My Voice on Cloth:

*Story Quilters of the South Carolina Lowcountry*

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Abstract

Susan Scott Hester, “My Voice on Cloth: Story Quilters of the South Carolina Lowcountry.”
(Under the direction of William R. Ferris, Bernard L. Herman, Dale Rosegarten, and Torreah “Cookie” Washington.)

My Voice on Cloth explores the lives and artistry of a group of African-American women art quilters based in the Lowcountry region of South Carolina. The thesis describes how art quilters use textiles to tell stories that challenge social constructs and negotiate identity, transforming a traditional medium into a contemporary art form. My research analyzes story or pictorial quilts as ethnographic narratives that serve to “re-tell” history, to reflect individual experience, to project the artist’s voice, and to shape the creator’s identity. I argue that story quilts are platforms for invention, re-interpretation, and cultural negotiation. By expanding the boundaries of her art each quilter claims freedom of expression and the power to transform a practical skill into creative energy capable of pushing the world in a new direction.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

“Quilts, like any art, serve as primary transmitters of the cultural, political, social, and spiritual values by which the artists live.”

--Carolyn Mazloomi, Spirits of the Cloth

A quilt can be a utilitarian object or a work of art. Most quilts have elements of both functions. Viewed as folk art, a quilt reflects a set of traditional communal values and customs as interpreted by an individual. Quilt making connects the quilter to the past, permits unlimited artistic expression and improvisational possibilities, and provides accessibility as a popular art form readily appreciated by the public.

In this study I will explore the lives and artistry of a group of African-American women art quilters based in the Lowcountry of South Carolina. My project describes how art quilters transform a traditional medium into a contemporary art form, using quilts to tell stories that challenge social constructs and negotiate identity. How do quilts reflect the individual? My research analyzes quilts as ethnographic narratives used to interpret history, to empower the people who make them, to shape the creator’s identity, and to serve as a window into individual experience. As a platform for invention, re-interpretation, and cultural negotiation, art quilts are a means of expression that gives voice to the quilters. Fabric is their medium. Art quilting offers each artist freedom of
expression and the power to transform a practical skill and a familiar medium into 
creative energy to break beyond boundaries of convention.

Finding the “Fabric of Life”

In 2009 I moved to Charleston, South Carolina and began studying the history and 
culture of the Lowcountry, through regional works such as Charles Joyner’s *Down By the 
Riverside* and *Shared Traditions*, and Walter Edgar’s *Encyclopedia of South Carolina*. 
The southern fiction of Sue Monk Kidd\(^1\) and Josephine Humphreys\(^2\) complemented these 
scholarly works by telling tales of women’s lives framed by folklore and oral history and 
made me ponder the role of personal narrative in history.

Further down the road of my cultural inquiries, journalist Emily Abedon passed 
on an article she wrote for *Charleston Magazine* entitled “Fabric of Life,” featuring five 
African-American art quilters—Catherine Lamkin, Peggie Hartwell, Dr. Marlene 
O’Bryant Seabrook, Torreah “Cookie” Washington, and Winifred Sanders. Through 
profiles of each artist, Abedon introduced a genre of quilting that was new to me. In my 
folklore studies I had learned about African-American quilting through the limited lens of 
folk culture which defined quilts as “traditional” or “utilitarian,” and deemed them as 
“fine art” only when they were removed from the places of origin and hung on the walls 
of art museums. Besides the Bible story quilts of Harriet Powers, I had not seen 
contemporary African-American art/narrative quilts like the ones pictured in “Fabric of

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Life.” These quilts seemed to blur aesthetic boundaries, blending folk art with fine art, causing the viewer to look beyond genre classification to the stories told in fabric. These story quilts combined art, narrative, and/or pictorial styles and approaches. According to a local quilt guild, calls for entry in exhibitions are categorized by quilt genres, such as “art/innovative” quilts, which are defined as the product of “original design reflecting innovative construction and design techniques, themes, or subject matter and/or materials, and “pictorial/landscape” quilts, which represent “any quilt that represents a recognizable image of a person, place, or thing, any size.”

Essentially, most of the quilts in Abedon’s article revolved around a central character, prompting the viewer to ask: Who is this person? What stories does he or she have to tell?

Learning about these women and their quilts provided an entrée into the worlds of the Utility Quilt, the Art Quilt, and the Story Quilt, and propelled me into a new field of folklore. I had focused mainly on expressive culture and vernacular music in earlier fieldwork. Now I needed to shift to a material culture framework. I revisited Henry Glassie’s *Material Culture* and examined the brilliant display of images in the *The Art Quilt* by Robert Shaw.

“It’s My Voice On Cloth”

My first contact in Charleston’s art quilting community was Cookie Washington, with whom Abedon had worked closely. Our initial interview yielded many insights into the creative process of art quilting, the distinction between art and traditional quilting, and the potential of art quilts to tell stories. Washington expressed her devoted interest in the feminine divine as we discussed her Black Madonna quilt series and the recent Black Cobblestone Quilt Guild web site: http://www.charlestonquiltguild.com. *Accessed 9/14/2009.*
Mermaid exhibit. Charged with my anthropology and folklore background, I dove into the “feminine divine” theme, poring through Henry Drewal’s research on the Mami Wata and reading versions of local African-American folktale such as *Suki and the Mermaid* by Robert San Souci and “The Mermaid Jar” from Virginia Hamilton’s *Her Stories: African-American Folktales, Fairy Tales, and True Tales*, works Washington had mentioned in our interview. Yet, before these stories took shape in the form of her quilts, they needed a medium. As we unraveled the story of her art quilting career, Washington explained that the book that triggered her interest in the practice of art quilting was Roland Freeman’s *Communion of the Spirits*. His extensive survey of African-American quilters was a window into the diversity and creativity of individual artists and an invitation to fabric artists to express themselves through cloth. As Washington describes it:

> I read a book called *Communion of the Spirits* by Roland Freeman. It’s an amazing book full of black art quilters. And I thought, “Oh my God!”—because most quilts you think are square, or Sunbonnet Sue, or Baltimore Album, and I just thought, “These are boring; don’t want to do this.”…I saw this book of quilts and I thought, “This is what I want to do. I have something to say. And I can do it….I can say what I want to say in fabric!”

My interview with Torreah Washington led to introductions and interviews with other local art quilters. Expanding the scope of my research from a text-based analysis of folktales to the study of a group of artists, and following Roland Freeman’s ethnographic approach, I delved into subjects beyond the feminine divine and varying quilt techniques. Catherine Lamkin, for instance, honors Civil Rights leaders through poetry and collage, and Dr. Marlene O’Bryant-Seabrook illustrates subjects of African-American history with archival documents. Peggy Hartwell’s appliquéd pieces capture memories of home. Arianne King-Comer’s batik and indigo pieces tell the story of traditional cultural

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Many hours of fruitful conversation with each of these ten women yielded a tapestry of subject matter tied together with common threads, subjects grounded in their experience of and approach to quilting: They all have roots, either newly established or running deep, in the South Carolina Lowcountry. They share an approach to quilting known as “art quilting.” Anchored in the narrative and pictorial quilt tradition, the themes of the quilts are another common thread linking this group of quilters. Stories told revolve around African-American history and culture, women, family, and faith. The quilts in this study were created to tell stories, while the artistic imprint of each body of work reflects individuality, complexity, and diversity. Finally, the strong common undercurrent among these quilters is the conceptualization of the quilt medium as “voice.” Teaching children how to quilt, Peggie Hartwell tells her students: “This is your voice on cloth. If you don’t have words, you can use the cloth, you can use design to tell what you want to say, and it might be something of interest only to yourself, or to your family, but at least it’s being told.”

“We are the Wayshowers”

My research revolves around the idea that quilts are narratives and quilters are storytellers. The art quilters involved in this project identify themselves as “griots,” in the

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5 Peggie Hartwell. Interview by Susan Hester. December 11, 2009, Artist’s residence, Summerville, SC.

Quilts, like any art, serve as primary transmitters of the cultural, political, social, and spiritual values by which the artists live. The quiltmakers in *Spirits of the Cloth* are “fiber griots,” whose voices are unique in the world of American quiltmaking. Their works are prose, poetry, and songs captured in cloth.⁶

Mazloomi links African-American quilts with the griot tradition by highlighting the quilt’s narrative function. “More than sixty percent of African-American quilts are narrative,” she explains. “In the tradition of the African griot, quilts tell stories of family leaders, moral and spiritual values, and social concerns. Such quilts have been the primary vehicle to preserve family and political histories for generations in both Africa and America.”⁷ Griots played an essential part in African culture where stories are learned through oral tradition. A Malian master storyteller described griots as “repositories which harbor secrets many centuries old…without [them] the names of kings would vanish into oblivion; we are the memory of mankind.”⁸ Like art quilters, griots are community archivists, bearers of culture and history. As many quilters in this study have expressed about their gift of creativity, griots have a divine purpose, an inherited role to fulfill. The art of expression is passed down to them through family legacy.


Expanding on the idea that art quilters are “griots,” their role as storyteller has a particular character and function. Using quilts as their voice and telling the *unnder-represented* stories of African-American history, they are doing more than fulfilling the traditional griot role of presenting and recording the past; as *art* quilters, they are actively and creatively *re-interpreting, re-inventing* history and themselves. They are storytellers who are “Wayshowers,” activists who lead a new movement of quilt making practice. They use this term to describe themselves and how they approach their work. Torreah “Cookie” Washington introduced this sobriquet in our initial interview to explain the passionate motivating force behind her work. She cites the example of Roger Bannister’s record-breaking accomplishment, as the first man to run a mile under four minutes. She explains:

> Before that, the best doctors in the world said, ‘Oh no, the human heart will explode. You cannot run faster than four minutes’…and so nobody did it. And then Roger Bannister did it. And then within weeks somebody else did it….He was a way-shower for us. Now we know if we can run a four-minute mile, what else can we push the body to do? You know, I want little black girls to say, if Bessie Coleman could go to France and get her aviator’s license and learn to be a barnstorming pilot and Doctor May Jameson, the first black woman Astronaut to orbit the Earth and go to the space station, what can I do?

The Wayshower, then, is someone who challenges the status quo, who bravely and boldly paves a new path, who enlightens and uplifts, and encourages action. The stories that these art quilters tell are meaningful to each artist and reflect her values and identity.

If art quilters are storytellers and quilts are narratives, what are the *types, meanings, and functions* of their stories? Mazloomi again parallels the griot and quiltmaking traditions:
In the tradition of the African griot, quilts tell stories of family leaders, moral and spiritual values, and social concerns. Such quilts have been the primary vehicle to preserve family and political histories for generations in both African and America.9

Are the stories autobiographical? Are they political? Are they memorials to loved ones? Are they works of fiction? Are they documentaries? Are they rooted in folklore? How are they “showing the way?”

Adapting a traditional folk art to a modern consciousness, these art quilters are projecting their voices through the quilts and claiming their history. Their voices are stitched into their quilts, shedding light on their lives and experiences. These African-American art quilters have expanded the repertory of the African-American quilt from the Bible quilts of Harriet Powers to the creation of personal narratives. How do these artists transform a traditional medium into a contemporary art form, using quilts as their voice on cloth? How are the quilts used as vehicles for cultural negotiation, for the construction of identity, and for reinforcing faith? How does art serve to invent new ideologies?

Knowing your past, whether it be family history or the history of a cultural group, shapes and strengthens identity, and art quilting by this group of African-American women provides a platform to recount their histories to themselves and to the public. Stitching these stories is an act of self-representation, honoring, remembering, believing, healing, and cultivating a voice.

Methodology

My approach in this project is folkloric and ethnographic. I examine material culture in context to explore issues of meaning within a cultural group by using oral

9 Mazloomi, Quilting African-American Women’s History, 5.
history interviews, transcriptions, and documentary photographs as primary sources of information. Employing a researcher-as-witness mode, this study places the art quilter and her words in the foreground, as in William Ferris’s oral history of quilter Pecolia Warner, in *Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts*. Rather than analyzing the quilt-as-object, this exploration of material culture revolves around the quilter-as-active-creator, contextualizing the quilts through personal narratives. Quilts are discussed in relationship to their makers, not as autonomous, anonymous texts. I am interested in understanding how quilts are situated within women’s lives and how women’s lives are situated within quiltmaking culture.

This methodological approach is informed by feminist thought, urging a “suspension of patriarchal assumptions which have historically devalued and distorted women’s experiences.”

10 Regarding quilts and quiltmaking as *lived* experience, the democratic methodology I enact here reveals a close, experiential description of each artist’s work, of her approach to her work, and of the stories embedded in each quilt which demonstrate the *diversity* of African-American quiltmaking. Each quilter represents a lens through which the complexity of art quilting is apparent. Each aesthetic decision illuminates the intent and intelligence of the quilter. In an effort to illicit the artist’s interpretation of her own work, I ask questions such as: How do you describe your work? What is the story or message of this quilt? What types of stories do you tell through your quilts—autobiographical, fictional, folkloric, historic? What are your aesthetic decisions based upon? What was the process of making this quilt? Why did you

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make this quilt and what meaning does it embody for you? What value, monetary or emotional, is ascribed to each quilt? What influences steer your work?

This thesis is not a survey of quilts and/or quilters in a specific geographic region. Rather, it is a collection of individual profiles that describes a community of African-American women art quilters in the vicinity of Charleston, South Carolina, who share common experiences. This “community” is defined by the quilters themselves based on a shared interest in art quilting and storytelling, a common experience founded on cultural background, age, gender, and residence, participation in local events, and membership of quilting groups. As mentioned above, the group chosen for this project was formed through networking within the closely knit arts community of Charleston. Though each quilter implements distinctly different styles, techniques, and themes in their art quilts, the threads that connect them are: living in the Charleston area, being an art quilter verses a traditional quilter, being an African-American woman, participating in local art events, having membership in the Women of Color Quilters Guild (though not all art quilters interviewed for this project are members), and conceptualizing their art quilts intellectually as their voice on cloth by creating mainly pictorial/narrative quilts. Based on these criteria, the women chosen for this study identify themselves as a group.

My research is collaborative in spirit. Meeting on a common socio-economic and intellectual ground I relate to this group of women as peers, which fosters open discussions of their work and of themselves. My ideas are directly molded by their words and experiences. Each quilter is given audio copies of all interviews and participates in the process of self-representation through images and through words. Representative quilts featured in the Appendix were chosen by the quilters themselves.
My methodology and interpretation are strongly informed by quilt scholars such as Terri Klassen, Kyra Hicks, Cuesta Benberry, Denise Campbell, and Carolyn Mazloomi. Mazloomi urges a shift in African-American quilt research, stating:

For the last two decades the study of African-American quilts has resulted in the promulgation of a number of theories that have been accepted as fact. Most of these theories have an extremely myopic view of defining the characteristics of an African-American made quilt. In truth, quilts made by African-Americans are as varied as the people themselves, employing a multitude of different styles and techniques which sometimes defy description.\textsuperscript{11}

Focusing on the narrative function of quilts and recognizing the quilt artists as “authors” of their work, I approach each quilt as a vehicle for the artist’s stories, whether the textiles are read as novels, documentaries, poetry, folklore, dreams, or memories. Allowing quilters to speak about their work counteracts quilt scholarship that removes the quilt from its context and treats the quilt as a purely aesthetic object.

The artist’s body of work is analyzed by examining the evolution of her quilts, the maker’s distinctive methods, and her identity as an artist. My methodology stresses the artist’s word and the way in which the art quilter describes her work, granting her an authoritative voice.

The textiles discussed here are generally described by their authors as either “story quilts,” or “pictorial quilts.” Yet, these terms remain loosely defined so that the quilts are not confined to a genre, but rather reveal a diversity of approaches. The artists featured here perpetually re-invent the story quilt. Though I am concerned with an approach to quilting known as “art quilting,” the energy of this project is invested in the artist’s intentions expressed through her work, moving away from the scholarly trend to label the quilts as falling within one genre or another. For example, there may be elements of traditional techniques or patterns in an art quilt.

\textsuperscript{11} Mazloomi, \textit{Quilting African-American Women’s History}, 12.
Art quilters documented for *My Voice on Cloth* use a variety of techniques and styles to tell their stories through cloth, going beyond the boundaries of a traditional “Bible quilt” framework. Their quilts blur the boundaries between “folk” and “fine” art. You may find elements of strip quilts, crazy quilts, folk styles, intricate or basic appliqué, painting on cloth, photo transfers, embellishments, conventional piecing, or complex montage. Most of the quilters interviewed for this project began making quilts based on traditional patterns and/or for utilitarian means. Having learned the basic techniques of quilting, these women used their skills for practical means as seamstresses or as employees in textile factories. The traditional quilt and basic sewing skills served as a foundation for quilt artists to build upon and then expand into a fine art form, honoring tradition while creating individual expressive art pieces.

