

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Naomi Long Madgett

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Madgett, Naomi Cornelia Long.
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Naomi Long Madgett,
Dates:	June 27, 2007 and March 5, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	12 Betacame SP videocassettes (5:29:45).
Abstract:	Poet and english professor Naomi Long Madgett (1923 - 2020) was first published at age twelve. Madgett was the recipient of many honors including 1993's American Book Award and the George Kent Award in 1995. Madgett was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 27, 2007 and March 5, 2007, in Detroit, Michigan and Detroit, Michigan. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_072
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Poet and English professor emeritus Naomi Cornelia Long Madgett was born on July 5, 1923 in Norfolk, Virginia to the Reverend Clarence Marcellus Long and the former Maude Selena Hilton. Growing up in East Orange, New Jersey, she attended Ashland Grammar School and Bordentown School. At age twelve, Madgett's poem, *My Choice*, was published on the youth page of the *Orange Daily Courier*. In 1937, the family moved to St. Louis, Missouri where her schoolmates included Margaret Bush Wilson, E. Sims Campbell and lifelong friend, baritone Robert McFerrin, Sr. Madgett, at age fifteen, established a friendship with Langston Hughes. Just days after graduating with honors from Charles Sumner High School in 1941, Madgett's first book of poetry, *Songs to a Phantom Nightingale* was published. She attended Virginia State University during World War II and graduated with her B.A. degree in 1945.

Madgett attended graduate school at New York University. In 1946, she married and moved to Detroit, Michigan where she worked as a copywriter for the *Michigan Chronicle* and the *Michigan Bell*. In 1949, her poem *Refugee* appeared in *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1949* and in 1950, several of her poems were featured in *American Literature by Negro Authors*. Occasionally, Madgett read her poetry for the Detroit Study Club. After marrying William H. Madgett in 1954, she earned her M.Ed. from Wayne State University in 1955. Madgett taught at Northwestern High School, while two other books; 1956's *One and the Many* and 1965's *Star by Star* gained local accolade. Madgett joined a group of black Detroit writers including Margaret Danner, Oliver LaGrone, Dudley Randall, Harold G. Lawrence, Edward Simpkins, Gloria Davis, Alma Parks, James Thompson and Betty Ford who met at Boone House. They were featured along with James Edward McCall and playwrights Powell Lindsay and Woodie King, Jr. in the October 1962 issue of the *Negro History Bulletin*. Madgett's poetry was also published in the *Negro Digest* and Hughes's 1964 anthology, *New Negro Poets: U.S.A.* In 1965, she was awarded the Mott Fellowship in English.

In 1968, Madgett was included in *Ten: Anthology of Detroit Poets* and joined the faculty of Eastern Michigan

University where she wrote *A Student's Guide to Creative Writing*. Madgett's 1971 African travels inspired the poems *Phillis*, and *Glimpses of Africa*. She earned her Ph.D. from Greenwich University in 1980. *Octavia and Other Poems* was published in 1988 by Third World Press. Madgett formed Lotus Press in 1972 and published her own book, *Pink Ladies in the Afternoon*. She edited the acclaimed *Adam of Ife: Black Women in Praise of Black Men* in 1992. Madgett is the recipient of many honors including 1993's American Book Award and the George Kent Award in 1995.

Madgett was made Detroit's Poet Laureate by Mayor Dennis Archer.

Madgett passed away on November 4, 2020.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Naomi Long Madgett was conducted by Denise Gines and Larry Crowe on June 27, 2007 and March 5, 2007, in Detroit, Michigan and Detroit, Michigan, and was recorded on 12 Betacame SP videocassettes. Poet and english professor Naomi Long Madgett (1923 - 2020) was first published at age twelve. Madgett was the recipient of many honors including 1993's American Book Award and the George Kent Award in 1995.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Madgett, Naomi Cornelia Long.

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Madgett, Naomi Cornelia Long.--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Poet

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Naomi Long Madgett, June 27, 2007 and March 5, 2007. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The

HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Naomi Long Madgett, Section A2007_072_001_001, TRT: 0:28:24 ?

Naomi Long Madgett was born on July 5, 1923 in Norfolk, Virginia to Maude Hilton Long and Clarence Long, Sr. Her maternal grandmother, Mary Saunders Hilton, was the daughter of an African American woman and a white man. She became a nurse, and married Sidney Hilton. Long Madgett's mother grew up with five siblings in Richmond, Virginia, where she heard Reverend John Jasper deliver his famous speech, 'De Sun Do Move and De Earth Am Flat.' She went on to attend Virginia Normal and Industrial Institute in Petersburg, Virginia at thirteen years old. Long Madgett's paternal grandfather, Frank Long, was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, and attended Leland University, where he met Long Madgett's grandmother, Sallie Mumphord Long. He later studied theology, and became an educator at Bishop College in Marshall, Texas and a principal in Guthrie, Oklahoma. Long Madgett describes her paternal aunt, Octavia Long, who graduated from the University of Kansas in 1909, and worked as a teacher.

