gave them credit for their works so that they could take something off their income tax. Haki Madhubuti eventually agreed because of me to serve as this year's judge. They are treating...I did everything myself. Everything. The chairman of our board of directors is now on their board. She knows computers much better than I do but I would lay out the book. She would know how to remove the page numbers from the books that should have no page numbers, and she knew how to put it in the final form for the printer. She designed some of the covers. Other than that, I did everything: the editing, the book layout, the covers, some of them. If a poet had a cover design that they liked, I would use that, but other than that, I designed covers. This book [*Connected Islands*]—I saw this piece of art somewhere, and I said that looks perfect for this book. But I designed the covers for *Pink Ladies in the Afternoon*, the original one. That was just a cut-out design, as long as it had something pink in it.

[short break]

MLM: I did want to ask you to talk a little bit more—you've mentioned how Lotus had a more national scope and Broadside had a more local scope. Could you elaborate a little bit more as what you mean by local vs. national when it comes to publishing?

NLM: Even when Dudley was handling the press, he seemed to be more interested in local poets than national poets and they were all black. We—very few of our poets are from anywhere near this area, and this group now seems to be thinking only locally. Most of the books they've published since they've taken over the press are by their own members.

MLM: Do you think that kind of local emphasis inhibited their ability to have Detroit be recognized nationally as this cultural center of literature?

NLM: Yes, it probably did.

MLM: At least to some extent. Why do you think you were specifically interested in a national focus, or thinking nationally?

NLM: I'm not originally from Detroit, and why limit the publications to people here? You get a much greater variety of people because in one place there are only so many good poets. I never thought of making it local, because I knew good poets all over the country.

MLM: In terms of that local emphasis just on some of the reading I've done about Detroit as a city, maybe that local motivation comes from Detroit being a city that has been demeaned. That is kind of like a protective measure?

NLM: I don't think that was on their minds, I don't think so.

MLM: I want to continue with this emphasis on Detroit and the Detroit poetry scene. You're not from Detroit, but most of your creative career has been here.

NLM: Since 1946.

MLM: What do you think it means to be a Detroit poet? How do you think Detroit has affected your work?

NLM: I have written some poems about Detroit. "Grand Circus Park" is one of them, and that poem went through so many different changes before I was satisfied with it. I was trying to say too many things at once. I like Detroit, I've never had any desire to move anywhere else. I've spent more time here than I've spent in any other place. This is home, this home now.

MLM: What do you think maybe distinguishes Detroit poets or poets who have spent time in Detroit distinguishes them from maybe say, Chicago poets or New York Poets? How does Detroit establish its own kind of poetic tradition? Or has it, does it?

NLM: I don't think that's the case.

MLM: Nothing, not specifically a Detroit poetic tradition?

NLM: No.

MLM: I also wanted to ask you a little bit more about the period when you were writing that was also the height of the Black Arts Movement. We talked about *Pink Ladies* and how it was difficult to find a place to publish that. But as you continued with your career after you published *Pink Ladies* did you feel any backlash or any pressure—you don't have to name names—in the poetry community for you not adhering to this kind of Black Arts Movement/Black Poetry aesthetic?

NLM: No—no. I never got any reaction like that from anybody except this person who was, used to be a Detroiter who wanted me to be more black. Detroit has been very receptive of my poetry.

MLM: What are some of, I know you talked about the Kresge Award and Wayne State, so what are some of the cultural institutions in Detroit that are really pivotal in promoting creative work like poetry?

NLM: There is...I forget the name of it. They have something to do with the Kresge Foundation in establishing that award every year. I don't know if I can answer that.

MLM: Maybe you could talk a little bit more about some of the most memorable readings you've done in Detroit. You mentioned the one with Dudley Randall that has unfortunately been lost. Within Detroit and with other poets from Detroit—or just poets in general that you published?

NLM: Let me—the man David Shock, who filmed the documentary film, he also did a documentary film on Toi Derricotte even though she doesn't live here anymore. Herbert Woodward Martin—the one who does Dunbar so well, but he's a good poet too—last year, he arranged...but we had never read together. I published Toi's first book and two books by her. He arranged for us to come to Central Michigan University and we read at two places there together. We went to Traverse City and we read two places there, went to Harbor Springs. One woman drove us all the way, so we were together and it was really a joyous occasion for us to be together and for us to do things together. We were so supportive of each other.