**Format**

The second chapter of my thesis reviews the history of African-American quilt scholarship divided into themed sub-chapters to place this study within the literature on quilt making. A range of quilting genres is represented and blended within the art quilts examined in this study, so the following backgrounds of quilt styles are relevant to understanding their influences on the artists in this project. These themes revolve around the historical movements of quiltmaking, beginning with the folk, or utility quilt, moving to the story quilt tradition and Harriet Powers. The Art Quilt Movement of the 1970s is discussed, when quilting began to be used as a vehicle to project politically-charged voices.
Roland Freeman’s fieldwork in the 1980s and early 1990s represents the first comprehensive modern-day look into the wealth and diversity of African-American quilters, distinguishing an autonomous sub-culture of the quilting world. Another landmark in the study of quilts is the Gee’s Bend exhibition, which placed the folk quilt within the context of modern art. This “folk to fine art” phenomenon challenged our notions of the “folk aesthetic” and made an imprint on the way the fine art world—and possibly American culture in general—defines the “African-American quilt.” Led by the “matriarch” of the modern African-American quilting world, Dr. Carolyn Mazloomi, recent scholarship regards quilters as artists and storytellers who actively preserve history and culture. This current perspective concludes the timeline of quilting movements relevant to my study.

In chapter three I profile of each quilter participating in the project. This section is organized according to the chronological order of interviews. This patchwork of biographies is divided by subtitles (The Preacher, Teacher, Poet, etc.). I devised to characterize the roles, intentions, and subject matter of the artists. These titles are meant to emphasize the active role of the artist and the rich diversity of work produced within this sub-culture of the quilting world.

In the conclusion, I articulate issues raised in my primary and secondary research about the relationship between medium and message and the ways in which material culture shapes identity. The thesis culminates with an examination of the “Wayshower” role and the function of the quilt medium, shifting to an exploration of the idea of inventing tradition. The final section describes how the quilt is an effective metaphor for understanding history-making. Appendix A presents a “gallery” of images showcasing
representative pieces of each quilter’s work, as well as a list of illustrations used throughout the body of the thesis. Appendix B displays a series of postcards of quilt exhibitions in which the quilters in this study participated. Unless otherwise specified, all interview excerpts are from interviews recorded by the author and all photographs and illustrations without credits are courtesy of the artists.
CHAPTER 2

Genealogy of African-American Quilt Scholarship

From the era of slavery to the Civil Rights Movement to modern-day politics and culture, quilts have been used to give “voice” to resistance and rebellion, celebration and individuality. Quilts are a medium distinct in its tactility, resonance, and intimacy. They were originally made for warmth and are, in turn, associated with home and security. Hands piece multi-textured fabric together and produce layered works of art. The process and product of quilt making invites touch, whether on the bed or on the wall. By virtue of these characteristics they are a fitting element of material culture through which to examine the woven, multi-layered experience of a cultural group. Tracing the lines, or moments, of African-American quilt scholarship describes the role African-Americans play in this deeply rooted tradition and marks modes of representation. These moments represent shifting paradigms, contexts, and ideologies that create frames of reference and assign meaning based on varying criteria, such as region, time period, socio-economics, quilt style, or art classifications. Quilt scholars have attempted to culturally categorize quilts based on aesthetics, regions, and cultural groups. Quilt scholarship is a reflection of the evolving roles of African-Americans since the 1900s when the first quilt histories were written, and quilt culture is essentially a window into African-American history.
African-American quilt scholarship could be characterized by efforts to distinguish a tradition raising issues of agency, placing quiltmakers either outside or inside the mainstream quiltmaking world, and rendering their voices “silent” or “loud.” The evolution of quilt research embodies a theme: that African-Americans have always been active agents in the quiltmaking tradition. Fieldwork documentation of the Federal Writers Project revealed that black women had been making quilts since before the Civil War. Scholarship of the 1970s linking African-American quilts to African textile traditions sought to establish the autonomy of the African-American quilt aesthetic by “uncovering” a cultural consciousness, or “unconsciousness,” associating the creative impulses of quilters of African descent with Africa. Africanist thought, however, tended to ignore the cultural web of influence that characterizes American material culture, and the use, for instance, of European-American patterns in African-American quilts. Beyond patchwork and place, scholarship stressing the diversity and complexity of the African-American quilt world shows that black quilters hail from various regions and socio-economic backgrounds, work in many styles employing various techniques, and quilt for many reasons.

African-American quilting has been viewed through the eyes of scholars and art critics who attempt to define the art form based on aesthetics, either by tracing patterns to Africa, or by elevating simple folk quilts to fine art status. Existing accounts have used a limited set of cultural and historical criteria to describe African-American quilts. They are categorized in terms of the aesthetic extremes of “primitive folk art” or “abstract fine art,” exaggerating either the quilt’s familiar or the exotic characteristics. Moving from the aesthetically based analysis of quilts to issues of function, creative process and agency,
recent African-American quilt scholarship reveals the diversity of quilters and their work, and places quilts within the context of storytelling. Patterns are seen as codes, stories woven into the quilts, which shifts focus to the intentions of the quilter. These stories reflect a cultural experience, and it is this narrative-based approach and the insights it offers that is the focus of this study. Examining the historical context of material culture, charting the intellectual genealogy of African-American quilt scholarship, and marking the major movements relevant to quilt styles and social issues, permits a redefinition of the African-American quilt.

Assistant to Africanist: Defining the African-American Quilt Aesthetic

The golden age of quiltmaking began after the Civil War when quilting was an exclusively domestic craft. Women focused their sewing skills on needlework, coverlets, decorative coverings, and homeweaving. Early accounts of quilt culture ignore the creative role of African-American textile artists. Slave seamstresses were silent creators, absent from quilt histories. African-American women were considered outside of the mainstream of American quilting traditions and were credited merely as technical assistants. They were aides to white, aristocratic “model homemakers” who were granted authorship of quilt designs.

One of the first comprehensive quilt histories was published in 1915 by Marie Webster who places emphasis on the patchwork quilt as the model quilt. Webster charts a European-American, Judeo-Christian-slanted quilting history from “Antiquity” through the Middle Ages to Old England and America. Designed by middle to upper class white, “model homemakers,” patchwork quilts and quilt patterns in this era were symbols of
American patriotism and idealism, “keeping the family hearth flame bright.”\textsuperscript{12} Black women were regarded as slaves or servants who gained little recognition for their involvement in quiltmaking culture. Webster credits women of varying classes with participating in and contributing to quilt culture, but ignores cultural groups. In her introduction to \textit{Quilts: Their Story and How to Make Them}, she writes, “Humble maids, austere nuns, grand dames and stately queens; all have shared in the fascination of the quilter’s art and have contributed to its advancement,”\textsuperscript{13} though subsequently making the bold claim that the English and Dutch are \textit{the} pioneers of the quilting arts in America.\textsuperscript{14}

Published later in 1929, Ruth Finley’s, \textit{Old Patchwork Quilts and the Women Who Made Them}, highlighted the symbolic meaning of quilt patterns and the skilled needlework of quilters. As in earlier quilt scholarship, African-American women were seen as competent and industrious, but nonetheless as an anonymous group of technical assistants in the shadow of the model homemaker. Merely seen as \textit{assisting} with what was considered European-American quiltmaking, African-American women were not seen as contributing to the mainstream American quiltmaking tradition, which represented refinement and patriotism. Though there was a lack of documentation of slave-made quilts, African-Americans were always cultivating their own aesthetic inspired by their own culture and experience. Though the patchwork quilt was the dominant model in early twentieth century quilt histories, African-American quilters merged the skills acquired making these quilts on plantations with their native aesthetic.

“Plantation rules forced slaves to quilt in a European tradition; however, they found

\textsuperscript{12} Marie Webster, \textit{Quilts: Their Story and How to Make Them} (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1915), xvi.

\textsuperscript{13} Webster, xv.

\textsuperscript{14} Webster, 60.
ingenious ways to include African cosmology and mythology in quilts made for their white mistresses."

Exoticizing the African-American quilt was one of the initial ways scholars separated African-American quiltmaking from the mainstream quilt world. Linking quilt patterns and styles with African heritage distinguished the African-American quilt style from the traditional European-American quilt style. Through this interpretive lens, African-American quilts are defined by a set of aesthetic criteria characterized by strip-piecing, irregularity, bold, asymmetrical arrangements, large design elements, bright colors, and association with West African textile designs. The “primitive” aesthetic of African-American quilts was seen as a cultural retention, or statements of “survival”—beliefs, cosmology, mythology, visual art, dance—from African culture carried over through the Middle Passage. Under this idea, slavery did not, in other words, obliterate culture and creativity. African-American folk quilts were seen as evidence of the link to textile traditions of Africa, such as the patchwork of Nigerian Yoruba used in Egungun dance costumes, the pieced and quilted armor used to protect horses and warriors during battle of the Hausa of Niger and Nigeria, and the appliquéd tapestries (linked to story quilt tradition) of the Fon culture (Benin) used for ceremonies. Breaking beyond the ethnocentric models of the early 20th century to one of cultural relativity, this Africanist scholarship granted African-American quilts cultural autonomy in appreciation of the complexity of African culture. Spawning New World African studies, anthropologist Melville Herskovits produced *The Myth of the Negro Past*, originally published in 1941 and Robert Farris Thompson’s book, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art*

*and Philosophy*, published in 1983, are two works regularly referenced by African-American quilt scholars. Provoking questions regarding art forms and sources of the African aesthetic, Herskovits claimed that Africanisms survived primarily in oral traditions and not crafts. Thompson’s influential essay “African Influence on the Art of the United States” was originally published in 1969 in *Black Studies in the University* and reprinted in *Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts*. Following Herskovits, Thompson was one of the first scholars to dismantle the assumption that slavery destroyed the creative memories of Africans, encouraging the exploration of African continuities in American art. Thompson presents a new interpretive lens through which to see American art. He writes, “By the hand of individual Afro-American masters were fashioned works of art whose blending of remembered ancestral and encountered alien modes may now be estimated and explored.”

Slavery annihilated neither memory nor culture, both of which are manifested in art. In this groundbreaking essay Thompson presents a group of traits of African-American sculpture that he concludes are evidence of African influence, such as monochromony or bichromy, smooth, luminous surfaces, equilibrated gestures, beadwork, and the repertory of motifs. By pointing out criteria characteristic of African-American expression Thompson’s research positions the African-American aesthetic as a distinct art form and culture. “Artistic autonomy implies social autonomy,” he writes.

Inspired by the work of Robert Farris Thompson, quilt scholars Maude Southwell Wahlman (a student of Thompson) and John Michael Vlach reinforced this Africanist perspective in their respective seminal works, *Signs and Symbols: African Images in"

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17 Ferris, 29.
African-American Quilts and The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts. In the catalogue of the 1978 exhibit Vlach writes,

> What may in the end be regarded as the most important feature of Afro-American quilting is the apparent refusal to surrender an alternative aesthetic sense to the confines of mainstream expectations. Euro-American forms were converted so that African ideas would not be lost.\(^{18}\)

> Adhering to a presumed African aesthetic, in contrast to a European-American one is, for Vlach, an act of asserting African heritage and identity. He claims that African-American quilts demonstrate how European artifacts may be modified by African canons of design and stand as statements of cultural survival rather than surrender. Essays such as, “Aesthetic Principles in Afro-American Quilts,” written by Wahlman and John Scully and published in William Ferris’s Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts (1983), stress the need for aesthetic guidelines to appreciate Afro-American quilts, and argue that they express an aesthetic “hitherto unrecognized and unstudied.” In an attempt to define the African-American aesthetic, Vlach and Wahlman, in Signs and Symbols, explain that,

> The goal of our general research is to trace the African roots of Afro-American quilting and to explore the American transformations of this art form…To document historic references to Afro-American quilts, point out main continuities between African and Afro-American quilts, and suggest five aesthetic principles which define Afro-American quilts.\(^{19}\)

African-American quilts were defined by limited aesthetic criteria: vertical strip-piecing, bright colors, improvisation, asymmetry, use of multiple patterns, and African symbolic forms that reflect cultural continuity with African vernacular expressive culture. Art preserves cultural traditions even when the social context of tradition changes. The lingering effects of Africanist thought are evident in recent projects showcasing African-

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19 Ferris, 79.
American folk art. Reviewing the Gee’s Bend exhibit (discussed later), quilt scholar Prokopow writes of the Africanist phenomenon in the art world: “It is this very tangibility of the transposition and survival of African aesthetic practices in the making of North American quilts that has generated both popular and academic interest and has made them objects of particular social, cultural, and political power.”

In attempting to distinguish the African-American quilt aesthetic from Euro-American tradition, scholars representing Africanist thought accomplished a goal of granting an art form cultural autonomy. Yet, later scholars debate the source of this African aesthetic.

From Folk to Fine Art

Africanist theory rears its head in a more recent phenomenon of cultural representation with the Gee’s Bend project. Anthropologists attempted to define African-American quilts from the perspective of cultural relativism, or African cultural retentions; folk art collectors and art critics draw upon the theorized African aesthetic to raise folk art to fine art status. Both critical frameworks are structured around imagined worlds: Africa and The South—two romanticized homelands, assumed static and primitive cultures associated with African-American quilts. From Herskovits and Thompson, to Vlach and Wahlman, the African-American quilt tradition has been consistently based on exoticizing the “folk.”

Art collector, William Arnett, began collecting quilts from Gee’s Bend, Alabama in the mid-1980s when he traveled there in search of quilter Annie Mae Young’s work,

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which he had seen pictured in a book on African-American quilters. Once there he
discovered a small community of quilters with a rich repertoire of folk quilts. By the
1990s Arnett had acquired a collection that he envisioned as an exhibition in order to
expose the quilts to a mainstream audience. The Quilts of Gee’s Bend exhibit made its
debut in 2002 at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. The exhibition, entitled “The
Quilts of Gee’s Bend,” is accompanied by two companion coffee table books, The Quilts
of Gee’s Bend (2002), and Gee’s Bend: The Women and Their Quilts (2002). Arnett’s
twenty years of research culminated in the two-volume book Souls Grown Deep: African
American Vernacular Art of the South (2000).

Quilts that had been considered inferior craftsmanship and technically flawed
compared to mainstream traditional quilts, now became a legitimate example of modern
art. From its initial exhibition at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, the Gee’s Bend
exhibit toured eastern U.S. cities such as New York, Boston, Memphis, and Atlanta, and
were featured in 2006 as Gee’s Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt. The most recent
exhibit, running through 2010, is entitled Mary Lee Bendolph, Gee’s Bend Quilts, and
Beyond. Seventy quilts made by women from the rural, low income, isolated community
of Gee’s Bend, Alabama, were taken from their rustic homes and displayed on white
walls under studio lights. William Arnett’s entrepreneurial energy, professional
connections, and knowledge of the art world granted these quilts and the women of Gee’s
Bend wide exposure and the critical attention of American society.21 The quilts were
placed in a new context and evaluated as high art. Validating quilts as art may involve a

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21 See Jonathan Holstein, Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition (Louisville:
certain violence as the quilt is torn from its site of production. Here is a case where we focus less on the maker’s meaning than the question of “what is art?” The quilters originally intended the quilts to be utilitarian; the art-world context was deliberately imposed on these quilts, changing their function.

By virtue of critical acclaim and effective marketing, the limelight of the Gee’s Bend exhibit overwhelmed the rest of the African-American quilting world by representing one subculture of quilters. Michael Kimmelman’s groundbreaking New York Times article published in response to the initial Gee’s Bend exhibit in 2002 declared that the Gee’s Bend quilts were “some of the most miraculous works of modern art American has produced,” paralleling their work to fine art painters Matisse and Klee. While praising their artistry, Kimmelman highlighted and romanticized the quilter’s folk background, “these women closely bound by family and custom…spent their precious spare time—while not rearing children, chopping wood, hauling water and plowing fields—splicing scraps of old cloth to make robust objects of amazingly refined, eccentric abstract designs.”

African-American quilt scholar Dr. Carolyn Mazloomi stresses that, “Despite the powerful impression made by Gee’s Bend quilts, it is important to emphasize that no single style dominates African-American quilts. African-American quilting can both

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22 Michael, 427.


24 Kimmelman.
reflect African heritage and embrace European styles.”

Gee’s Bend quilts were deemed by some members of the public as typical “African-American” quilts, ignoring the diversity of black quiltmaking tradition. Folklorist Teri Klassen comments on this idea of de-contextualization:

Their attempt to boost the Gee’s Bend quilts from the level of outsider folk art, already achieved by quilts with Africanisms into the high-art realm depends on the exclusion not only of white quilters but also of Gee’s Bend quilts in recognizable quilt-world patterns and of black quilters who happen not to live in Gee’s Bend or who are urban, middle class, northern, or mainstream.

