

# WOMEN AND MIGRATION(S) II



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# 8. Barbadian Spirits—Altar for My Grandmother (Ottalie Adalese Dodds Maxwell, 1892–1991)

*Leslie King-Hammond*

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My family was blessed to be ‘makers’ with a vast range of skills and materials. My mother, Evelyn Alice Maxwell King, was a healer who spent her professional life as a registered nurse and made her own medicines. My father, Oliver Curtiss King, was trained as a master carpenter whose skills were engaged as a shipfitter, tasked to assemble the huge components of warships in the Navy Yards of Brooklyn and Philadelphia. There was literally nothing he could not make from tissue paper: Japanese kites, war ships or a house. Otallie Adalese Dodds Maxwell, my grandmother (Mama) was taught to be a master seamstress, who migrated from the island of Barbados, West Indies to New York City around WWI—during the Great Migration (1925–45) as African Americans moved en masse to urban northern cities in the United States in search of a better life—even as the Great Depression wreaked havoc on the world. Mama settled in the East New York community of Brooklyn, which became home for thousands of African diasporic people from the Caribbean Islands and South America. Her career was spent making upscale clothing in the garment district of New York City for more than thirty years. Everything my family had or needed was often handmade, repurposed from salvaged ‘hand me downs’ or Goodwill items. However, it was the profound impact of my grandmother’s unconditional love, technical skills, determination and deep spirituality that made an indelible imprint on my own need to

make art. She also sparked my relentless curiosity about the roots of African American history—with a special emphasis on women—given the limited conversations we had about her life in Barbados.

As an infant it was discovered that I had cancer—devastating news for a first-born child with only a 5% chance of survival. After my surgery, a special bond occurred between my grandmother and me—she was overjoyed with the success of my treatments. My grandmother remained relatively quiet on the subject of her early life experiences in Barbados but expressed them outwardly, through her masterfully designed clothing, delicious island cuisine and devoted commitment to St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, located in Brooklyn, New York. For almost forty years she was responsible for creating all the altar cloths, drapes, regalia for the priests, altar boys and choirmaster—as well as dressing the altar for weekly, holiday and special services. She also made all the clothing for my mother, sisters and me—until I was old enough to sew and made clothes for the family. Mama then only made clothes for me. I still have the first and the last dress she made for me.

My artmaking began as a process of osmosis. I was immersed in the ‘maker’ routines of my family, learning to harvest and repurpose scraps from Mama and my father’s projects, cutting, pasting, stitching, beading, embroidering, designing and assembling utilitarian objects—for my needs—or just out of a desire to experiment with materials. My grandmother and father were most patient with my projects, while my mother had some doubts, especially after I became fascinated with the desire to become an archeologist. I was a different child who was the first generation—born, raised and educated in the United States—while my Mama was born in Barbados and my parents were born in the States and sent back to Barbados to live with their grandparents. I was raised between what my brother called “island-diffic” and Depression-culture values that stress the economy of materials and an emphasis on ‘literacy and pride.’

My youth was spent as a child of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. I lost my innocence seeing an open casket photograph of Emmett Till and reading *The Diary of Anne Frank*. My love of the arts did not wane but became a mechanism and means to maintain my sanity during times of extreme racial tension and segregation. I kept on making stuff to center my energies, anger and frustrations. The 1970s and 1980s began the thrust of the Black Arts Movement, then the advance of feminism, followed by the culture wars of the 1990s. I had

given up hope of becoming a trained archeologist and had opted to get a doctorate in art history so that I could reclaim the stories of African American artists lost, ignored, erased and denied a place in the annals of American history. My home had become the site of mini-installations as I continued to work as a Graduate Dean and Art History lecturer at the Maryland Institute College of Art. It was not ever my primary aspiration to be an exhibiting artist, in spite of earning a BFA in painting from Queens College... As long as I was making my own work in the studio of my townhouse, I was fine! Yet, Deborah Willis was researching the role of the Artist/Scholar for a Smithsonian exhibition and did not allow me to stay cloistered away with my thoughts and installations.

Instead of being the curator, which had become a familiar role due to my professional and academic experiences, I was now being curated! *Barbadian Spirits—Altar for My Grandmother* (Ottalie Adalese Dodds Maxwell, 1892–1991) was an important revelation for me. Components I had created over the decades, and personal objects left to me by my grandmother were combined with needleworks of her sister, or her cousin, and numerous laces—made by anonymous women—were added to these to create an altar to honor the potent essence of my grandmother's impact on my life. The bricolage installation uses a nineteenth-century wooden mantel from a demolished Baltimore row house as the centerpiece. The top shelf of the mantel has a variety of jars, bottles, and containers that contain references to medicinal elements used by African peoples throughout the diaspora to heal all manner of ailments and illnesses. The center shelf functions as a sacred space for elements such as a cross, cups, saucers and teapots which, when with my grandmother, we would use for tea and her homemade coconut bread. Each shelf is dressed with handmade vintage laces.

The use of reclaimed, repurposed elements embodied the energies of past lives, functions, and memories that now have a safe and sacred space, a home, a resting place, and more importantly a site of purpose and meaning as defined by the artistry and intellect of women.

The floor in front of the altar is filled with rice and dried pigeon peas which is one of the staple dishes in Caribbean diets. Scattered across the rice are dried hibiscus flowers—the national plant of Barbados—used for aromatics, healing medicines and herbal teas. In the fireplace sits a traditional clay Barbados Monkey Pot, which was usually placed on the doorstep of the home, to provide cool water for visitors—one of the

few memories my grandmother shared with the family. Surrounding the Monkey Pot are Eucalyptus leaves, also native to Barbados and used for medicinal purposes. Many of these herbs were used by my mother and grandmother to treat illnesses and ailments in a manner known to be economical, effective and accessible. These plant dynamics were part of a vast knowledge system that was highly developed throughout the African diaspora of the Caribbean and are still used today. The creation of *Barbadian Spirits* opened the door to a vast body of research about the origins and lives of my immigrant family. A recent analysis of my DNA confirmed more than 80% African ancestry, with an emphasis on Nigeria. In addition, the remaining origins point to Northern Europe and confirm the revelation that my great grandmother, Alice Dodds, was from England. So many questions haunt me—how/when/why did she get to Barbados, was she part of the forgotten history of Britain's white slaves in America, what was her occupation, how did she meet my great grandfather...? Their marriage was blessed with eight children, of which my grandmother, Ottalie, was the fourth child. My work has only just begun to really locate the stories and narratives of my family, and all my Barbadian Spirits are yet to become known, in the light of day.



Fig. 1 Leslie King-Hammond, *Barbadian Spirits—Altar for My Grandmother (Ottalie Adalese Dodds Maxwell, 1892–1991)*.