

WOMEN AND MIGRATION(S) II



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14. NormaNamesake/The Choice

Nashormeh N. R. Lindo



Fig. 1 *NormaNamesake*, 2006, jacquard tapestry, mixed media. Courtesy of the artist
© Nashormeh Norma Lindo.

This tapestry is about my paternal grandfather, my father and myself. The title, *NormaNamesake*, refers to the fact that my father was named after his father, Norman Kendrick Wilkie (1880–1939) and named me, Norma, after himself, Norman Leodius Wilkie (1912–2002). The medallion photograph is of my grandfather, whom I never knew except via the stories my father told. I first saw this picture hanging on the living room wall of the family home. The quartet of photos are of my

father and the small picture of me is my high school graduation picture. This work is also about the migration of my father's family from the rural South to the urban North at the end of the first Great Migration and the beginning of the Great Depression, in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

This image began as a collage, made up of small paintings, family photos, drawings and disparate symbolic objects, referencing that journey and those stories. The tapestry form itself is representative of the weaving together of the narratives, the history and the personal family connections between myself and my forefathers. In this work, I am reimagining the past and the motives my family had for migration. In the tradition of the griot, my father always told us stories about his childhood, his family and his early days in Philadelphia. The memories of stories repeated by my father over and over at dinner, when we were a captive audience, drive the narrative. They are also based on oral histories, interviews and conversations I had with my dad, and other family members. As a woman artist and daughter, I wanted to find a way to represent that narrative and the ideas it evoked for me about personal identity, family, history and how relationships are impacted by the changes migration brings.

Daddy always said that his father was a "master mathematician." He could do problems in his head without writing the numbers down. I include a mathematical formula in the work to represent his legendary genius. He always carried a fountain pen and a pencil in his top pocket and a knife in his back pocket. There is a heart at the top of the composition, signifying the love underlying it all. A map of South Carolina indicates where they came from. My grandfather worked, along with other men in the community, at a sawmill, but he also taught at a school for Negro children. There is a drawing of a red pony, named Colette, which he rode to work, to school and to church. There is also a picture of Mother Bethel A. M. E. Church which is in Philadelphia.

My Dad and his family were originally from a small town called Ashton, South Carolina, in Colleton County. Walterboro was the county seat. We never visited my father's home. He had an aversion to the South. He hated the idea of it. My grandfather's brother, Charlie, had to be spirited out of town in the dark of night, to avoid lynching after shooting a white man. But Daddy also had fond memories. He often spoke of his paternal grandmother, Caroline, who was part Native American.

In keeping with the flow of the Great Migration, the family headed north, following the well-travelled route established by the Underground Railroad. On Palm Sunday, in the spring of 1924, my grandfather's eldest sister, Millie Connelly, and her family reached Philadelphia. They dropped off their bags, headed to Mother Bethel Church and became members that same day. In 1926, my Dad's uncle, James "Bubba Jim" Wilkie, arrived with his wife and children. They had initially migrated to Uniontown, where Bubba Jim worked in the coal mine. They too, eventually, joined Mother Bethel. In 1929, my grandfather, his wife Daisy and their family arrived. My grandfather got a job as a fireman. He wanted to teach, but, coming from the South, his credentials were deemed inadequate. He heard that the Post Office paid better, and he was studying for the test when he sent for his family. They too joined the church and became active members. The church was walking distance from their home and became the center of their civic and social lives. My Dad was almost seventeen. Unfortunately, one Sunday, my grandfather got sick in church. They carried him to Pennsylvania Hospital, where he died a few weeks later. It was ten years after he migrated to Philadelphia.

Migrations are characterized as voluntary or involuntary. Most people voluntarily move around the planet seeking a better life, to find the means for basic survival, to find family members or friendlier environments. Most early Africans who found themselves in the Western hemisphere came here involuntarily, by forced international migration, on slave ships over the Middle Passage. During the time my parents migrated, this interregional movement north was both voluntary and involuntary. For them, though, mostly, it was necessary. Some stayed behind. Some left willingly, seeking their fortunes or following love. Others had to leave quickly, in the dark of night. For most, this domestic migration was related to industrialization, and social and political prejudice. The same was true of my family. They came from South Carolina and Georgia to Philadelphia. For them, it was a logical choice. There was community there, cultural traditions, educational and employment opportunities. They wanted to do more with their lives than pick cotton, work in the sawmills and constantly be on guard against the virulent racism of the Jim Crow South. They wanted better lives and new experiences. They chose to leave, and my father and grandfather never returned.