The Gee’s Bend project could be viewed as an act of “othering,” under-serving the historical, social, and cultural forces that initially produced the artifacts and downplaying issues of identity. “In art galleries and on walls, quilts may be divorced from the fabric of women’s lives.”

Inviting the public to view these quilts from an art critic’s standpoint while presenting portraits of the women of Gee’s Bend in their cultural setting deliberately ties a quilt style to a culture. Some members of today’s African-American quiltmaking world are critical of the exhibit’s unintended effect of naming the typical “African-American quilter.” Recent quilt analysis marks efforts at contextualizing, to show webs of influence, inconsistencies, and profiling across diverse geographic and demographic lines.

Africanist theory and the Gee’s Bend exhibition left constructive imprints on the path of African-American quilt scholarship. Using quilts as grounds to spark the ongoing “folk” versus “fine” art debate and elevating folk quilts to fine art status assigns pride in


creating art, honors cultural heritage, and uncovers the artistic potential of domestic craft. Attention to objects can easily be associated with defining them, but provocation and exposure lead to greater appreciation of material culture. “In displaying quilts as art objects,” Prokopow explains, “the curators challenged the presumptive differences between artifacts and art but also raised public awareness about an important aspect of American material culture.”

Questioning the curatorial legitimacy of displaying quilts as art forces us to examine what art institutions do and why, and to challenge assumptions about traditional categories of cultural production. In recognizing the artistic achievements of a little-known group of African-American quilters and the rich cultural contributions of African-American culture, we introduce new material to institutions and disciplines. Redefining and expanding our definitions of fine art to include quilts means that pieced textiles can be critiqued as two-dimensional art, as if they were paintings, focusing on design, color, and form, or possibly as sculpture for its three-dimensional qualities. African-American quilts have been historically defined not by their intrinsic, distinct aesthetic, but against the backdrop of the mainstream. Scholars derived meaning from opposites, based on Western art critique. “African-American quilts have a long history of commentators seeking to define these objects not by what they are, but what they are not.”

In sum, removing an object from its context can strip away socio-cultural information, but its displacement can also concentrate critical energy on its aesthetic qualities and the maker’s artistic autonomy.


29 Prokopow, 62.
Tradition Transformed: The Art Quilt

At the same time that scholars were attempting to define African-American quilts based on aesthetic principles, artists were beginning to break through these limitations. Moving beyond associations of African-American quiltmaking with genre and social context, quilting bees and utility quilts, art quilters transcended these limitations. In the spirit of the civil rights, anti-war and women’s movements, quilts became a medium for cultural critique. Robert Shaw’s seminal book, The Art Quilt (1997), showcases a diverse world of art quilts and sheds new light on a familiar medium. He writes that “art quilters have…expanded the quilt’s permissible subject matter and expressive range, reflecting the diverse and complex concerns of the world in which they live.”

Most striking and relevant to Robert Shaw’s portrait of art quilting is that the chapter on African-American quilts focuses on narrative quilts. Why is a cultural group tied to a genre? What assumptions are in place here? What historical links are there between African-Americans and the narrative quilt genre?

Researching quiltmaking and communication, quilt scholar Kristin Langellier connects quilts with politics: “Just as the sewing circles coincided with the rise of the First Wave of feminism in the United States, so, too, has the recent quilting renaissance coincided with the contemporary Women’s Movement.” She continues, “the contemporary revival has refashioned, but not rejected, traditional meanings for quilts in at least two significant ways: quilts as art and quilts as commodities.” Art quilting combines two modes—art (lived experience and creativity) and craft (traditional medium and utility). Langellier associates the traditional quilt and the art quilt with

31 Langellier, 66-67.
distinct historical stations, summarizing that, “quiltmaking inherits the contradictory symbol of the quilt as women’s oppression and women’s expression.”

Quilt scholars and feminists Elaine Hedges, Pat Ferraro and Julie Sieber raise the idea that art quilts can have a narrative function. “In light of the women’s movement in the 1970s and the spirit of feminism, quilts are viewed as something meaningful beyond domestic craft, that women’s stitched fabrics were often the most eloquent records of their lives and thus function as ‘texts.’”

Yet, scholars such as Shaw who chronicle the Art Quilt Movement suggest that there is a cultural connection between African-Americans and the narrative quilt tradition. Art quilts for many African-Americans served as a platform for making statements and representing their heritage. “Published statements of black art-quilt makers indicate that they wanted to be valued as productive participants in the U.S. quilting tradition, rather than as people who were operating outside of it…they wanted to determine the meaning of the quilts themselves.”

Art quilters widened the presumed quilter demographic, breaking beyond the folk stereotype of the African-American quilter identity, usually associated with isolated, low-income communities of the South. “Working in tandem with the art-quilt movement, African-American quiltering has been used to update the concept of quilting generally to fit contemporary needs and values.” Many pioneering art quilters are educated, middle-class, professional women who lived in urban areas with access to

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33 Klassen, “Representations in African American Quiltmaking,” 309.

34 Klassen, “Representations in African American Quiltmaking,” 327.
unlimited intellectual and creative resources. Black Studies and Women’s Studies college programs were offshoots of the Civil Rights and Feminist Movements of the late 1960s influencing points of reference in studying material culture. Art quilts expanded traditional parameters of the medium, where creativity and inventiveness make it possible to modify and rejuvenate the old approaches and techniques.

Beyond their traditional function as a domestic heirloom, quilts became palettes for self-expression, either to make political or ideological statements, to recount events, to convey dreams, or to tell autobiographical stories. The term “contemporary quilt” was coined to distinguish them from the traditional quilts. Art quilts became a medium for expression functioning as a painter’s canvas. Art quilts are defined, according to the Studio Art Quilt Associates, as a “contemporary art work exploring and expressing aesthetic concerns common to the whole range of visual arts, painting, photography, graphic design, assemblage, and sculpture, which retains however through material or technique a clear relationship to the folk art quilt from which it descends.”

African-American art quilters such as Faith Ringgold and Carolyn Mazloomi reinvented the quilt medium for self expression and as a vehicle for voice. Paralleling the Underground Railroad quilt with the art quilt, Jacqueline Tobin writes, “In the same way that tools were used for escape, art quilts stitch tools within their work: spiritual, mental, intellectual, to reshape self images.” Inspired by this work, other art quilters recognized a quilt’s potential to be a medium with unlimited aesthetic possibilities and not just a pattern-based, utilitarian object. “The art-quilt movement offered an alternative aesthetic
system to that of the quilt world, one that was more open to inconsistency and experimentation.\textsuperscript{35}

\textbf{Always There...}

Recent research has revised the history of the African-American quilt, shifting the historical paradigm and giving rise to a “decolonized” interpretive frame. Is culture or “race” ever unconscious, immutable, or static? Are there not various streams of influence such as heritage, media, etc., flowing into African-American quilts? Does Africanist ideology reflect lived experience?

Folklorists and quilt historians have played an active role in uncovering the “diversity” theme of African-American quiltmaking from the 1980s until the present. According to folklorist Teri Klassen: “Quiltmakers who share an African heritage may (or may not) also have European, American Indian, or Asian heritages, and they may differ as well in terms of age, socioeconomic class, urban or rural experiences, and exposure to what I will refer to here as “mainstream” quiltmaking practices.”\textsuperscript{36}


\textsuperscript{35} Klassen, “Representations in African American Quiltmaking,” 303.

\textsuperscript{36} Klassen, “Representations in African American Quiltmaking,” 298.
African-American quilters. Quiltmaker Sandra German is skeptical of the effect of Africanist on quilting culture:

> The reduction of African-American quilting to a quantifiable, simplistic caricature is a travesty which sets the stage for convenient, trivial, and lucrative rip-offs such as “Afro-American style quilts” and the instruction in “How to make an Afro-American quilt.”

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Quilts have been described using this limited criteria in an effort to establish authenticity based on the Africanist retention theory, ignoring aesthetic choices made by the quilters, the meaning of each quilt to the quilter themselves, the blending of European American and African-American styles, and the overall diversity of the quilters and their quilts.

Tracing African roots to distinguish African-American quilts from European-American quilts was a starting point to develop awareness of the black experience in quilting.\textsuperscript{41} Moving away from an aesthetics-based description to the personal and cultural identities of quilters, Benberry’s work explores the chronology, diversity, and varied roles played by black quilters. “Human creativity has so many variables, it is beyond the purview of small scientific samplings.”\textsuperscript{42} This “diversity-centered” scholarship has helped grant quilters agency and put a face on tradition.

**Quilts as Ethnography**

A wave of quilt scholarship from the mid-1980s to 1990s examined the social context of quiltmaking. In her exhibition catalogue *Social Fabric: South Carolina’s Traditional Quilts* quilt historian Laurel Horton refers to quilts as social documents. “Viewed as a folk art,” she writes, “a quilt is the product of a traditional set of values and customs as interpreted by an individual within a community.”\textsuperscript{43} For Horton, quilts are an expression of heritage produced in a cultural context which reflects the quilter and the


\textsuperscript{42} Benberry, *Always There*, 20.

\textsuperscript{43} Laurel Horton, *Social Fabric: South Carolina’s Traditional Quilts* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina in association with the McKissick Museum) 1985, 11.
society of which the individual is a part. Whether we look at utility quilts or art quilts, cultural influences are evident in subject matter, technique, and quilt style. Quilts are the material product of the quiltmaker’s world. Feminist historian Elaine Hedges studies the rediscovery and celebration of women’s textile culture that has taken place in the last three decades. She views sewing as a “universal form of activity, uniting women of different classes, races, and nations.”

Using the critical lens of feminism and phenomenology, quilt scholar Langellier writes, “what appears to be merely personal reasons for quiltmaking simultaneously reflect the social, cultural, and political organization of women’s lives as they undergo the transformations of the late twentieth century.”

Webs of influence and localisms mesh with quilt styles and materials. Teri Klassen points out that, “objects acquire differing meanings as each interpreter incorporates them into his or her own context.”

Adopting the methodology and cultural theories of the field of folklore, African-American quilts and quiltmakers are empowered to create their own contexts of interpretation. Positioning themselves as witnesses (and potential advocates) folklorists prompt questions revolving around influence and inspiration, meaning, and agency, listening to how the artists themselves describe their world.

In Afro-American Folk Arts and Crafts (1983), folklorist and historian, William Ferris documented the stories of African-American quilter, Pecolia Warner. In this book, which Ferris also edited, the chapter on Pecolia Warner was raw oral history text. Warner’s voice is the story. Ferris’s research methodology, granting so much weight to

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44 Hedges, In Her Own Images, 13.

45 Langellier, 68.

oral history narratives, was pioneering at the time. Ferris was the first to make ethnographic documentary films on African-American quilters, featuring Amanda Gordon in Made in Mississippi and Pecolia Warner in Four Women Artists. Literally stepping into their worlds, their homes, their yards, Ferris’s folkloric research, whose backbone was oral history, was unburdened by scholarly analysis, allowing these women to present their own ideas about quilting, their techniques, and designs, in their own words.

Folklorist Charles Joyner’s, Down By the Riverside, describes the rich and complex folklife of slave culture in the South Carolina Lowcountry. Like Ferris’s oral history-based approach, Joyner’s book also depends on the personal narratives recorded by Works Progress Administration fieldworker Genevieve Chandler. A few of his key points are particularly useful in studying quiltmaking culture and inspire the direction of this study: 1) all history is local history, suggesting that scholars shift their attention to sub-cultures, to particular communities instead of universal wholes; 2) history and culture are constructed; 3) artistry and creativity are claims to power and identity; and, 4) the folk, or non-institutional knowledge is a “moral economy.” Like Ferris, Joyner describes African-American culture using the ethnographic approach that places the subject in a position of power.

Paired with folkloristic ideology, the “diversity” theme gained popularity in the 1990s, looking more closely at the complexity of the African-American quilting tradition. Under this “diversity” lens, African-American quilters were the subjects of issues of race, gender and class. Quilts were described as varying in stylistic characteristics and

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47 Ferris is known for saying in his Folklore and History classes, “In Africa when an older person dies, a library burns,” teaching the value of oral tradition.
technical skill, and genres. Photographer Roland Freeman documented the widespread
and diverse culture of African-American quilt makers by producing an extensive national
Freeman uncovered *diversity* across lines of geography, class, gender, and style of
African-American quilting and, fundamentally, the medium’s potential as a personal
expressive tool. Quilts are “instruments of cultural transmission,” he claims. Freeman
continues on this point:

> Quilting has historically provided a creative outlet for individual artistic expression for Afro-
American as well as other American women. Quilting was a practical skill taught to women by
their mothers as a means of supplying warm bedding. But quilt tops and backs also reveal and
reflect the cultural roots and the aesthetic choices of the women who made them.\(^{48}\)

Focusing on the individual and creative agency, Freeman, like Ferris and Joyner,
works to dismantle cultural assumptions about quiltmaking, stating, “Individuals who
quilt cannot be lumped together or generalizations made about them. They quilt for a
range of reasons.” Hinting at the destructive forces of past object-oriented, “othering”
scholarship on African-American quilts, Freeman approaches quiltmaking at the level of
the people. To represent the vitality and richness of African-American quiltmaking
culture, Freeman’s *Communion of the Spirits* project could not be anything but extensive
in breadth and depth, and Freeman takes on this challenge as a revolutionary. Freeman
stresses, “It is certainly not useful to view African-American quilts merely as isolated
folk art objects, divorced from the lives of blacks and the social, political, and economic
conditions under which they lived.”\(^{49}\) Author of book and groundbreaking exhibition,

*Stiched From the Soul: Slave Quilts From the Antebellum South*, folklorist Gladys-Marie

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\(^{48}\) Roland Freeman, *A Communion of the Spirits: African American Quilters, Preservers and Their Stories.*

\(^{49}\) Freeman, 16.
Fry challenged myths about slave made quilts based on limited, technical criteria and described the culture of quiltmaking of a particular time period and region. She shifted the attention of quilt analysis by highlighting the creative process of African-American women. Literally putting faces and words on tradition, a folklorist was perfectly positioned and well suited at this time in the genealogy of quilt scholarship to rid African-American quilt analysis of myth and stereotype.

African-American studies scholar Floris Barrett Cash offers valuable insights about the social context of quiltmaking. In her article on kinship networks and quilting she examines the inventiveness of African-American women, recognizing their historical contributions. She begins her discussion of the quilting tradition and the experience of African-American women with a reference to W.E.B. Du Bois’ idea of “double-consciousness” or “ethnic dualism.” Women of African decent, according to Cash, have been boxed in with myths, or rather, boxed out of the mainstream quilting world because of myths that position black women quilters as technical “assistants,” (referenced earlier), in the quilting process, and not innovators. Foregrounding the inventiveness and creativity of African-American women, Cash aims to expand our idea of African-American history and quilting by describing the diverse roles African-American women have played in the quilting tradition. “Quilts can be used as resources in reconstructing the experiences of African-American women. They provide a record of their cultural and political past.”

Echoing the ideas of recent scholars, Cash claims that “the voices of black women are stitched within their quilts” and she looks to value-infused “kinship networks” or communities of women as a framework for understanding material culture.

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Cash points out the history of quilting for political and moral causes, such as fundraisers for Anti-Slavery efforts and military support. “developing awareness of the black experience in quilting.”

Taking a folkloristic approach, what do African-Americans say about their work? What meaning does it hold for them? What factors influence their creative process? This primary material challenges all of the above frames of interpretation and archetypes of quilt scholarship: the Silent Seamstress, the unconscious Africanist, the Folk Quilter, etc.

The Pictorial/Narrative Quilt Tradition

More than sixty percent of African-American quilts are narrative.\(^{51}\) In the late 1990s individual women quilters in African-American quilt history, such as Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley and Harriet Powers, were acknowledged in quilt scholarship. Moving away from anonymity and naming influential quiltmakers, historians began to recognize the creativity of individual African-American women as artists and storytellers. Harriet Powers’s quilts were among the first “narrative” works documented and closely examined with references to oral history, symbolism, legends, and folklore. Her Bible quilts are “evidence of the strength of an oral tradition within the African-American experience,”\(^{52}\) representing stories from her memories of church sermons and her personal expression of faith. Consistent with previous theory that quilts are social documents reflecting worldview, the pictorial/story quilt is a distinct genre, employing storytelling tactics, with symbols, timelines, text, and characters.

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\(^{51}\) Mazloomi, *Quilting African American Women’s History*, 5.

