

Connected Islands: An Evening with Naomi Long Madgett

February 24, 2005

Introduction

Naomi Long Madgett is a poet of connections. In her work, she forms connections across generations, across oceans and continents, and through history—back to her aunt Octavia, whom she never met but whose “face she wears,” back to Phillis Wheatley in whom, Madgett writes, “that native lifestory once again burst free” on *American* soil. Ms. Madgett’s poetry links us to that of Emily Dickinson, when she envisions her Aunt Octavia gazing beyond the “horses’ heads” and “toward eternity.” And, contrarily, her poetry connects us to that more recent poet, Tina Turner. In a dream Ms. Madgett takes on Turner’s persona, and puts on her “wild wig,” her strut-stomp and miniskirt, flaunting her own power *against* that of time and eternity.

In Ms. Madgett’s work we see connections to her Detroit predecessor, Robert Hayden, like him searching the past, using the middle passage to reconnect with Africa and with the experience of enslavement and slavery. With Hayden’s poems, too, her work shares distinctively Detroit experiences and images: the summer night front porch conversation, the downtown park, and that stubborn inhabitant of Detroit’s backyards, streets, and alleys: the Tree of Heaven, which she calls “the troublesome / indestructible / stinkweed of truth.”

In her poems, she connects even the most solitary islands of experience to one another. Through the “airy cry” of seagulls drawn into the city from the Detroit River, Ms. Madgett establishes links with members of earlier generations who heard the gulls’ cries near distant bodies of water—to foremothers on the Nile, to prisoners “shackled to the walls on Gorée Island,” to “slaves in Bahia” [be-**hee**-eh] and “the cotton fields along the Mississippi.”

Naomi Long Madgett builds connections in life as well as in poetry. As mentor and publisher, she has helped scores of other writers develop their talents and find their audiences. As a Detroit high school teacher and as Professor of English at Eastern Michigan University, she has connected students to the worlds of writing and literature, and some of those students who treasure what she has given them are reconnecting with her this evening.

This is a *Defining Detroit* event and part of Marygrove’s commemoration of Black History month, and it is fitting that we have as our guest a person who, as poet herself and as mentor to others, has been so instrumental in defining our city and resurrecting black history. We are deeply grateful that Marygrove College is one of the islands to which she is connected.

Please welcome our Poet Laureate, Naomi Long Madgett.

--Frank D. Rashid