I wanted to show you a couple of posters. The Museum in National Women's Month—that's a poster for that.

MLM: [pointing to the poster] That documentary, the *Star by Star* documentary, it's a really excellent documentary.

NLM: Yeah and they [the museum] showed that. This is when Toi and Herb and I went to the various places for five days. And then this is the larger poster of—

MLM: Did you sit for this portrait, or did they just do it from a photograph?

NLM: No, she asked me to give her 3 photographs of myself and she did the painting from that. I noticed she's been selected as one of this year's Kresge fellows.

MLM: Thank you.

NLM: What was it you asked me again? [laughs]

MLM: [laughs] Oh that kind of answered it, I was just asking about some of your memorable poetry readings over the years or throughout your career.

NLM: Oh, yes. When Bob Hayden was, before they called it Poet Laureate of the United States, it was like poetry consultant in Washington D. C., he had me record a reading at the Library of

Congress and then he took me out to lunch after that. That was really wonderful. I can't think of anything that stands out right now...I consider all of my readings important and I'm glad to be asked to read.

When I went back to St. Louis, I did a reading there. That was wonderful, to go back to my high school because Sumner meant so much to me. But it was not a large crowd, just among students. There has to be something—oh, the first honorary degree I got was at Sienna Heights College, I think it's a university now. They also wanted me to be the commencement speaker but they wanted me to read poetry. That's what I did.

MLM: That's really—that's very interesting, though that's very unusual.

NLM: It is.

MLM: I would have probably really enjoyed a commencement speaker who read poetry.

NLM: Commencement speakers are usually so repetitious and dull.

MLM: What did you choose to read?

NLM: I read a lot of different poems. I don't remember which ones then. What did I do when I went to New York...I've done so many readings, I just can't remember.

MLM: You did mention earlier talking about how you decided to do Lotus regardless—because poetry doesn't sell. Why do you think poetry doesn't sell?

NLM: No one understands it—people expect poetry to be prose. They give up on it because they expect to read it as if it were a newspaper column and understand right away. That's not what poetry is all about. If they knew what it was all about, they might be—there are some poems that I really don't understand, but there's something about them that draws me back even though I don't understand them. There's a poem I read in some journal by a Michigan poet, "Love is a Dust We Keep." I don't—I think that was by Herbert Scott. I really don't understand it, I feel it

more than I understand it in my brain. I keep reading it, and you don't need to understand everything about a poem. The average person who says they don't like poetry, they say, "Well I don't know what they're talking about, why don't they come to the point?" That's not what poetry does, that's why I taught a class here last semester about understanding poetry.

Sometimes I don't even know, I don't even understand my own poems. [laughs]

There is so much of the subconscious that goes into writing poetry that sometimes, when I finish it, I have to go back and say, "Now what did I say?" And I'm not always sure. For instance--and sometimes a poem decides itself which way to go. You start out thinking you're going to talk about something and the poem decides nuh uh, I'm not going that way. For instance: a recent poem that I wrote called—I'm a workaholic. If I don't have work to do I have to invent something. So when somebody asked me how it feels to be retired, I said I'm never retired, I can't retire. I have to have work to do. This is called "Nearing Jordan," and underneath I have "I don't know what retiring means. If I didn't have work to do I would have to invent it."

And so it starts out in one way talking about growing old, but that's not how it ends. It said, I'm not going that way.

When you know that the shores of Jordan are not miles by steps away,
And the chariot swings lower in the waning light of day
You may hear an angel beckon come and rest eternally
Then a gate will slowly open, but beyond it, you will see one large desk
Piled high with papers and a chair that bears your name
You'll be happy to discover earth and heaven are the same
You'll have manuscripts to edit, other writing jobs to do
And your joy will last forever at your desk beyond the blue.

Now theirs is another piece, very recent poem that was inspired by a real picture of, I think it's in *Pilgrim Journey*, a picture of my mother holding me as an infant over her shoulder.

You remember seeing that?

MLM: I think it was in your archives yesterday. They had a whole box.