\(^{52}\) Benberry, *Always There*, 43.
Story quilts are narrative rather than abstract. They flow directly out of the oral tradition which used story telling as a way to impart the culture and preserve the history of a people. Story telling and the story quilt impart moral and spiritual lessons as well as personal family genealogy for future generations. To view a story quilt is to learn about the quilters, their families, values and life experiences.\textsuperscript{53}

Considered the pioneer of the story quilt genre, Harriet Powers created these quilts at a time in the late nineteenth century when quiltmaking had become, for the most part, the unimaginative repetition of simple traditional designs or a garish mixture of commercial patterns. Her Bible quilts are original statements of her life. Contemporary narrative quilters, such as Kyra Hicks claims that her quilts are “not just contemporary, but in fact are a part of a tradition of religious quilts by black Americans like Harriet Powers.”\textsuperscript{54} Powers’s quilts, in their simplistic and beautiful imagery with symbols and scenes, invite scholars to analyze her messages and motivations. It is presumed that Powers’s sources of knowledge and inspiration for her quilts were her memories of Bible passages, church services, and local events. Her quilts describe a nineteenth-century African-American woman’s world for which few sources now remain. Scholars attempt to literally “read” the narrative blocks of Powers’ quilt. Yet, beyond chronicling events, scholars go further, claiming that Powers is “making a declaration of faith,” depicting a “grand spiritual vision.” Analysis of her work links Powers’s story quilts to African traditions, tying her signature appliqué technique and subject matter to the tapestry tradition of the Fon culture of Benin, as what some scholars claim is evidence of African retention or, what Charles Joyner calls cultural “creolization,” the blending of African and American cultures. These scholars “read” Harriet Powers’s quilts as oral history.

\textsuperscript{53} Benberry, \textit{Always There}, 114.

\textsuperscript{54} Mazloomi, \textit{Threads of Faith}, 14.
William Ferris explains, “Because few personal records of black women from this period exist, the pictorial quilts and its texts are precious documents.”

Another project on African-American quilts that broadcast the “quilts as narratives” idea was *Hidden in Plain View* (1999) by Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard. Based on two conversations in the mid-1990s with Charleston quilter, Ozella Williams, Tobin and Dobard recounted the story of the Underground Railroad quilt. They theorize that slaves used quilt designs as a language to communicate escape plans and interpret quilts as repositories of stories, codes, and messages. Quilts could be seen as maps/texts to be read, adopting an “unsuspected dimension of meaning hatched from an old familiar form.”

Focusing on the storytelling function of quilts, the quilt becomes a voice. Tobin looks to quilts as a window into an under-represented history. Illustrating this point, she writes, “These stories are the remnants of a history that is still being written. To follow the stories is to trace African-American history: from Africa to America, from bondage to freedom, from survival to triumph.” Tobin does adhere to an Africanist theory in her analysis of quilts, stating that the African-American quilt is a “cultural hybrid that enjoys encoding meaning through geometric patterns, abstract improvised designs, strip-piecing, bold singing colors, and distinctive stitches.” Tobin uses “folk” quilts as the model quilt to represent the African-American quilt tradition with limiting criteria and assumes that narrative qualities lie in aesthetic elements, instead of the maker’s intentions. Tobin references the African “griot” tradition, but considers the quilt itself, instead of the quilter, the storyteller. The act of fashioning stories and the agency of their raconteurs is ignored. She writes, “When we analyze these five elements of encoding meaning, we will see the African-American quilt for what it is: a fabric

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griot.” Tobin did succeed in situating quilters in an African-American—empowering framework. Tobin and Dobard attempt to give what early quilt histories gave to European Americans: the use of quiltmaking as a source of honorable heritage, pride, distinctive identity, solidarity, and continuity. In this framework, quilts are didactic, seen as keys to cultural memory and knowledge.

Though valuable for its close examination of the quilt as text, *Hidden in Plain View* was critiqued by some scholars who debunked the Underground Railroad quilt thesis. Considered a *theory* rather than fact since the information about quilt codes was passed down orally. “Since the vast majority of slaves could neither read nor write, there is no written record of these quilt codes. Therefore there is no certainty whether they in fact existed or to what extent they played a role in helping slaves escape to freedom.”

Shifting contexts from the domestic to the artistic, the quilt medium in this case is transformed from a utilitarian object into a storytelling medium. Tobin provides a framework for *reading* quilts. Quilts are a visual language, repositories of symbols, of meaning.

**Her-Story: A Different Truth**

Current quilt makers and historians and scholars of African-American quiltmaking such as Carolyn Mazloomi (founder of WCQN mentioned later), Patricia Turner, Lisa Farrington, Denise Campbell, Michael Harris, Yvonne Wells, Faith Ringgold, and Kyra Hicks have pushed the boundaries of quilt interpretation. They highlight the storytelling aspect of quilts and present portraits and stories of African and African-American men and women, documenting their history and culture. In depicting

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portraits contemporary narrative and pictorial quilters are calling on the recognition of a culture, of a way of life and an identity. Story quilter and painter Faith Ringgold is motivated to fill in the gaps of mainstream American history by telling stories through the eyes of African-American individuals with her quilts, paintings and children’s books. “In my church school we saw some accomplishments of African Americans, but in public school, no way….But later I found those people on my own,” she explains.

Dr. Carolyn Mazloomi refers to today’s African-American women quilters as the “Daughters of Harriet Powers.” With Mazloomi as a sort of “matriarch” of contemporary African-American “insider” quilt scholarship, this family of scholars takes the position that the history of women of color is neglected, and their profound contributions should be recognized. These scholars describe the black quiltmaking tradition in terms of active, distinct individuals, substantiating the creative abilities and skills of African-American women. African-American quiltmaking tradition is widened beyond the strip quilts of Gee’s Bend or the generic patterns of traditional quilts to a new interpretation of the narrative quilt. Contemporary scholars look to this genre of quilts and consider art quilters as having “continued and expanded the black tradition of pictorial story quilts…their quilts present portraits and stories of African and African-American men and women, commenting on their history and the dignity of their daily lives.”

Quilt historian Kyra Hicks’s Black Threads chronicles the history of the African-American quilting tradition and provides an extensive catalogue of quilting scholarship and research from the 1800s. Building on this research, she suggests new directions in

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African-American quilt scholarship. Hinting at the folkloristic methodology mentioned above, she claims that

Many of the references to Black quilters or their quilts refer primarily to the artistic elements of the quilts—fabric selected, color choices, obvious themes. There should be in-depth evaluation of the Black quilter’s *body of work*, not simply individual quilts. We should learn about the influences on the quilter’s work, the motivations for each quilt, and the value ascribed both intrinsically and monetarily for the quilts.\(^{59}\)

Changes in social conditions and evolving value systems cause shifting frames of reference for African-American quiltmaking interpretation. Issues of race, class, and gender converge within the work of African-American women quilters, and narrative art quilts are voices on cloth that re-interpret history and negotiate identities. Approaching quilt scholarship from an “insider” perspective, Mazloomi advocates for quilters, urging, “Do not participate in the myth others want to create for us.” Taking a traditional medium and reinventing it, as art quilters do with the story quilt, and implementing a methodology that stresses the disciplinary need to listen to the maker’s meaning, “new representations can end up contributing to cultural continuity if they generate discourse that keeps old forms useful by updating outmoded meanings.”\(^{60}\) Quilts are a window into the lives of African-American women, creative expressions layered with meaning. Mazloomi claims that the quilt medium is infused with history and meaning:

> No artistic form is more closely associated with African-American culture than quilt making, representing skill, aesthetic beauty, and utilitarian need...for African-Americans the quilt became a covert expression of resistance within the context of storytelling...denied freedom, they gave voice to the voiceless, transcending suffering, reclaimed history, and transformed the future of their descendents.\(^{61}\)

Mazloomi encourages African-American quilting audiences to read quilt narratives from the perspective of the makers themselves. Her motivations for the

\(^{59}\) Hicks, *Black Threads*, 227.

\(^{60}\) Klassen, “Representations in African American Quiltmaking,” 327.

\(^{61}\) Mazloomi, *Quilting African American Women’s History*, 4-5.
preservation, re-interpretation, and appreciation of African-American art quilting are evident in her essay “Lost, Appropriated and Recovered: The Thread of African-American Quilt History:”

If scholars agree on one fact about the history of African-American quilts and the artists who make them, it is this: the definitive “her-story” has yet to be told…Until the recent past, rarely have African-American quilters had opportunities to chronicle our own histories, for this requires opportunities rarer still – the chance to speak from positions of power and agency.62

Mazloomi’s perspective guides this study, stressing the need to challenge the universalized, biased historical narratives of African-American quilts and their creators to demonstrate that these objects of material culture are as diverse as the people who make them. African-American experience is defined by the connection to home, finding roots, honoring ancestors. “Honoring the past is extremely important to a people whose legacy of achievements is still not acknowledged by mainstream society. African-American quilters hold on to memories by the use of scraps of cloth in their quilts.”63

The research on recent quilts scholars/quilters such as Carolyn Mazloomi is inspired by the recognition of the “power that we artists have to change history and change the present.” To quilt is to create history. She states, “I do what I can to promote African-American quilt scholarship…I have put myself on the front line of the quilt history mainstream just to tell a different truth.”64

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64 Mazloomi, *Quilting African American Women’s History* p. 7-8.
CHAPTER 3

The Wayshowers: Profiles of Ten Story Quilters

TORREAH “COOKIE” WASHINGTON, The Preacher

“Art can be a kind of ministry.”

Mermaids, Madonnas, matriarchs, female pilots and astronauts, timeless icons suspended in celestial space, rising, reaching, dancing, expressing freedom, a prayer, the mystical—art quilter Torreah “Cookie” Washington’s subjects are women with wings, literally and figuratively. Washington began her quilting career as a seamstress, learning the technical fundamentals of textile craft and sewing based on patterns. Her skills were soon in high demand to make fashion wear and wedding gowns. She broke free from the box of utility in the mid-1990s when she came across Roland Freeman’s A Communion with the Spirits: African-American Quilters, Preservers and Their Stories, and realized that she could channel her artistic energy into fabric. “It’s an amazing book full of black art quilters! And I thought, “Oh my God!—because most quilts you think are square, or Sunbonnet Sue, or Baltimore Album, and I just thought, ‘These are boring, don’t want to
do this.” Washington continues with her critique of traditional quilts, “you’re getting this beautiful fabric, cutting it up into little strips and the reconfiguring it into something else. Her creative spirit, from the beginning of her art quilting career, is characterized by voice, sending messages. When Freeman’s work showed her that the world of quilting was not confined to a traditional style, she wanted her creations to speak, to transmit her individualized messages. “I have something to say…and I can do it with fabric. Realizing her medium, Washington admits,

I wish I could say things so eloquently as Maya Angelou…It’s just my spiritual lot. I’m not like a beautiful singer, like Mahalia Jackson. I mean you knew that she loved God every time she opened her mouth….And I don’t have that….But I think that art can be a kind of ministry….Fabric is what I know. It’s what I do.

Washington approaches quilting as an art. Her subjects are born from a cross-cultural analysis of folkloric icons. She is inspired by scholars such as Henry Drewal, an Africanist whose recent work focuses on water spirits, or the Mami Wata. Like Washington, Drewal investigates cultural roots of figures of the feminine divine including the Sisterhood of the Boa Morte of Brazil, the worship rituals of the Virgin Mary, and the multi-cultural manifestations of Oshun, an African river goddess.

Washington traces European and African influences of popular stories, challenging dominant versions of tales, such as “The Little Mermaid.” Looking for quilt ideas, Washington discovered Virginia Hamilton’s Her Stories: African-American Folktales, Fables, and True Tales at a local library, looking for quilt ideas:

I didn’t know there were black mermaids! I was thinking, you know, Hans Christian Anderson…Disney, Ariel….In Africa there are wonderful stories. They are the ocean goddesses who have even given birth to the first people that ever came up on the Earth….These are stories that really need to be told.

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65 Cookie Washington Interview by Susan Hester, July 1, 2009, Rhodes Art Center, Charleston, SC.
For Washington these goddesses, queens, spirits, and saints symbolize strength, independence, and leadership. “We don’t know about all the Goddesses that were worshipped.” Washington has been working on a “Black Madonna” series exploring the identity of this timeless icon. “I came to realize…so much of religions that predate Christ were primarily feminine based, so there are lots of goddesses from all over the world,” she says. Washington considers herself a very spiritual person and has developed a keen interest in religious history. Her “Black Madonna” series was inspired by her research of the early iconography of the Holy Family, especially the Virgin Mary. Her quilts in this series reinterpret the identity of Mary and introduce varying cultural perspectives of the feminine divine.

Washington draws upon folklore and religious history to tell the “un-told” versions of well-known stories such as “The Little Mermaid” and the Virgin Mary, shedding light on multi-cultural perspectives of common tales. Discussing the African origins of these stories, Washington explains,

Some of the very first folktales of mermaids in America came to this area with the first black slaves that came here with the first governor of South Carolina. They were slaves in Barbados. They had come to Barbados from the west coast of Africa. These were people who worshipped the water goddesses Mami Wata, the Oshuns and the Orisas….They brought those tales with them and so many people said, “Well, I’ve never seen any documentation of that…slaves were not allowed to learn to read and write! And they were encouraged, sometimes to the point of being beaten, to give up their belief in whatever was their original religion.

Washington, like many of her art quilter colleagues, seeks to expand history’s scope in terms of cultural perspective. Washington describes,

I started expanding my ideas about Christianity. I wanted to know more about historical Jesus and not so much the Baptist Jesus of the Bible, so I was reading on my computer one night and something talked about the early iconography of the Holy Family and took me to pictures of black Jesus and Mary….Most of the early iconography of Jesus and Mary were black.
Making the Black Madonna quilts is a journey of the spirit for Washington. “I loved the process of making it. I loved the spiritual journey that it took me on to do it. I loved the fabrics that I picked….It was very, very spiritual for me.” Her journey with the Black Madonna continues, but this series is not an exhibit commission. Washington received this spiritual commission from God in a dream, she says, to create a series of eight quilts. Describing her second Black Madonna quilt (see Appendix A), Washington says:

This Black Madonna and the Holy Child are patterned after our Lady of Czestochowa, the most beloved icon of His Holiness the late Pope John Paul II. The angels are all Afro-centric. When I was a young girl, my mother loved a song sung in Spanish by Roberta Flack about the absence of Black angels in art. I had never seen a Black angel in art so I placed five in this quilt. I believe spreading the message about the Black Madonna is of vital importance to African-Americans. People of all faiths and races need to hear about the love, and reverence many people have for the Black Madonna. The Black Madonna is revered throughout the Old World, in countries like Spain, Poland, France and Italy….Her shrines attract thousands of worshippers each year. Historian Stephen Benko notes that over 1,000 of the world’s better known Madonnas are Black. Knowing we are descendents of a rich African history is empowering. I hope seeing my Black Madonna II will inspire Black women to investigate history, ancient and recent, to awaken their pride and foster self-esteem.66

Applying her seamstress skills to artistic expression in cloth and seeing herself as a “griot,” Washington is inspired to challenge cultural stereotypes and tell new versions of old tales and stories of the divine feminine in order to depict African-American women as strong, beautiful, and capable people for younger generations to look up to as role models. Washington explains,

Those stories, a lot of them have been kind of lost, kind of watered down, but I know they were here….I want young black women and girls to see themselves as something other than slaves or entertainers. If you think about only what you learned through high school about black women in America, if you went to a really good school back East you know about Phyllis Wheatley…. Harriett Tubman, you know, Underground railroad, but slave, and then Women’s Suffrage, but still slave…and, depending on your age, you may have heard about Rosa Parks…that’s pretty much it for black women in American history…we don’t know that in Africa black women were queens…and I want little girls to know that because I think they will come away with a sense of pride…I don’t think you know where you can go unless you know where you’ve been.

66 Carolyn Mazloomi, Quilting African American Women’s History, 152.
Working with the hands and with fabric is healing to quilters, whether they are traditional quilters or art quilters. Its tactility, intimacy, and connection to a folk tradition draws viewers in and makes it an effective tool for evoking emotion and thought. Fabric guides Washington’s work. She “communicates” with her fabric, deciding on which fabric to use. Washington sleeps with her fabric, “drawing out the energy from it…putting yourself more into it,” and transferring her energy to the work. “We [art quilters] all do sleep with it so that our spirit goes with it, so that our spirit is in it, you know.”

I go in the studio, and I’ll think, ‘Mary should have a green or a blue dress,’ and so I’ll pull all the blue fabric that I have…I work with the fabrics. Should her robe be cotton? Should her robe be silk? I’m not sure, so I’ll just bring all the blue fabric and if I can’t get a feel for it that day, you know, I will usually have it narrowed down…if I can’t decide, I’ll sleep with my fabric…it will just really speak to me.