Video Oral History Interview with Naomi Long Madgett, Section A2007_072_001_002, TRT: 0:30:11 ?

Naomi Long Madgett's father grew up in Guthrie, Oklahoma, and went on to study theology at Virginia Union University in Richmond, Virginia. There, he met and married Long Madgett's mother, Maude Hilton Long. He began pastoring in Virginia, where Long Madgett and her older brothers, Clarence Long, Jr. and Wilbur Long, were born. Her family then moved to East Orange, New Jersey, where her father attended Upsala College, and pastored Calvary Baptist Church. Long Madgett recalls the discriminatory practices of the public schools there. As she conducted research for her book 'Octavia: Guthrie and Beyond,' Long Madgett travelled to Guthrie, Oklahoma, where her paternal grandmother, Sallie Mumphord Long, was granted government land because of her Native American heritage. There, she met several people who knew her family, and had been taught by her paternal aunt, Octavia Long, the subject of her book. She also visited the local church pastored by Solomon Sir Jones, who had several rare films of the all-black town.

Video Oral History Interview with Naomi Long Madgett, Section A2007_072_001_003, TRT: 0:29:13 ?

Naomi Long Madgett attended Ashland Grammar School in East Orange, New Jersey, a predominantly white school, where she recognized the class difference between herself and the other students. She also attended East Orange High School for one semester. Long Madgett's father, Clarence Long, Sr., was the pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in East Orange, where she was active in the Baptist Young People's Union. Long Madgett and her brothers often got into trouble for laughing during the service, and changing the words to hymns. She was close to a woman in the church who had been accused of killing her husband. The woman began vying for Long Madgett's father's attention, but was rejected. The woman then threatened Long Madgett's parents, and was removed from the church. Nevertheless, Long Madgett's father decided to move the family to St. Louis, Missouri, where he pastored Central Baptist Church.

Long Madgett transferred to Charles H. Sumner High School in St. Louis, where she dated singer Robert McFerrin, Sr.

Video Oral History Interview with Naomi Long Madgett, Section A2007_072_001_004, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Naomi Long Madgett attended Charles H. Sumner High School, led by Principal Charles Brantley, where she received good grades, with help from her teachers. Although the school did not teach African American history, she learned about important figures like W.E.B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson from her parents, Maude Hilton Long and Clarence Long, Sr., who had collections of black poetry, and introduced her to hymn author Charles A. Tindley. Long Madgett began writing poetry at a young age; and at fifteen years old, met Langston Hughes at a literary meeting. They became friends, and Hughes gave her constructive criticism on her poetry, and encouraged her to continue to write. In 1941, Long Madgett's father published her first book of poetry, 'Songs to a Phantom Nightingale' through Fortuny's Publishers, Inc. She decided to attend Virginia State College for Negroes in Petersburg, Virginia, after meeting John M. Gandy, who was the president of the university.

Video Oral History Interview with Naomi Long Madgett, Section A2007_072_001_005, TRT: 0:28:46 ?

Naomi Long Madgett often visited her mother's family in Richmond, Virginia as a child, which influenced her decision to attend Virginia State College for Negroes in Petersburg, Virginia. There, she studied English under Professor Felicia D. Anderson. On the way to visit soldiers at Camp Lee, Long Madgett was informed of the attack on Pearl Harbor. As the United States entered World War II, many of her male students were drafted, and the government began rationing items like clothing and sugar. The boyfriend of Long Madgett's cousin was killed in action, and soon after, Long Madgett's brother, Wilbur Long, was deployed to Italy with the Tuskegee airmen. There, he was captured, and placed in a prison camp. The family feared he was dead, until hearing about his predicament from cousins also stationed overseas. They corresponded occasionally until Long was released just before Long Madgett's college graduation in 1945. She describes her paternal grandmother, Sallie Mumphord Long, who had Native American ancestry.

Video Oral History Interview with Naomi Long Madgett, Section A2007_072_001_006, TRT: 0:30:49 ?

Naomi Long Madgett learned about the Civil War from history professor, Luther Porter Jackson, Sr., at Virginia State College for Negroes in Petersburg, Virginia. She was reluctant to become a teacher, and instead majored in English, but was unable to find work upon graduation. She then attended New York University for one semester, before marrying Julian Witherspoon and moving to Detroit, Michigan. There, she worked as a staff writer for the Michigan Chronicle, and had her daughter, Jill Witherspoon Boyer. Long Madgett was hired at Michigan Bell Telephone Company, and took graduate courses in education part time. She married again to William Harold Madgett, who encouraged her to return to school full-time, when her boss, Raymond Scruggs, left the company. She earned a master's degree in education and a teaching certificate from Wayne University in Detroit, and began teaching at Northern High School and Northwestern High School, while continuing to write poetry.