NLM: Oh, okay. Can you hand me a copy of [*Pilgrim Journey*]?

[hands book]

This is not the whole picture but it was enlarged to fit the page. Now I don't know what in the world inspired me to write that poem, this poem. It just sort of wrote itself. It's called "Laundry Day."

There's a backyard somewhere with a high wooden fence
A clothesline stretches between two posts
A woman in a long skirt has just finished hanging wet sheets
Scrubbed clean on the metal ridges of a board
She is holding an infant at her shoulder
Out of sight, another woman aims a camera that has no film
She clicks the button, but the snapshot is never taken
The woman hanging laundry is not my mother
I am not the infant looking over her shoulder
I have never seen this yard, this fence, these clean white memories
Flapping in a wind that has not yet begun to blow.

And I don't understand what I'm saying here. I think I do, because we left Norfolk when I was about 18 months old, so I don't remember anything about it. But some poems I just don't understand why I wrote them and they sort of wrote themselves.

MLM: How do you find that writing a lot of your poems start? You mentioned with “Midway” that the first line just came to you. Is that how it happens with a lot of your poetry?

NLM: Yeah, one poem in *Pink Ladies* came from watching a movie that was in a foreign language. A woman was bathing her son and she had on a negligee that sort of was falling over and I wrote this poem—hand me a copy of *Pink Ladies*. It’s called “the Boy.” And I had the idea, this boy doesn’t have a chance of living the life of a man.

[reads poem]

Now my stepson who was gay read this book and he picked this out and asked me why I wrote it. He recognized what I was saying in this. It seems to me that a lot of gay men are really extra close to their mothers. I don’t know what the relationship is, but I don’t know what I was answering now...

MLM: How you start poems, just how you get started.

NLM: Oh, when I was in college, a friend of mine and I were walking to town. I was telling her about something happy that just happened, and she looked at me and said, “grin, you monkey you.” That was the first line of a poem, but it had nothing to do with what started it. It was the first line. Sometimes the first line comes to me and I don’t know where it’s going, but I start writing and then sometimes I have to go back and say, “now, what did I say?” And try to understand it myself and in the process of revising, if it isn’t unified, I have to make some changes.

The revision of the poem is very important because seldom does a poem come out in its final version the first time. It’s important to get down the inspiration while it’s there, but that’s only the beginning. A lot of people don’t want to revise their poems, and they say, “well that’s the way it actually happened.” Well the way it actually happened doesn’t make a poem. You ask

me what is a good poem. If you read a poem—and there are a lot of good poems that I don't particularly like—it gives some evidence that the poet has, knows something about form, knows something about what poetry is all about. It's implicit quality, it doesn't tell it all. It knows when to stop. It's often very condensed. There is a great deal—it makes use of figurative language much more than prose does and is not to be taken literally. There's a lot of symbolism, and you, everyone thinks they can write poetry and so they just jot down something off the top of their heads and they don't want to revise it. But you can tell once you read a poem whether the person knows anything about form.

In my textbook—well I was writing poetry before I knew how to scan a poem and I was doing it pretty well. But a high school friend of my brother's who spent a lot of time at our house was a very good poet. He taught me how to scan a poem, but I was doing it very well by instinct. I think if you want to be a good poet you have to read. You don't have to go take a course in creative writing. If you read a lot of good poetry, you will learn about what it is by osmosis, by example. It's always a good idea if there's one available, a poetry group of people on your same level who can critique your poems. That's very valuable. Or if you can take a creative writing class. But you need to know something about form and rhythm if you're going to write. A lot of beginners want to write poetry that rhymes and they don't know how to rhyme. Rhymes are not intentionally near rhymes, they just don't rhyme. They don't know anything about the uniformity of the length of line or the rhyme scheme. All language, every word in English, has a rhythm if it's more than one syllable. They write lines that don't have any rhythm to them, and the accented syllables bump into each other. It's very easy to tell when somebody, a poem is by somebody who really knows something about form. I think always in my creative writing classes, I would teach them how to scan a poem whether they wanted to write in rhyme or not. I

think that's basic, it's like studying the scales on a piano. If you know that, then you avoid some of the problems with rhythm and with consistency throughout the poem.

MLM: How do you teach them to scan a poem?