Washington held a quilt “blessing” party before sending her quilt to the Obama exhibition. “I just held it in my arms and just prayed for him and his safety and I let everybody touch it—and you’re not supposed to touch quilts.” Washington describes the healing function of quiltmaking in making one of her quilts:

My stepfather died and he and I loved jazz…it was very difficult watching him die. He had a brain tumor. It was long and it was painful and I wanted to not stay in that place in my head…my heart was breaking….It was therapy and it was a tribute….I started think about who did he like…jotting down some names….We really liked jazz vocals. And so I kind of healed myself with the jazz guitar…and so I thought, I’ll make a jazz quilt. So I made a jazz quilt for my dad and I will dedicate this to him and not be sad anymore because it will be a joyous thing.

Art quilting is her language; it is her prayer. Many of her quilts, in fact, incorporate text. For example, in one of her quilts in the Black Madonna series Washington designed an image symbolizing the sacred heart Jesus, and “the Madonna looks at us through the eyes of her sacred loving heart.” Defining art quilting as a “new application that speaks beyond the specificity of time and place” and considering herself a “wayshower,” Washington urges her viewers to derive universal messages from her
work by infusing it with the undercurrents of hope and pride. “It’s not about Africa. It’s not just about the Lowcountry. It’s not just about slave times. I want it to be for all times….I’m just a little gal, little needle with fabric….I want my fiber art to strive toward a universal means of communication.”

Washington’s work prompts the redefinition of identity. In her series quilt, Black Madonna #3, she points out that, “all the angels are black, and they are all a different complexion…black people are what we call the ‘rainbow race.’ We all have different colors of blackness.”

What I like about living in South Carolina in the Lowcountry and being an art quilter is that I’m taking an art form that is over four hundred years old in this area. You know, black women have been doing this in this area for years and totally re-imagining the way that it’s done…It’s no longer the utilitarian. It is about the choice of art. You know, I’m not making quilts because I have to because I’m cold, but I’m doing what women from two continents have done with our hands, the work of our hands and re-imagining it in a totally new way.

Though Washington identifies with the African-American quiltmaking tradition, her generation, the contribution that the art quilting community makes to quiltmaking history, is making the choice of art with the quilt medium. “I think of myself more as a studio artist than a quilter because none of my quilts are bed quilts,” she says.

Washington compares her work to the tradition quilting of her ancestors who were burdened by utility:

The handiwork is amazing and the ability to do this against incredible odds…African-American quilters had to do fine sewing for the master’s family and then you had to come home at night and try to put together something that would keep your family warm, too.
Cookie’s ideas for future quilts include a series of quilts on Califía, and black Madonnas as well as black women in Aviation.

I found out about seven years ago, about the same time that I got really serious about doing art quilts, that on the entire planet Earth, there only about fourteen black women pilots, commercial pilots. I just thought, “Wow, that’s amazing…little black girls don’t want to be pilots because no one taught us how to fly, and I want us to know that we can fly, that we can be pilots and that we can be astronauts. We can be whatever we want to be.

Being a “Wayshower,” Washington expresses, “I want little black girls to say, if Bessie Coleman could go to France and get her aviator’s license and learn to be a barnstorming pilot and Doctor May Jameson, the first black woman Astronaut to orbit the Earth and go to the space station, what can I do?….So many of us need Wayshowers.” Washington is a Wayshower in wanting to empower girls and women to soar beyond stereotype and to follow their passions. She wants to tell the stories of strong black women throughout history, such as millionaire Madame C. J. Walker, singer Nancy Wilson, Shakazulu’s mother, and African queens and goddesses.

Washington was asked to participate in the national exhibit, 44 Quilts for 44th President at the Historical Society in Washington, DC. “For me, it completed the circle.” “Full of the hope that the present has brought us,” and “Ring with the harmony of liberties,” two phrases from the black national anthem.

Washington is a spiritual Wayshower, preaching through quilts. She challenges her audience to think and to feel. She says, “I want to create work that can uplift, that teaches and heals rather than divides. I want my art to challenge you to learn more about the subject and your own feelings about it.” Challenging us to re-examine history,

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67 Califia, a myth about a black Amazon goddess who lived in California discovered by Spanish explorers. “It’s a great story and her history has almost been literally white-washed out of California’s history, so I want to do a story,” Washington says.
religion, and our own identities, Washington assumes the role of Visionary. “Though I’m working in a centuries old medium, I’m shifting the historical tradition to accommodate a new application.” She says, “I desire to keep this tradition alive and validate our culture by weaving stories about the African or African-American experience into my quilts.”

Using quilts as voice, Washington “would like to be remembered as somebody who…made a political statement or historical statement with my work.”

Catherine Lamkin, The Poet

“Among the things connecting us as African-American art quilters: telling the stories of our lives and paying tribute to those that have come before us.”

Fourth generation quilter Catherine Lamkin pays homage to the matriarchal legacy of quilters from which she stems. Her great-grandmother, Delia Deas Small, and grandmother Mattie Chiasm Small, were traditional quilters, while Lamkin’s mother, Winifred Sanders, though beginning her craft for utilitarian purposes working in a garment factory, veered the family quilting tradition in a new direction with art quilts.

Lamkin grew up in New York City, though her mother’s and husband’s roots lie in the South Carolina Lowcountry. “The South, it’s where my roots are.” Lamkin distinguishes her quilting from the traditional quilting of previous generations. She says,


70 Catherine Lamkin Interview by Susan Hester, November 16, 2009, St. Andrews Public Library, Charleston, SC.
When my great-grandmother was quilting and when my grandmother was quilting they were quilters from the South. They were older quilters. My grandmother died in 1996—my mother’s mother—so she was making quilts in the 1980, 1970s, and we refer to those quilts as utility quilts...to keep you warm....People weren’t art quilting.

Inspired by her mother’s art quilts, Lamkin’s art quilting took off when she moved to the Charleston area. Lamkin learned to sew from her mother, and she continued on the “art-quilt” path that her mother paved for her. Lamkin considers traditional quilting a stepping stone towards the art quilt medium.

The person that really inspired me is my mother, Winifred Sanders, and my mother started out as a traditional quilter....She and I have this running joke that you start out as a traditional quilter and then you kick traditional quilting to the curb and start doing art quilts.

Catherine incorporates words and language into her quilts and has invented her own style of collage aesthetic, combining photo transfers of archival images of people, quotes, and postage stamps. She often references events in African-American history that honor Civil Rights leaders, such as Rosa Parks (see Fig. 4), and jazz musicians such as Nina Simone (see Fig. 6).

Many of Lamkin’s quilts pay tribute to influential people, in African-American history, recognizing their contributions, personalities, philosophies, and historical context. The quilts are essentially a way of re-telling history through biography. Lamkin describes the story behind her Rosa Parks quilt:

When Rosa Parks passed away I wanted to make an art quilt to pay tribute to her life and her contribution to the Civil Rights Movement. She is known as the “Mother of the Civil Rights Movement”....Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me ’Roun is an old Negro spiritual which served as a rallying song during the Civil Rights Movement. In this piece I used footprints to symbolize the many steps taken during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Cleveland Avenue is the name of the bus route Rosa Parks was pulled off for refusing to give up her seat to a White man. The line ‘deep in
my heart I do believe’ is taken from the song ‘We Shall Overcome.’ Certainly the boycotters believed deep in their hearts they would overcome segregation. They walked for over a year to accomplish their goal. I used African fabric titled “Queen Mother and Child” to symbolize the participation of children and their parents in the bus boycott.\footnote{Mazloomi, Quilting African American Women’s History, 86.}

For Lamkin, style is not arbitrary; it is based on her identity as a black woman, her “points of reference.” Art quilts are, for Lamkin and many of her art-quilting colleagues, a way to express and reinforce identity and to gain artistic agency. “I think that people should be open to learning new styles, new techniques, trying different things until you find your voice. It takes a while to find your voice and then once you find it it will click,” she explains. The material she pieces together, stitching cowrie shells\footnote{Used as currency in parts of Africa, cowrie shells symbolize African heritage.} onto African cloth surrounding a photo of Rosa Parks, reflect her identity as an African-American woman. When she creates a piece she asks herself: “What is it about his/her life that I want to include in this piece?” “How do I incorporate his life and what do I include in it?”

Lamkin often uses fabric and/or embellishments that represent Africa, archival photographs, sheet music, cloth, cowrie shells, beads, sequins. Her very first quilt depicts a scene from the folktale \textit{Suki and the Mermaid} and was made to tell her daughter a story that reflects her identity, empowering her through identity-building. “I wanted her to have images that reflected her,” she says. Lamkin’s signature embellishment is a postage stamp that marks important moments and leaders in African-American history. Each quilt contains one Black History Month stamp, a small portrait of leaders from the Civil Rights Movement and the Voting Rights Act, such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., or Madame C. J. Walker. In her Rosa Parks quilt (see Appendix A), she places a postage stamp of Thurmond Marshall.
As a quilt “Poet,” Lamkin uses metaphor, symbols, and text to convey messages. “I am influenced by words and language,” she says. Lamkin does not use a sketchbook, as most other art quilters do. Her creative process parallels studio art: “Just like a painter would decide ‘what kinds of paints am I going to use’ I make a decision about colors and types of fabric.” She lets words guide her design. She is a natural wordsmith who consistently uses text in her quilts. Metaphor, poetry, and literature find their way into her work. She also takes a photojournalistic approach with her quilts, using the photo transfer technique, illustrating her words with archival photographs. Her quilt, Change, was inspired by Ghandi, one of her father’s heroes. Lamkin often uses text in her work. This quilt’s message reads: “We must be the change that we want to see in the world.” Lamkin chose this quote because,

President Obama had certain phrases and sayings, and one of them was ‘Change,’ and the other one was ‘Hope.’ I wanted to focus in on something that he used in his campaign and I wanted to incorporate that into the quilt that I was making.”

Lamkin stresses the importance of history in her work, stating, “I think that a lot of my work has kind of like a message in it, so I would like to be remembered as someone who used history in her art.” History validates and empowers her messages. Lamkin is a historian chronicling leaders and events in African-American history. “We pick a story and we tell it,” she says. For Lamkin making quilts is more than an act of documentation; creating is an act of honoring.

Fig. 5. Ms. Negro History, (2008) Catherine Lamkin

73 Catherine Lamkin Interview by Karen Musgrave.
Ms. Negro History (see Fig. 5 above) pays homage to Carter G. Woodson, founder of Negro History Week, whom Lamkin considers “The Father of Black History.” In describing this piece, Lamkin chooses a representative quote from Woodson that parallels her passion for history: "If a race has no history, if it has no worthwhile tradition, it becomes a negligible factor in the thought of the world, and it stands in danger of being exterminated.” The skirt of the gown is made from African-American stamps featuring: Mahalia Jackson, Patricia Roberts Harris, James Baldwin, Roy Wilkins, Paul Robeson, Ella Fitzgerald, Marion Anderson, Malcolm X, and Hattie McDaniel.

Lamkin honors the late Nina Simone in her quilt Cotton Eyed Joe (see Fig. 6) which was part of Carolyn Mazloomi’s Textural Rhythms: Constructing the Jazz Tradition exhibit. Other quilts honoring jazz musicians include Blue Syncopators which recognizes Benjamin Smith.

Lamkin creates mainly commissioned pieces. “All of my pieces are call for entry,” she explains. Being exhibited in museums disseminates her messages to a wide audience, reinforcing her role as a public historian. Lamkin’s art functions at an autobiographical level, too. Inspired by events in her own life, she is currently in the process of building a body of work that is not a call-for-entry, or commissioned.

When asked why she quilts, Lamkin responds quickly and passionately: “They make me feel wonderful, proud.”

Fig. 6. Cotton Eyed Joe,
Catherine Lamkin
WINIFRED SANDERS, The Stylist

“I like the freedom of being able to do what I want to do.”

Art Quilter Winifred Sanders, mother of Catherine Lamkin, grew into the craft through tradition and utility. “I’ve sewn for just about all of my life,” she says. A city girl with country roots, Sanders was born and raised in New York City, but her family hails from James Island, South Carolina. Sanders’s fabric art foundation is the utility quilt tradition of previous generations. Growing up, Sanders made frequent visits during the summer to the Charleston area. Her earliest memories of quilts were her grandmother’s scrap quilts. She was taught to sew at a young age by her grandmother and her aunt. Sanders remembers, “My grandmother, they always made quilts, but the quilts that they made, we called ‘utility quilts.’ They’re patchwork and they’re made mostly for the bed.” Her father worked in the garment sector of New York City and he used to bring home scraps that Sanders would use to make quilts. “We just used whatever we had,” she explains.

As a teenager in the mid-1940s Sanders attended Central Needle Trade school, now called Fashion High School in New York City. There she took sewing courses and gained a broad skill set in textiles, but she concentrated her energy on dressmaking. “When I graduated we didn’t have the opportunities at that time. We were all lumped together and there were not opportunities to go into like, merchandising or designing, and things like that.” So in 1950 Sanders worked in a corset factory. After marrying, when the demands of raising of family fell upon her, Sanders left her job at the factory. Eventually

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74 Winifred Sanders Interview by Susan Hester, December 3, 2009, St. Andrews Public Library, Charleston, SC.
she picked up her sewing skills again, working from home as a seamstress. She made all of her daughter Catherine’s clothing as a young girl.

Quilt guilds provided a doorway through which Sanders passed beyond the boundaries of convention and utility. Though familiar with the quilting of her grandmother and aunt, she took her first official quilting lesson in 1980 from the “Elder Craftsman” organization when she taught sewing at the Hudson Guild.

Sanders also joined the Women of Color Quilters Network, and it was at this point that she broke free from the constraints of utility and started to create art quilts. Art quilting gave her artistic freedom. “I like the freedom of being able to do what I want to do. In traditional quilting everything has to match and be very exact,” Sanders says. She keeps one foot in the traditional quilting world and is currently a member of the Empire Quilting Guild in New York City. “The quilting in Empire is more traditional quilting,” Sanders says. Yet, she describes herself as an “art quilter” and her quilts as “pictorial” quilts. Pictorial quilts, she says, “can be a scene, a portrait, or it can be a story—they have story quilts.”

Fueled by her trained hand and her artistic energy, creating art quilts became a way to express emotion, whether it be joy or sorrow. Her quilt, In Her Loving Arms, was created after her husband’s death, helping her heal. Art quilts have a therapeutic function for Sanders. Sanders’s daughter Catherine Lamkin mentioned above, wrote an essay honoring her mother, entitled “Growing Up on the Hem of My Mother’s Skirt: The Making of an Art Quilter/Fiber Artist Winifred Sanders.” “In 1998,” Lamkin writes, “after learning of her niece’s death, filled with sadness, my mother turned to her art and created a piece for me representing the three most important women in her life. This is a
delightful piece full of hope and love.” Using hankerciefs, old aprons, and other garments connects the quilter to loved ones and keeps them close to people who have passed away. In her “stash,” as quilters refer to their collection of fabric, Sanders has guarded cloth from her grandmother’s and aunt’s clothing, which she uses only in her most personal quilts. Fabric is charged with meaning. Her first quilt has sentimental value for Sanders.

Normally I put batting inside the quilt, but this quilt, it has an old blanket inside that belonged to my mother-in-law and I put that in my quilt and then I put that top on there and then I put a backing on there, and everybody who has slept in my house has lain under this quilt, so it has a sentimental value.

Sanders uses embellishments like buttons, beads, cowrie shells, and feathers.

She often focuses on African-American women and African culture for her subjects. Her playful pictorial quilts celebrate women and fashion, such as Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend and Hair, Hair, Hair, or Maybe Knot (see Fig. 7). She describes her idea behind this piece:

It’s all about hair these days. I recently got a wave nouveau after wearing my hair natural for over 25 years. It is said that your hair is your crowning glory. I believe that sometimes you don’t need the glory and that your crown can be beautiful as well. Hair, Hair, Hair, of Maybe Knot has three women with hair and one without.75

Sanders work has evolved as new fabrics presented themselves. Sanders initially used only Kente cloth when she first started making Africa-themed quilts, “not realizing,” she says “that they [Africans] had so many different types of fabric….I wasn’t exposed to that.” New worlds of fabric opened up for Sanders when she discovered the African market in New York City where she has found a diverse array of African fabric. As with many African-American art quilters, Sanders implements the African aesthetic in her work. “Art quilts are very colorful,” she points out. “We use a lot of color in our quilting,

75 Mazloomi, Quilting African American Women’s History, 132.
African-American quilting. And I think that’s why a lot of other ethnic groups have joined us because they are so amazed at our colorful quilts.”

Having sewn for over forty years, Sanders looks to quilting fellowship for enjoyment. She teaches workshops to help others express themselves through cloth. Sanders finds inspiration for her art quilts through the social aspect of quilt guilds. Guilds sponsor quilt “challenges,” for example, which expand Sanders’s creative possibilities.