Video Oral History Interview with Naomi Long Madgett, Section A2007_072_001_007, TRT: 0:29:24 ?

Naomi Long Madgett wrote her most popular poem, 'Midway,' after the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka decision in 1954. The poem appeared in

several books and sparked a number of controversies, one of which involving the cancellation of an high school talent show that incited protests and garnered the attention of the local chapter of the NAACP. Long Madgett wrote 'Alabama Centennial' in 1963, in honor of the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama, and sent the poem to Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. just before his death in 1968. During the 1960s, Long Madgett met Rosey E. Pool, a Dutch woman who edited several collections of African American poetry. She also met other black poets, such as Broadside Press founder Dudley Randall, Oliver LaGrone, Kofi Wangara, Betty Ford and J. Edward Simpkins. They began meeting at King Solomon Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan, and formed the Boone House Poets group, where they read and critiqued each other's work.

Video Oral History Interview with Naomi Long Madgett, Section A2007_072_002_008, TRT: 0:30:30 ?

Naomi Long Madgett first moved to Detroit, Michigan in 1946, and continued writing poetry inspired by her life experiences and family, although she did not know other African American poets in the city. She eventually formed an informal literary group with Dudley Randall, Oliver LaGrone and Margaret Danner, who left the group in 1964. She worked for the Michigan Bell Telephone Company, until completing her master's degree in education at Wayne University. Madgett was initially assigned to Northern High School before transferring to Burroughs Junior High School. Discontent with her new assignment, Long Madgett soon requested to be reassigned, and was placed at Northwestern High School, where she taught for twelve years. After receiving a fellowship at Oakland University in Michigan in 1966, she created the first African American literature course in Detroit Public Schools, where playwright Pearl Cleage was one of her students. She later taught at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, Michigan.

Video Oral History Interview with Naomi Long Madgett, Section A2007_072_002_009, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Naomi Long Madgett's poetry was often written about her family. Her father, Clarence Long, Sr., passed away in 1976, followed by her oldest brother, Clarence Long, Jr., in 1978, and her mother, Maude Hilton Long, in 1982. When Long Madgett's brother, Wilbur Long, died unexpectedly, she wrote the poem, 'Lonely Eagle,' in his honor. Her book, 'Octavia: Guthrie and Beyond,' was written about her paternal aunt, Octavia Long. Long Madgett received the College Language Association award in 2007 for her book, 'Pilgrim Journey.' At the time of the interview, Long Madgett participated in the National Poetry Month, writing a poem a day; and planned to publish a new book after completing one hundred poems in total. She recites her poems 'Connected Islands' from her book of the same name, and 'Reluctant Light,' which was about her relationship with her mother.

Video Oral History Interview with Naomi Long Madgett, Section A2007_072_002_010, TRT: 0:28:50 ?

Naomi Long Madgett founded Lotus Press in 1972, when she was unable to find a publisher for her collection, 'Pink Ladies in the Afternoon.' Long Madgett began publishing African American poetry, starting with the work of her student, Pamela Cobb. She also published poetry by May Miller, and poet Toi Derricotte, and James Emanuel, in addition to her own autobiography, 'Pilgrim Journey.' Although she owned the press with her husband, Long Madgett did most of the work herself, occasionally enlisting the help of volunteers. Long Madgett served as a mentor for young writers like Pearl Cleage, and established the Naomi Long Madgett Poetry Award in 1993. In 2001, she was appointed

poet laureate of Detroit, Michigan by mayor, Dennis Archer. She describes fellow poet laureates Gwendolyn Brooks, Rita Frances Dove, Dolores Kendrick and Pinkie Gordon Lane, who was published through Lotus Press. She also recalls visiting Guthrie, Oklahoma.

Video Oral History Interview with Naomi Long Madgett, Section A2007_072_002_011, TRT: 0:23:47 ?

Naomi Long Madgett integrated the Detroit Women Writers program in Michigan, which eventually became the Detroit Working Writers. She was also a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority and the Fred Hart Williams Genealogical Society. Long Madgett originally donated her early papers to Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, but gave later papers and those of Lotus Press to the University of Michigan Special Collections Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Long Madgett talks about attending Plymouth United Church of Christ in Detroit, Michigan. She also reflects upon the difference between literary poetry and spoken word poetry, as well as her legacy, future plans, hopes for future generations, and how she would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Naomi Long Madgett, Section A2007_072_002_012, TRT: 0:10:51 ?

Naomi Long Madgett narrates her photographs.