NLM: Well, I've got it in the *Student's Guide to Creative Writing*. We go through words to find their rhythm and we write a line of poetry and indicate with a U shape the ones that are unaccented and the ones that are. I give examples of that, and then—I don't bother with the names of the, that form. [makes rhythmic noises] And then there's the opposite [makes rhythmic noises].

Once they have been able to figure that out—I have them tapping on the table with their pencils to make sure they have the rhythm—and then you count the number of feet. You mark off the number of feet and you make sure that there is some consistency from one stanza to another of the number of feet per line. Then you teach them how to indicate the rhyme scheme with A being the first word of the end of the line, and sometimes there's internal rhyme, and if the second line rhymes with the first, that's "AA." If the next two lines rhyme with each other, that's "BB". And that continues, or the third line may not rhyme with any line, so that's "ABCB." Those are the 3 things that should be consistent in some way.

Now you can make up your own rhyme scheme or your own pattern, but once you do one stanza like that, the next one and the others that follow are usually the same, though not necessarily.

MLM: In terms of teaching people how to write free verse, how does that work?

NLM: Okay, free verse is—and I talk about that and blank verse [in the book]—blank verse has the five feet of iambic. Free verse doesn't have any pattern but it's very important where your lines end. The word that comes first has the most emphasis and the one that ends may cause you

to do a very very brief pause before it goes to the next line. But the ending word is very important too. It makes a difference in a well-written poem where the lines end. Sometimes, it's done by syllables, syllabic verse so that you don't—it's free, but it does have some consistency in where the lines begin and end. For instance, I think this poem of mine—if I want to emphasize that pause, I put "but" at the end of a line. It causes me to pause a second—a half a second, before going to the next line. It's all very interesting. Also, it does have some kind of form in that you don't want two accented syllables to come together and bump in with each other. It does have a flow to it when you read it.

MLM: Dr. Hardison, did you have any questions?

AKH: Maybe you could ask what she wanted us to know—if there was anything else she'd like to talk about?

MLM: Yes, is there anything else we didn't ask that you'd like to discuss? Looks like you have some really thorough notes there. [all laugh]

Oh, I did, I forgot: when I was in your archives yesterday, I found this poem that you decided to never publish called "Incident" about a stewardess giving your wine to a different person on the plane.

NLM: Oh, that was included in—I think *Pink Ladies*, that was the very first edition printing later on I added...

MLM: You added to that book?

NLM: I don't have my *Pink Ladies* with me.

MLM: I don't think it's in this one...

NLM: ...no, it's in the second edition.

MLM: I had it written down, I don't know if you can read my handwriting. But where you had it in your archives, it was x-ed over and it said, "Don't use" at the top.

NLM: Oh really? Well, I did use it. [laughs] I used it in the later edition of *Pink Ladies*, and I can tell from the cover because I changed it a little bit. I did add some additional poems, and that's one of them. [quoting the poem] "Now that's real progress!" [laughs]

MLM: [laughs] Yes, Dr. Hardison, if you don't mind, I'll read it to you since it's pretty short:

Mid-air between Atlanta and Detroit
I asked the young blonde stewardess
For another glass of wine.
When she came back, she passed right by
My dark brown face and handed the glass
To a puzzled white lady with hair as white as mine.

Now that's real progress.

[all laugh]

I just thought that that was a really great poem.

NLM: Yes, she didn't see race.

MLM: Another one of those observations on writing good poetry, one of the other things you said was "A good poem rides on the strength of its verbs."

NLM: Yes.

MLM: Will you talk about that a little bit more?

NLM: Adjectives have to be used sometimes, but very sparingly. Poems are often very, very concise. Adverbs—I mean if you could find the right verb, it's better to use that than to write a

longer sentence that uses adjectives and adverbs. Hand me a copy of the *Student's Guide [to Creative Writing]*.