Her daughter, Catherine Lamkin, writes in her above-mentioned essay

She joined the Women of Color Quilters Network and began using her sewing machine as a paintbrush creating wonderful art quilts. Was this my mother the professional seamstress, daughter and granddaughter of traditional quilters cutting loose, breaking from tradition and her “sewing roots?”

For Sanders, sewing was a profession first and then an art.

Sewing was my profession so I think that I was a pretty good dressmaker, but with the quilt it was just something that I did on my own and I was more or less following what my grandmother and aunt did.

Sanders took the sewing skills that she learned from her family and worked with thread and needle for over seventy years. She has an intimate connection to her fabric and uses it to express her personality.

When asked if she had a quilt “signature” she said that the eyes of her subjects are unique to her style. Looking into these eyes, Sanders shows us the way to her creative spirit. Lamkin writes fondly about her mother:

I cannot remember a moment in my life when my mother was not making something. The hum of her Singer sewing machine was my lullaby, gently rocking me to sleep stitch by stitch as she sewed deep into the night. Stitching and mending, hemming, and sewing, but most importantly always creating.
PEGGIE HARTWELL, The Folklorist

“I think I tell these stories because it’s about preservation, preserving not only personal history, but that part of history that should not be forgotten.”

Peggie Hartwell’s quilting roots lie in rural South Carolina. Raised in Springfield, a small town about one hundred and fifty miles inland from Charleston, Hartwell’s earliest memories of quilts are set within the context of family and domestic life. Her first exposure to quilts was visual, with the utility quilt:

I started quilting before I started quilting. I’ll say that because I came from a whole family of quilters….All the girls had to learn how to quilt….Since it was a farm without hot water, heat, or electricity, the only way that you could keep warm was to make a quilt….They used clothing that had been worn out….My introduction to quilts came visually first because that’s what I saw and that’s what I covered beneath.  

Hartwell learned basic sewing skills from her mother and from other women in her family and community, an informal “quilting bee” of sorts, assisting in making clothing and utility quilts. Utility, or “scrap” quilts are Hartwell’s quilting roots and they represent a link to home. Describing her childhood memories of these quilts, she nostalgically adds,

Going to bed was like going to bed with the whole family because since they used all of these fabrics from aprons and shirts and sweaters, and just everything all mixed together then you had such a feeling of comfort, going to bed with a quilt made out of your family history.

Each piece of these family-made utility quilts was infused with memory and meaning. Not only were they used for warmth and practical purposes, the quilts for Hartwell were full of memories and stories. Hartwell’s quilts are primarily narrative/pictorial quilts inspired by her grandfather’s mastery of storytelling. Hartwell’s quilts mirror the colorful imagery, landscapes, and characters described in his stories that Hartwell remembers listening to as a young child. She credits her grandfather for inspiring her to create pictorial/narrative quilts. For Hartwell, quilts are her storytelling

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76 Peggie Hartwell Interview by Susan Hester, December 11, 2009, Artist’s residence, Summerville, SC.
medium. They are a means for remembering, honoring and preserving family folklore.

Hartwell recalls her grandfather’s storytelling sessions:

After the fieldwork he was sitting on the porch because it was so hot inside the house, or during the winter months when the women were quilting….He would say, “I have a story.” And then he would start telling us something about when he was growing up, or folklore, or something he had heard his father tell him….He would mix all these things together and create these stories….You actually saw the wild horses that he was talking about running across the fields….That was my introduction to storytelling.

Hartwell created the quilt, *The Storyteller* (see Fig. 8) to honor her grandfather’s storytelling legacy. While she absorbed her grandfather’s stories and the colors, textures, and shapes of traditional quilts, the artist in her lay in wait. As a young child playing in her yard, Hartwell drew in the sandy Lowcountry ground with a twig. This moment, she claims, marked her discovery of herself as Artist, though she would not bring her skills as a draftsman and quilter together until many years later.

Hartwell lived in New York and launched a career in dancing. Combining her sewing skills with a passion for family history and an artistic eye, Hartwell began creating pictorial/narrative quilts. When asked how she transitioned from the utility to the narrative quilt genre, Hartwell describes her various artistic influences: “Knowing to draw helped a great deal….I took some courses in art….I was also introduced to dancing and…to voice because my father was an acapella singer.” When her mother decided to move to New York City, Hartwell entered a melting pot of cultures in the Brooklyn neighborhood called “Williamsburg.” In New York, Hartwell discovered dance, and at age eighteen, she joined a multi-cultural dance company.
From drawing to dance to family folklore—what she calls her “Santa bag of all this stuff coming with me”—Hartwell’s quilts reflect these varied streams of influence. After a dance career and later working with an insurance company, Hartwell revisited quilting and in her twenties made her first doll quilt. She then made a strip-pieced quilt for her mother. Hartwell soon went beyond traditional patterns because, she explains, “I had all of this I wanted to say.” The first narrative piece that Hartwell created was called *The Annunciation*.

Hartwell is passionate about preserving local customs and stories through her quilts. For example, Hartwell’s *Storm in the Hall* recalls a family tradition:

> Whenever there was a storm my grandmother…she would take us all in the hallway and we would sit there and sing these spiritual songs. And that was about believing that, no matter what happened, that as a family, as a unit, that your faith would get you through.

*The Flower Pit* is a quilt inspired by a local practice of seasonal horticulture. Hartwell explained that deep holes were dug into the ground and plants were placed into this hole and covered with brush in order to preserve the plants through the colder temperatures of fall and winter. Hartwell values this knowledge because, as she says, “it was a part of the history of South Carolina.” In an attempt to preserve the vernacular traditions of her family, she has taped oral histories of members of the Springfield community. Hartwell feels some urgency to record local traditions, such as the flower pit, because she realizes that generations who practiced this tradition are passing away.

> I need to do other research and find out about other people who did that [the flower pit]. It was a tradition here in South Carolina, but I think I need to do it fast because those people are dying out and some of them have died out who remember that. That’s a quest that I need to do.

Hartwell is determined to tell untold stories, illustrate local folklore, and fill gaps left in mainstream consciousness. She adds:

> I think telling my personal stories is related to South Carolina history and what we did here as farmers….I’m still a farm person, a folk person. That was such a rich part of history. I think it
should be known….I think I tell these stories because it’s about preservation, preserving not only personal history, but that part of history that should not be forgotten.

Honoring matriarchal legacies, from family members to the Biblical icons, women are the subjects of several of Hartwell’s quilts. She and other quilters in this study draw upon the feminine divine for inspiration. In a Women of Color Quilters Network exhibition and book entitled, Threads of Faith, Hartwell explores the character of Eve in a quilt entitled, Eve’s Garden (See Appendix A). This piece is accompanied with words that express Hartwell’s faith:

Eve, ancestral matriarch…decisions and consequences are held in her arms. “We may eat the fruit of any tree in the garden, except the tree in the middle of it.”

In homage to the legacy of African-American story quilts, Hartwell created a piece modeled on the Harriett Powers Bible quilt Ode to Harriet Powers that continues the tradition through her own voice with a portrait of Powers as the centerpiece. Hartwell expresses her gratitude to Powers, crediting her as a pioneer for art quilters:

Thank you, “ancestral grandmother,” for the legacy you left for us: two glorious Bible quilts, one in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the other in the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Your artistry inspires us. Your vision allows us to see what your eyes could not behold. Your quilts not only connect quilter to quilter, but also culture to culture. Your messages of faith, hope, and redemption embrace the spirit of humanity, such precious gifts to bestow on your “ancestral” grandchildren and fellow artists. We are indeed humble.

I show Harriet Powers (1837-1911) at the center of the quilt surrounded by my interpretation of her imagery. I created Ode to Harriet Powers to honor this wonderful quilt artist. During and after my research I felt so connected to her that she became a kindred spirit for me. I could think of no better way to honor this master artist than to create a quilt commemorating her and her work. I made the quilt with the intention of having it on display in as many exhibitions as possible so that Powers’ legacy would be revealed to many people. I made the quilt with the knowledge that it might be the closest I would ever get to a place a tombstone on her grave, the search for which sparked my initial research.77

Expressing love and respect for someone closer to home, Hartwell created The Home Going (see Fig. 9) after the death of her mother. As with all of her quilts, this piece

77 Mazloomi, Quilting African American Women’s History, 70.
is filled with symbolism. Large, vividly colored hearts making up her mother’s dress represent her children, and batik butterflies symbolize her mother’s metamorphosis.

Peggie explains her motivations for this making this quilt:

When I did my mother…because her death was so sudden, and it was inconceivable that I could never say, “Mama” to her, I just had to work big, not make her attached so her feet were not attached to the cloth…because when she died it was like the world had just cracked open an all the content just spilled out.

Another influential woman and quilt subject for Hartwell was Clara M. Hale, a caretaker for at-risk children, activist for children’s rights, and founder of the Hale House. With Mother Hale’s Children (see Fig. 36), Hartwell honors Ms. Hale’s unconditional love and support of children. Working extensively with children herself, Hartwell creates this quilt to commemorate and reinforce their mutual values. Like Hale, Hartwell considers children as “the true visionaries.”

Through her “Memory and Dreams” program implemented in local schools, Hartwell encourages young people to develop their own voices, as she does through her quilts. “I teach them to have their voice on quilts like I do,” she says. She does this by creating portraits of influential people in her life and career, drawing the viewer into their character and their life, as an author would through literature, and drawing out autobiographies from her students. She tells her students:

This is your voice on cloth. If you don’t have words, you can use the cloth, you can use design to tell what you want to say, and it might be something of interest only to yourself, or to your family, but at least it’s being told….They come with a culture that is rich with traditions. And so when I speak to them I ask them to remember something from their homeland….It’s about culture, the same culture that I’m trying to preserve about my history. So it’s all connected.

Quilting is a living art form for Hartwell. She demonstrates how fabric is a medium that brings people together and uses it to illustrate stories through symbols and
characters and to evoke feeling. Hartwell’s dancing career brings energy to her quilts, expressing movement and music (see Figs. 10 & 11).

“I can only show the music if I can show the way they stood when they were singing this note,” Hartwell explains. Considering fabric a living medium, Hartwell creates a multi-sensory experience through her quilts, inviting the viewer to look beyond the two-dimensional, visual aspect of the quilt medium.

Translating sensory memories into fabric collages, Hartwell’s *Wild Horses and Dragonflies*, (see Fig. 12) conjures a scene from childhood: “When I look at it I can still smell the fragrance of the earth being wet, and the leaves and see the sun going down. When people look at my work I would like for people to experience

Hartwell mainly works in large scale, and the appliqué method is her primary technique. Hartwell has embraced appliqué because,
It puts you in a place where you’re not because it’s so refined. It calls for your attention, but in this moment of being, of concentrating on those stitches. There is such peace….Your mind is free to wander….It gives you a chance to meditate.78

Equating quiltmaking with vocalizing, Hartwell’s quilts articulate her messages. She explains that quilts are the most effective medium to bring together her skills and passions:

I quilt because I have a lot to say and I want to say it in the closest form to something being alive as possible, so since I consider that to be a living art form, the fabric is alive….It’s like a child. You have to absolutely take care of it and listen to it….It has a voice.

Beyond the subject matter of her quilts, the creative process of quilt making has a certain function for Hartwell that other artists in this project share. Quiltmaking is a therapeutic act and working with fabric is meditative. Having explored other artistic forms, including drawing and dancing, Hartwell finds that fabric is her medium of choice.

My creative process can be very, very stressful but in a beautiful way….It is not always easy for me to do my own work. When I do, it is really sacred. I pick up the thread and the material like it is—holy. All of these images are in my head; I gather them and sketch them out….I wait for the fabric to speak to me….My creative process is to listen to these fabric and the colors and try to put them together so that they will compliment each other and say what I want to be said….Hand appliqué…is like a meditation. It is like prayer.79

In an article for Charleston Magazine Peggy Hartwell describes her quilting as her “voice on cloth.” She stresses, “When I work I’m hoping that it speaks to the people.” Hartwell’s artist statement supports this idea:

Narrative quiltmaking is my voice on cloth. My Work allows me to revisit my childhood in rural South Carolina and bring to life the traditions and customs of the many generations of farmers from whom I have descended. These memories have nurtured and molded my art form. Most importantly, my work has allowed me to honor my Grand father’s oral tradition of storytelling.

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79 Peggie Hartwell Interview by Karen Musgrave.
Hartwell’s quilt repertoire expands from her family folklore to American history. Along with Cookie Washington, Catherine Lamkin, and Marlene O’Bryant-Seabrook, she participated in the national exhibition, “Quilts for Obama: An Exhibit Celebration of our 44th President,” at the Historical Society of Washington, D.C. Her quilt, entitled Restoration, used her characteristic appliqué method, pen and ink, and various symbols to honor America’s first African-American president. In chronicling an event in political history, Hartwell draws a connection to her family history. Making this quilt was a “decision that took me back to my mother getting an education at a school that was started by an ex-slave, it took me back to my father being a sharecropper in South Carolina and it took me back to the three-room schoolhouse I started school in.”

Drawing on the perpetual well of family folklore, Hartwell continues to preserve her stories through quilts. The story of a chicken named “Beep” who survived being struck by lightning is the subject of one of Hartwell’s future quilts.

DR. MARLENE O’BRYANT-SEABROOK, The Teacher

“Long before I even considered fabric…I’m verifying the stories. And all of my quilts, I say either subtly or overtly, have lessons tucked in them. I refer to them sometimes as my bulletin boards.”

Marlene O’Bryant-Seabrook is in a line of three generations of educators, and this family lineage comes through in her quilts. Her art work has a didactic function; the quilts contain lessons, mainly pertaining to historical subjects. Never intending to be a

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80 Peggie Hartwell Interview by Karen Musgrave.
traditional quilter, O’Bryant-Seabrook views quilts as an effective medium to teach history. Like all quilters in this study, O’Bryant-Seabrook tells the under-represented stories of African-American history.

Unlike many of the artists in this study, she does not quilt with nostalgic memories of her grandmother’s or mother’s utility quilts. Mastering a *technique* was the motivation to start quilting for O’Bryant-Seabrook. She started quilting in the late 1980s as she neared retirement. When one door closed for her, another opened. Upon seeing a cross-stitched quilt hanging in the hallway of a high school in Charleston, O’Bryant-Seabrook was inspired to learn to cross-stitch.

She admired the workmanship and cultural scenes that the quilt depicted and eventually took a course to learn the basics of quilting from master quilter Marie Wilson. With these skills O’Bryant-Seabrook created a quilt modeled after the cross-stitched quilt she had seen, entitled *Record of a Rich Heritage.*

She says, “My intention was to make that one quilt and never quilt again in my entire life…I was only interested in the way that I saw these cross-stitched pieces displayed, and the quilt just seemed a wonderful medium.”

With *Record of a Rich Heritage,* (see Fig. 15), a cultural tapestry, she *reinterpret* a Charleston-themed story quilt. Adapting it to an African-American

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81 Marlene O’Bryant-Seabrook Interview by Susan Hester, September 29, 2009, Sheraton Hotel, Charleston, SC.
perspective of history, she replaced Charleston landmarks with scenes of African-American characters and their activities. Rather than portray places, she fills the story blocks of the quilt with people. “I’m not at all interested in the ambience of Charleston….When I did the Phillip Simmons quilt, it was an homage to him. It was not ‘wrought iron is a part of Charleston.’ That just fell into place."

**Fig. 15. Record of a Rich Heritage, Marlene O’Bryant-Seabrook**

With *Record of a Rich Heritage*, she says,

I no longer saw the market place. I only saw the vendors sitting there…Whereas it does capture the sense of place I come at it from a different angle.

In this first quilt O’Bryant-Seabrook did not merely copy quilt patterns; using the block pattern, she adapted her quilt to her professional and cultural background.

Creating educational quilts for O’Bryant-Seabrook is

Who I am. I’m a third generation educator. My grandmother was Principal of a school on James Island in 1926. My mother and father were both in education and it’s all that I know. And that’s how I approach my quilting….I approach quilting from a dual focus of an artist and an educator….I guess that’s the reason why I haven’t done traditional quilts because I’ve never been interested in just putting together shapes and colors….When I decide to do a quilt, for example, I used to go to the library. Now I go to the internet. But long before I even considered fabric, you know, I’m verifying stories.

O’Bryant-Seabrook was the first African-American professor to teach at The Citadel and one of only two women teaching there at the time. O’Bryant-Seabrook focuses on subjects of African-American history and culture. Quilts are her research tools. She says of her exhibition audiences, “when they leave they tell me that they’ve been to school.” O’Bryant-Seabrook remembers designing and cutting out objects for her mother’s elementary school bulletin boards to illustrate a theme such as “April Showers Bring May Flowers.” She considers this activity a precursor to learning appliqué.
From the time she picked up a needle, O’Bryant-Seabrook has primarily made quilts commissioned for exhibition work. O’Bryant-Seabrook’s first quilt, *Record of a Rich Heritage* (see Figure 15 above) caught the attention of heritage institutions and was ultimately exhibited for a local black arts festival. Intended as teaching tools and displayed art, O’Bryant-Seabrook’s quilts became more intricate and increasingly small—the size of paintings rather than beds. “I don’t know whether I would have quilted just for the sake of making quilts,” she says. “I have never made a quilt with ‘bed’ in mind.”

O’Bryant-Seabrook’s quilts typically revolve around individual people. She teaches history through biography. Based on extensive research, O’Bryant-Seabrook’s quilts honor legendary jazz singers like Billie Holiday, and little-known actors in history, such as Buffalo Soldier Cathay Williams (see Appendix A). She places her subjects in the context of historical moments. O’Bryant-Seabrook’s quilt, *Dizzy Bopped Out of South Carolina*, honoring jazz trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie (see Appendix A) In O’Bryant-Seabrook’s quilts scholarly research is mingled with personal connections. All details have significance.

I have a copy of the cover of his memoirs, and then there are also two other documents signed where he [the author] signed it in 1980, and I have both of those included. But they are included for very personal reasons. My dad and Dizzy were childhood friends…I have my dad’s hankerchief in Dizzy’s hand and I have a copy of the book where Dizzy had signed them for me dated when he was performing here because Al Frazier, who wrote his memoirs, in a childhood friend of mine, so that’s the reason that’s on there.

Holiday’s rendition of “Strange Fruit,” is depicted as an expression of the Anti-Lynching movement. With bold colors, intricate detail, and careful research, O’Bryant-Seabrook encourages her audience to remember, honor, and learn about her subject’s experience. O’Bryant-Seabrook is an avid researcher who strives for historic accuracy.
and scholarly authority to legitimize her pieces. Her quilts mark important moments in history while presenting her creative interpretation, and her ideology, based on lived experience. She describes the idea behind her Barack Obama quilt, *They Paved the Way*:

I was born in the thirties and so I remember very vividly the indignities of Jim Crow and the sacrifices that were made during the Civil Rights Movement and before that. The First thing that came to my mind was that he had not done this on his own, that he was standing firmly on the shoulders of many who had paved the way for him.  

O’Bryant-Seabrook commemorates not only widely known figures in history, but obscure heroes and heroines of African-American history. Her quilt, *Camouflaged: Female Buffalo Soldier* (see Appendix A), was inspired by a little known fact: An African-American female served as a Buffalo Soldier for twenty-three months without detection of her gender. Cathay Williams served as a cook and washwoman for the staff of a general until she learned from a cousin and a friend, who were Buffalo Soldiers, that they were being paid more. With their knowledge, she enlisted as William Cathay and served in the thirty-eighth U.S. Infantry from 1866 to 1868.

After Williams resigned from her post, her gender was discovered in the infirmary. O’Bryant-Seabrook stitched copies of her enlistment and discharge papers on the quilt.

O’Bryant-Seabrook’s quilts are symbols of faith, strength, and resilience. Women who exemplify these traits are often featured in her quilts. *Roots and Wings: A Millennium Challenge* is a statement of women’s resilience, recognizing women’s role as the nurturers who pass on the folkways of a culture. Unlike her quilt telling the story of historical figure Cathay Williams, the subject of Roots and Wings quilt is a mythological archetype sporting wings and with roots sprouting from her feet. O’Bryant-Seabrook not only draws upon historical fact, but creates folkloric fiction. “This quilt is my 21st century

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socio-political statement,” she claims. Offering role models grounded in history, O’Bryant-Seabrook calls for a revolution of women’s identity. “I challenge women to retain their deep, nurturing roots AND spread the massive, powerful wings that will take them to unimaginable heights.” O’Bryant-Seabrook effectively uses embellishments to reinforce her messages. Rocks sewn into this quilt represent the rocky road that women “who dare to spread their wings” have had to travel.

Quilts are ideal teaching tools because they evoke warmth and intimacy, drawing viewers into the subject. O’Bryant-Seabrook chooses fabric over chalk, pencil and pen to teach her lessons. Her artistic sensibility and intellectual drive come together in the quilt medium.

There’s something about fabric that’s magical….A painting will just sit quietly on the wall and allow you to admire it, and a quilt will yell across the room, ‘Please come over here and touch me!’

The striking effect of O’Bryant-Seabrook’s quilts is created through color. She explains,

I do workshops on creativity and I tell them that you have to get into a mindset where everything is a quilt, you know, whether it’s conversation, whether it’s walking out here and looking up at the sky seeing a beautiful sunrise, or sunset…thinking about colors.

O’Bryant-Seabrook re-tells history by making statements and expressing values. Like the other quilters in this study, O’Bryant-Seabrook imprints her voice while working with a traditional medium, and regards quilts as a means of communicating. She says, “I still feel a calming sense of being connected to the future while I am quilting.”
Faith and family are constant themes in O’Bryant-Seabrook’s work. While commemorating historical figures, she honors her own ancestors and paints intimate portraits of their lives (see *Who Do You Think We Are?* in Appendix A). She tells stories through archival photographs, letters, and other archival documents.

O’Bryant-Seabrook’s work has been exhibited around the world. Many of her quilts have been sold through galleries, though some of her quilts evade the price tag; these quilts depicting family history or other personal memories hold emotional and archival value, and belong to a collection which will ultimately stay within her family. Honoring quilter Harriet Powers, O’Bryant-Seabrook places herself within the story quilt tradition and is a contemporary member of her legacy.

Grounded in faith, family, and history O’Bryant-Seabrook, like Powers, is a storyteller. “I want to be remembered as a quilt artist who took the time to do the research that was necessary,” she says, “to share important stories through quilts.”

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83 Marlene O’Bryant-Seabrook Interview by Karen Musgrave.
LENORA BROWN, The Sketch Artist

“The traditional way is fine, but it leaves you in a box. When I do my way of quilting I can just take it and run with it.”

Lenora Brown was inspired to quilt when she saw Carolyn Mazloomi featured on a television program called, “Simply Quilts.” Her creative instincts were ignited by this introduction to a new type of quilting. Brown’s idea of the quilt form had been limited to the traditional, pattern-based genre. Raised in Charleston, South Carolina, her first point of reference to the world of African-American quilts was the block patterned scrap quilts made of rice sacks and articles of clothing. As a young child, Brown’s aunt taught her how to use a sewing machine. Seeing Mazloomi’s art quilts woke Brown up. “I didn’t know quilts like that existed,” she says.

Brown soon made the connection between the panel machine and the pen. Inspired to translate her natural artistic abilities as a sketch artist to the quilt medium, Brown started drawing designs for art quilts. “The idea came for me to bring these sketches to life in the quilt form,” she describes. Her artistic mind works in puzzles, sketching designs which she reconstructs through fabric. Her first quilt depicted a woman with dreadlocks.

I just treated it like a puzzle on a larger scale. The sketch, I blew it up. Then I just took the pieces apart and put it back together, and I did it in the cloth form.

Approaching quilts with a painter’s eye, Brown feels that art quilts allow her the freedom to express herself through textiles and embellishments.

It [quilting] just lets me express me….The traditional way is fine, but it leaves you in a box. When I do my way of quilting I can just take it and run with it.

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84 Lenora Brown Interview by Susan Hester, November 11, 2009, Dorchester Public Library, Charleston, SC.
Brown’s work combines traditional, pictorial, and abstract styles. Though entering the quilt world as an artist, Brown is humbled by quiltmaking tradition and considers conventional techniques the foundation for her work. She says making traditional quilt patterns is “kind of boring,” but, “I’m still intrigued” and determined to master the craft. For Brown, traditional quilting is a creative stepping stone for her which, once conquered, will advance her to the level of fine art. Brown’s body of work reveals her dual interest in creating abstract design and telling stories. Like the work of many contemporary art quilters, Brown’s pictorial quilts share elements of craft and fine art. “I try to have quilts that tell a story.” Yet, conceptualizing her quilts as abstract art, Brown is inspired by modern painters. “I have sketches of abstract, and I want to bring those sketches in cloth form.” “I’m determined to put this sketch in cloth form because it’s going to be a challenge. It’s not angles and lines, squares and triangles. It’s curves and it’s…going to be fused together.”

For Brown these quilts are vehicles of self discovery.

Brown’s main sources of inspiration are African history and family history. Brown researches the diverse strains of cultural ancestry in her family, including Native American roots. Shifting from paper to fabric, from sketches to quilts, she embeds herself in a tradition that evokes themes of family and heritage. “I was told I have Indian on my mom’s side, so that’s going to be another avenue I haven’t explored yet in my art,” says Brown.

Compiling biographical information is a personal journey for Lenora. She has the passion to tell the story of her family through art quilts. “Hearing stories from my past, like my
mom’s stories…I would love to incorporate that in my quilts,” she emphasizes. Brown credits a fellow quilter for inspiration to quilt biographical pieces. recalls a moment when her desire to quilt biographical pieces. “She was telling how she first came into quilting and she mentioned her history, her grandmother, her mom, who made quilts, and that brought me back to me as a young girl and caused me to dig deep into my past growing up as a little girl going to my grandmother’s, my aunt’s, and seeing quilts.” Brown shares the vision with other art quilters profiled in this study whose quilts are vehicles for negotiating identity. Many of her quilts depict female figures who express strength, beauty, and timelessness. The subject of her first quilt, the woman with dreadlocks, represents to Brown strength and freedom. Brown aims to raise her work to the level of abstract art, considering this the ultimate expression of individual voice. Like other art quilters Brown appreciates the therapeutic effect and spiritual function of quiltmaking.

If, in my outside world, I got stress and I can go into my sewing room and just quilt, it just relaxes me, you know. It takes me in another world….The reason I quilt, for me…quilting is my world….I go into my room and I can quilt. I can create.

Outside her studio Brown is increasingly involved in the local art quilting community through exhibitions. Brown met Cookie Washington when she enrolled in a class on doll making led by Washington. Washington introduced her to the quilting network when she expressed interest in creating art quilts. New to this world, Brown regards herself as a humble, eager student for whom the art quilter is a role model. Attending quilt exhibitions and seeing this art form in a new context, Brown exclaims, “I was blown away when I saw the other’s work up close and personal because I’d never seen work like that.” Brown was soon urged to enter her own work in quilt shows. Her quilt, Zanthia (see Appendix A) was featured in the College of Charleston’s Avery Research Center exhibit, “Mermaid and Merwomen in Black Folklore.” She admits, “I
was nervous how it was going to be received and compared to the other quilters and their work because they were, you know, working longer than I have.” Brown was shocked when her piece was sold.

A professor of Black Studies, he bought it. And I...thought it was a joke because Cookie called me and said, “Your quilt is sold! Your quilt is sold!” I said, “You're kidding,” and she said, “No. A professor bought your quilt.”....My feet were this much [motioning with her hands] off the ground for a long time.

Within this art-world context, where quilts are viewed as commodities, Brown’s art quilts were immediately successful. This first commercial transaction reinforced Brown’s self-esteem, validated her work, and fueled her artistic energy. Gaining the support of the art world and the buying public, and asserting her identity as an artist, Brown is encouraged to continue her art. “I got a lot of good reviews that tells me that I’m in the right place….That makes me want to do more and venture out and not be afraid to think outside the box,” she articulates, granting her more creative freedom.

Brown recently entered an exhibit sponsored by the North Charleston Cultural Art Department, entitled “Honoring Zora: Art Quotes and Art Quilts.” A graceful African-American female figure clothed in bold colors is the centerpiece of her quilt, *Jump at De Sun* (see Appendix A), a theme consistent with Brown’s artistic tendency to convey female strength. Exhibit themes inspire new directions in an artist’s repertoire, and a common theme of African-American art quilts is the connection to storytelling, history, and heritage. Brown feels she is not just creating “art” in general, but participating in a tradition, a common history. Art quilts, she explains, are statements of “our history.”

We want to be able to share with others our work….I was ecstatic that I was asked to be a part of another exhibit….I felt that all these women, all these experiences, all this history, I’m a part of all of this….I want to be a part of this as much as I can.

Art quilters participate in “trunk shows” once or twice a year that allow them to display and talk about their work. One of these shows had a profound effect on Brown.
It makes me see her [the quilter] in a whole new light, that she’s fascinating because I wonder how they came up with their pieces, their work, their ideas, their quilts, and there are so many interesting stories behind each piece... You got the actual artist there, speaking on their work, on each piece, how they came up with the concept, and the design of the quilts. There are a lot of interesting stories in each piece.

Quilts allow her endless artistic possibilities, bringing to life her sketches and connecting her to a folk tradition, a sisterhood of art quilters.

ARIANNE KING-COMER, The Traditionalist

“If you don’t know your culture then you don’t know who you are.”

Arianne King-Comer’s artistic passion is fueled by tracing the culture and history of textile art. Connecting a medium with a way of life, her research on the indigo-dying process led her to Africa, where she discovered the traditional process and context of the craft. Her intellectual and literal travels into worlds of material culture are for her, “a way of going into how they made what they made.” Her passion is the cultural historical context surrounding fabric.

King-Comer considers herself a fabric artist who uses traditional indigo dye techniques in her work. She carries on artistic practices of African-Americans in both the Lowcountry of South Carolina and West African culture. During the French and Indian War the South Carolina Lowcountry suffered economically, and indigo became a valuable cash crop substitute for rice. Indigo was in high demand and traded with England weavers.

Fig. 21. Portrait, Arianne King-Comer

85 Arianne King-Comer Interview by Susan Hester, November 1, 2009, Artist’s residence, North Charleston, SC.
who used the dye for military uniforms.\textsuperscript{86} Indigo’s prosperity built plantation mansions and bonds between its harvesters. The Sea Islands share the cultural imprint of the culture created by indigo-making. The indigo-dying of Yoruba culture inspired King-Comer to travel around the world to its cultural sources.

King-Comer blends Lowcountry scenes with African mythology in her piece, Osun with Angel, recently showcased in the exhibit, “Honoring Zora: Art Quilts and Art Quotes,” featuring quilts illustrating the poetic phrases of Zora Neale Hurston.

![Osun with Angel, Arianne King-Comer](image)

Though some art quilters are self-taught, studio training is a common element among many art quilters. King-Comer honed her artistic talent in the studio when she studied art at Cranbrook Academy in Michigan. Her journey there marinated her art in intellectual energy and deepened her relationship to her art. Through the challenges of graduate study and establishing a professional attitude toward her work, King-Comer adopted the tenant: “If you don’t know your culture then you don’t know who you are.” Her travels to Africa gave her work new life by exposing her to other cultures and ways of displaying fabric. King-Comer states that through her passion to learn the social background of fabric and her desire to transfer this inspiration to her work, she “learned the importance of storytelling because people actually support the story.” King-Comer

gained an appreciation of indigo making while in Africa. Struck by the integration of the arts in daily life, and inspired by this soul-searching journey to carry on a textile tradition, she succinctly states: “If you create with integrity, somebody’s going to buy it.” Her art quilts reflect her personal voyage. The fabric led her down a road of self discovery.

In her artist statement, King-Comer claims that she “honors her heritage through indigo batik. I know that I am an indigo child…And I know that my art is my journey.”

King-Comer is a Wayshower in that she digs for the cultural roots of her craft and keeps traditions alive as a self-appointed “apprentice.” She is a Traditionalist, enlivening and enriching her textile art with historical methods. King-Comer is attached to “sense of place,” passionately seeking sites of origin for her craft to deepen her practice. Learning These techniques is a spiritual and geographic journey for King-Comer. She has conducted indigo workshops abroad in Kenya and Turkey and locally at the historic Penn Center on St. Helena Island, the heart of indigo cultivation in South Carolina.

Fig. 23. Untitled.

Fig. 24. Portrait of Arianne with her batik-indigo quilt, The Masquerade
DOROTHY MONTGOMERY, The Musician

“Not only do you learn about the songs, but you learn about the history of a people.”

Dorothy Montgomery grew up in Orangeburg, South Carolina. “My mother was always very resourceful. When we were growing up, there was always a quilt,” she says. Montgomery inherited quilts from her mother that were getting worn, so she learned to quilt in order to rescue them.

When I took a quilting class to replace the torn and frayed quilts of my elders, I realized that quilts could communicate the story and history of a people’s songs and save a heritage, just as quilts once communicated paths to freedom and gave a heritage…I have made many discoveries since starting this journey…I use quilts to illustrate the songs, poems, stories and essays I wrote. My creative writings are about songs African-Americans created, adapted or influenced.87

Making quilts was never just about utility for Montgomery. As she learned traditional patterns, she wove a story into each of them. “I do incorporate some of the traditional, but I use more of the pictorial to depict a certain style of music.”88 A natural teacher and accomplished musician, Montgomery’s desire to learn quilting was coupled with her inspiration to teach music.