[opens to "Making the Words Work," page 116]

The verb is probably the most important word in a sentence. A sentence cannot be complete without it. For one thing, but more importantly, it has the power of providing through suggestion helpful information regarding not only the action itself but the performer's will. The verb "cried" is useful in identifying the action, but it does not reveal how, when, or where this action occurred. It might have been loudly for 10 minutes, weakly, shrilly, or in a frustrated manner. Every mother understands the language of her child's furious cries and reacts to it accordingly. Added information is more descriptive than a simple act of crying—a more thoughtfully chosen verb can often eliminate the need for extra words and phrases. To say that the baby screamed suggests that it was in severe pain or was perhaps angry. To say that it whimpered implies something altogether different. Walk or enter and sit are other verbs that only identify actions. They tell nothing about the walker or his manner of entering a room and taking a seat. Notice what different mental pictures are conjured up from the following sentence:

He shuffled into the room and slumped into the nearest chair.

She waddled into the room and flopped into the nearest chair.

She floated into the room and perched upon the nearest chair.

He staggered into the room and collapsed in the nearest chair.

Now if those words eliminate a lot of other words that would be necessary to tell you how the person entered and how he or she sat down. It's preferable to use a strong verb that suggests those things and eliminate the other words.

One of the poems I use is by James Emmanuel. I've always liked that poem because it is so condensed and conjures up so many images of the stereotypes of the negro and it's called "The Negro."

[reads poem]

That's, to me, is really—there are so many stereotypes in such a short space. "Eyes a saucer"—again the image of, who was this black actor years and years ago...big eyes. "yes, a bossier"—a subservient person. "Dice a clinking"—another stereotype. "Razor flicking"—another stereotype. And so the person here, there are no verbs in this...well, it does have one. The person that this is talking about could not distinguish between "a" negro and "the" negro with its stereotyped images. That's an excellent example of condensation: using as few words as possible.

MLM: I also want to ask sort of an off-topic question: I remember when you wrote in your book about the 1967 Detroit "riots" and you referred to them as a "rebellion." I also saw that the Detroit History Museum is doing an exhibit called "Riot or Rebellion" [about that event]. You obviously lived here whenever that happened, and I wondered if you could talk about it?

NLM: Well, I was in Rome when that occurred. I was with a group—some of the people tried to, I thought it was a real race riot, and I had a white friend of mine staying at my house to cat sit rather than moving the cat. I was afraid she was in danger. Finally, somebody got through and found out that it was in that 12th Street area, which was nowhere near [my house]. It was a race riot and I can't understand for the life of me why we—why people would burn down their own businesses. It really didn't have anything to do with race, I don't know what strange thoughts people might have that if they were rebelling against poverty or joblessness that it would be helped by burning down places, even black-owned places. I can't call it a race riot, whereas the

one in 1943 was a race riot. My first husband was living at the black Y[MCA] in Detroit, and the YWCA was across the street and served meals. He had just left there and he was on the steps to the Y where he lived when he saw a state trooper chasing a black boy down the street. He turned around and said, "Heil Hitler," and they turned around and shot him in the back and left him lying there. It was just a flesh wound. My brother and I were home from college and we read about the riot in the newspaper, and my brother knew him because they had been roommates at Lincoln University in Missouri. And he said, "I think Spoon is in Detroit, and if he is in Detroit he's in the riot," and the next day we read in the paper that he had been shot. Any account of the 1943 riot will discuss that.

MLM: That's interesting, I don't remember coming across that. It was before you lived here, right?

NLM: Right. He was getting ready to graduate from high school, we got there during the Christmas holidays and it was a weird time to be starting school. Everyone knew that there was a new girl at school and he [Spoon] introduced himself for me in the hall. I don't remember if we ever said anything else or not, but he graduated and forgot about him. But we had such a fantastic high school choir with some good soloists including Robert McFerrin, who was the first black person to get a contract with the metropolitan opera. We stayed in touch for life, he never lost his voice. So we toured the state and we stopped at Lincoln's campus and I saw Julian walking across the campus and we spoke but that was the end of that. Then, when I was in college, he was stationed at Camp Lee and somebody told him that Long's sister was on campus. He came over and looked me up, and that was the beginning of the romance.

But [in 1943] that was truly a race riot, because there was some rumor about somebody doing something to a white person. But 1967—I don't think it had anything to do with race.

They burned up their own communities.

MLM: Well I thought I wasn't going to get to everything, but I actually don't have any more questions.

NLM: Oh, well—yes, I keep good notes. [laughs]

END OF TRANSCRIPT