Once she learned the basic techniques of sewing, she inquired of her peers: “Do you think I could make some quilts that would illustrate the different styles of music?” Montgomery’s lifelong passion is music and teaching others about the legacy of African-American music traditions, from worksongs to Motown, and she uses quilts mainly to illustrate her music history lessons.


88 Dorothy Montgomery Interview by Susan Hester, February 16, 2010, Rhodes Art Center, North Charleston, SC.
Montgomery uses quilts as a teaching tool. “I’ll use the quilt for interaction, to get the people involved.”

Gullah scholar and heritage activist Emory Campbell inspires Montgomery’s work. His scholarship on the culture and music of Lowcountry South Carolina germinated Montgomery’s ideas to show music in context. Montgomery earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Music Education from Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, North Carolina, a Masters of Education at the College of Charleston and a Masters degree in Music Education from The University of Georgia. She has taught music in public schools to kindergarten through twelfth grade students. Montgomery displayed her musical talents in church settings, as well, having served as Minister of Music, Choir Director, and Organist/Pianist for churches of varying denominations. Her book, *A Legacy of Twelve* (2006) tells the story of African-American music genres by blending her original poetry with images of her quilts (see Fig. 27). “Not only do you learn about the songs, but you learn about the history of a people.” Through textile art she tells the story of spirituals, ragtime, and “sermonizers,” whom Montgomery defines as pioneer black preachers who transformed an oral tradition into a written expression through music. Her quilts also show how geographic regions influenced African-American music, Gullah singers, motown, and funeral songs. With *The Legacy of Twelve*, Montgomery presents songs created, adapted and/or influenced by African-Americans derived from twelve notes of the musical scale. They included work songs, spirituals, ballads, lullabies, the blues, play songs, jazz, and
motown. In the foreword to her book, Montgomery expresses her motivation for creating the book: “As a retired public school music teacher, I am concerned with students—all life-long learners—knowing and appreciating the power, the beauty, and the history of African-American music and its rich legacy.”

Montgomery’s work follows the story quilt block pattern. “I usually make them to go along with the stories.” She consistently uses a sun symbol to suggest that African-Americans are “people of the sun.” She often uses an appliqué technique and painting or drawing on fabric. Her audience ranges from three to ninety-four year olds, she says, depending on the venue. Her folk-style pieces have been displayed in various venues throughout the South, including the Penn Center on St. Helena Island, The Lucy Laney Museum in Augusta, Georgia, and the Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston.

Fig. 27. The Story, Dorothy Montgomery

Her musical quilts are also displayed in schools, libraries, churches, and festivals. One of her quilts has traveled overseas to Sierra Leone.

Fig. 28. Excerpt from book, A Legacy of Twelve, pp. 6-7
ZELDA GRANT, The Recycler

“We must learn to take what we have to make what we want.”

Zelda Grant is a self-taught fabric artist who grew up in Georgetown, South Carolina and later relocated to Atlanta, Georgia. Since she was a young child, Zelda Grant saw possibilities in fabric, beginning with her father’s socks. She rescued discarded clothing and used it to make doll clothes. “I remember showing dad the dresses. He did not recognize that they were his socks.” With her pioneering spirit Zelda began creating pieces with fabric. “When I got started fabric was hard to come by. I mean, I was growing up in a small town…fabric art wasn’t even a name….I remember going to the library, looking for books on fabric art” in the late eighties. Moving from dolls to real people, Grant evolved into a seamstress, making her first dress by the age of twelve for her grandmother’s funeral. “It was wintertime and we were supposed to wear white, and I did not have a white dress.” Grant learned to sew on her own, and did not know of any fabric artists in the area, but was influenced by a cousin who made clothing professionally. “That was as close as I got to a professional fabric person,” she says, but “I never want to be called a ‘seamstress.’” In her late teens Grant continued to make commissioned clothing for people in the community, but later “got burned out,” as she says, and put her sewing machine in the closet.

Creativity trumped utility for Grant, who thinks of herself as an Artist instead of a Seamstress. “I was just strictly into my own sewing world, recycling,” she says. “Nobody told me that you could come into this world with your gift and that would be your career

89 Zelda Grant Interview by Susan Hester, February 24, 2010, Artist’s studio, McClellanville, SC.
and that would be your contribution….I hadn’t heard that.” Grant’s passion for fabric is clear in the following story, which she calls the “Scrap Story.”

My mom was teaching school in North Carolina. My mom was teaching at the high school and she befriend the Home Ec. teacher, and, of course, they had to do sewing, you know, in Home Ec. class, and so she surprised me and had the lady save a huge bag of scraps (garbage bag size) and she told me maybe two or three days before that Ms. Evans was coming to bring me the fabric scraps and I’m making doll clothes, so it doesn’t matter—I got so excited. I was like, “Oh, my God!” A huge bag of fabrics I’d never seen before. I got dressed up on Saturday morning like I was going to church! I remember sitting in the living room. I think she came about one o’clock. I must have sat there an hour. It’s like, “I cannot miss this moment!”...and she knocks on the door and I open the door and I had the biggest smile on my face. And she came in and I went through every piece and just dumped it out. It was the best day.

Grant continues, “I loved that I had never seen any of these fabrics before....I separated them. That’s the first thing I remember doing, because everything wouldn’t work the same.” After high school Grant kept her passion for fabrics under wraps while she worked various jobs. She had a fabric “renaissance” when she pulled her sewing machine out of the closet to make an outfit for her infant son, and went beyond that outfit to decorating his room. “I’m a crafter,” she realized at that point, and went back to her “recycle days,” as she refers to them. She went to thrift stores for material, converting leather coats, old jeans, and other used fabric into designer purses and bags. Her craft evolved to incorporate wearable art, “soft sculpture,” framed art pieces, and quilted wall hangings. Creating layered, organic fiber art pieces, Grant recognizes the power of fabric to draw audiences in. She says with her art, “you can actually crawl into it,” and her audience, that “they just want to know all about it.” She is inspired by African designs and decorative elements, such as cowrie shells.
Grant’s identity is that of an “Artist.” She thinks in quilting terms in her piecing and layering of fabric. She explains why she defines herself as a “Fabric Artist,” instead of a “Quilter”:

I think the closest connection is how I pull the picture together, how I appreciate the art of the fabric itself. But I think the technique is where I totally take another path…I see it way before it’s done…and I want it then.

Grant puts her energy into the artistry and design, the quilt “top,” of fabric art pieces, whether they are actually quilted or not quilted. The fabric medium lends itself to intimate memories and stories, and Grant’s pieces send these messages.

She says,

I have seen people look at one of my pieces and be reminded of a place they visited or a special coat or dress that they owned at one time. For some reason my pieces will allow people to go back, go back into their childhood.

Grant realized her artistic nature as a young child at eight years old. She recounts her “Green Tulip” story:

ZG: I was in second grade…and Ms. Smalls was our second grade teacher, and it was art time. Now, all of this time, when art time comes everybody does the same thing. And I was okay with it, but this particular day, she [Ms. Smalls] passed out a stencil of a tulip, and we were supposed to color it and write your name on it. And that was it! And I was like [laughing], ‘I can’t do this anymore! I cannot do this anymore!’

SH: Too regimented for you?

ZG: Yes!...So she passes out all the stencils, and I’m looking at this, and I’m like, “I’m not going to do it.” but I knew that if I didn’t do it I would have gotten like an “F,” or whatever. I didn’t want a bad grade. So we all got our little boxes of Crayolas, you know…and I’m watching everybody and they’re just [mimicking coloring motion]—so I’m thinking, “Maybe I’ll just color all over it like a Kindergartener and don’t go in the lines,” and I’m like “No, no. That’s not going to do it.” So I sat there, and I sat there, trying to figure out what I could do different. This tulip cannot look like anybody else’s tulip in the class—that was job one. So, time was ticking…She gave us, I don’t know, maybe fifteen or twenty minutes to do this, right? We’ve got other things to do….So when she said, “Okay, it’s almost time! Everybody get your last little pieces together here! Sign your name and hold them up.” I’m like, “Oh, let me go polka dot. No. I’ll make it striped! No. I’m just going through—Finally, I just said, “It’s going to be green. A full blown tulip, it’s going to be green…light green on the top, dark green on the bottom—signed my name…All right class, everybody hold up your tulips….Show and Tell now.” And I looked at the tulip
one last time, made sure I didn’t want to add anything extra, you know, like some lace around the [laughing]. This has got to be the only tulip in the whole class that looks different with the stencil. “Hold them up!” And it was like drum roll…. [laughs] Immediately, “Ew! Miss Smalls! Grezelda got a green tulip!” And I was like “Yes! Yes! Yes!” I was the only one, the only one in the whole class!….I didn’t care that it didn’t look real. That wasn’t the point. That was when I said, “I’m an artist! I don’t see the world like the rest of you see it! I’m not sitting here another day coloring in stencils, you know, and making it look like everybody else!” 

That’s when the “artist” was born. So when I work with my work right now, I’m still coming from that. There are still things I wanted to express back then. I believe, that I still express in my work today, because I didn’t have the fabrics then. I did not have a place to hang my art because I didn’t know I was an artist. I just knew I had to do it.

Grant curated and featured her fabric art at The Fabric of a People: African-American Art, Experiences and Contributions, an exhibit at Brookgreen Gardens in Pawleys Island, South Carolina. Grant’s fabric art was displayed as a series, the first series of its kind in which she uses photo transfers and text to recount chapters and people of the Civil Rights Movement. “Each speaks the language of the human condition—the struggle for truth and meaning.” Grant writes in her introduction to the exhibit, “Let’s marvel for a moment at how one element—textiles/cloth/fabric, whatever you prefer to call it—has attracted, influenced and deeply touched those who have the ability and immediate resources to reshape our world from a global perspective.”

For Zelda, making these Civil Rights collages “was taking me back to teenage years because my first art was collage work….It chronicles our history and highlights the Gullah Geechee traditions.” These pieces include text printed on canvas, framed by archival photographs of African-Americans who were influential in the Civil Rights Movement. Using the collage method with words, she says, “This is my interpretation.” Her layering of text, “that brought the art of it out.”

Grant blends utility and resourcefulness with creativity.

90 Included in the January 2010 show was local fabric artist Arianne King-Comer, whose section called, “The Art of the Indigo Process,” showcased her various indigo creations, including framed art, patterned table covers, and lampshades.
In the realm of being creative, I have found that the best rule is to allow yourself to enjoy endless opportunities for full self-expression. The question is not merely, ‘What can you do?’ My question is, ‘What can you put your whole self into?’

Grant channels her artistic energy into her pieces with textures, layers, colors, and stitches. Grant says, “Fabric is one of the easiest creative mediums to work with because there are a wealth of design elements present in every swatch. The key is training your eye to see the inherent artistic possibilities present in a bolt of fabric when shopping for materials.” Unlike painting, the art of textiles is in the re-arranging and the re-imagining of material. “The creative process begins before a fabric purchase is even made,” she says. Grant eloquently articulates her artistic vision in poetic form:

We must
learn to take what we have
to make what we want

We all
have some
talent or gift
that can enhance our life
and the life of another

Whatever we
dedicate positive energy
and spirit to
will bring prosperity to life

To fully
realize what we are
we must be free to
fully express who we are.

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92 Zelda Grant Interview by Susan Hester, February 24, 2010.
Grant spent most of her career in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1989 she started a business, Bag Lady and Company, to market her fabric creations. She began teaching fabric arts classes and joined the artist roster of the Georgia Council for the Arts/Young Audiences of Atlanta, Inc. which provides arts education to thousands of students. Grant has come full circle. Returning to her home territory, she is now based in McClellanville, South Carolina, where she has her own studio.

I’m transplanted back home now, and when I left I was an artist in my heart, but I wasn’t expressing it, you know. It was really wonderful to come back and know that this is where I began. I left here with the ability to create and now people are finding out about me.

She recently became a member of the Charleston Crafts Gallery, where she has a permanent collection. South Carolina Art Commission and has Artist-in-Residency in local schools. She recently participated in the exhibit, “Honoring Zora: Art Quotes and Art Quilts.”

VERMELLE “BUNNY” RODRIGUES, Gullah O’oman

“We’ve always done story quilts.”

Story quilter Bunny Rodrigues grew up in the western section of Georgetown, South Carolina, in the heart of rice plantation history and Gullah culture.

Georgetown County was ninety-five percent black…so black and white people lived next door to each other. I was brought up in a very diverse community. We had poor whites and blacks that
lived on the west side of Georgetown together….We lived together. All of us had the same midwives.

Georgetown’s economy from the era of slavery and rice plantations to the industrial paper and steel mills in the twentieth century has drawn a diverse population. Rodrigues remembers a community that included blacks and whites, as well as Jews, Croatan Indians, Lebanese, and Syrians. “The only thing that we did not do was go to school together,” she says. Not until Rodrigues left Georgetown for South Carolina State College did she experience segregation. “My mother always instilled in us education.” Rodrigues was raised in an established African-American community whose roots were deeply embedded in Gullah culture. Her learning began in this autonomous community where institutions, such as the local newspaper, the church and public schools, were sources of cultural information from an African-American perspective. Books, black newspapers, and the church were fuel for the story quilts Rodrigues makes today.

We had to read all the time….We were always telling stories, from the church….I’ve been telling stories for a long time….There are two things that helped me with the story quilts is that I’ve always been a history buff, so that helps because all of my books from first grade to fourth grade, I had black readers…they were positive readers…the Rosenwald readers.

Rosenwald readers were culturally specific history textbooks that were created in light of the Rosenwald Rural School Building Program. This program was an effort to improve the quality of public education for African-Americans in the rural South during the early 1900s. Booker T. Washington was responsible for initiating the program, who “preached a gospel of self-help for black southerners that emphasized economic advancement

93 Vermelle “Bunny” Rodrigues Interview by Susan Hester, March 1, 2010, Gullah O’oman Museum, Pawley’s Island, SC.
through vocational education without challenging racial segregation.”

The Rosenwald readers gave more in-depth accounts of African-American history, empowering students to appreciate their own culture.

Rodrigues uses her hands to channel this wealth of knowledge into her medium. She gracefully unfolds the sequence of events leading to her craft:

From the time I can remember myself I was always making things….I was always interested in the African culture and I was always doing things with my hands. I’m from a family with artists and my great-grandfather…he was a cobbler on the plantation. My mother did not quilt; she was the intellectual one….I got my first sewing machine when I was in ninth grade…and I would make clothes and other things…to sell. Then I started making little things for the children, because I have four girls, but I started quilting really seriously about twenty years ago. I was working with some senior citizens…and my stepmother, they had a little quilting circle and they would get together and I would help them. They were doing traditional quilts and I wasn’t interested in it because, number one, they were strip quilts, or log cabin type quilt, but they weren’t story quilts. Since I was always a history buff, when I started quilting…I don’t know, I think it’s one of those things that’s a spiritual thing, and I say, “I want to tell a story about the Gullah culture. So I got my little pad and pencil out and did my little diagram, put the Gullah O’oman in the center, and I started, ‘What am I going to say?’

From the time she picked up a sewing needle or fed fabric through a sewing machine, Rodrigues has approached quilting as an artist. Not wanting to follow the patterns of traditional quilts, Rodrigues says, “I’m almost like the butterfly. I want to be free. And I want to create something that doesn’t look like everybody else’s….I want it to be original.” Rodrigues takes historic quilt styles and refashions them to tell stories in her own way. In design and spirit, her quilts parallel the story quilts of Harriet Powers, which she calls “religious quilts.” All of Rodrigues’s quilts revolve around a central character who is framed by a sequence of story blocks with symbols that represent chapters in the story (see Appendix A). Rodrigues also created a pictorial narrative version of the railroad quilt. “A lot of people only use the codes….When I do it I have the Seminole Indian in the center of that quilt….I have at least ten of the codes and what they mean, but I like to put a real person in the center,” she notes. She teaches history through

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main characters. “I have a subject in that center because I believe that everything leads from that center…that main character.”

The Seminole Indian puts a face on tradition and draws the audience into their experience. Uncovering what may be under-represented chapters of African-American history, Rodrigues tells the story of the black Seminoles who came from South Carolina. Black Seminoles were a band of black Indians from Florida who escaped to Mexico to avoid enslavement. In the early 1800s many African descendents living outside the settlements of northern Florida had adopted an Indian way of life. Many of the Seminole blacks were former slaves from plantations in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina. Through her story quilts she is telling different versions of the same story, re-telling history.

Rodrigues focuses her work on South Carolina’s Gullah tradition and the African roots of American history. She often tells this history through female characters. Her quilt *From the Slave Cabin to the White House* was created to celebrate the election of President Barack Obama’s election and tells the story of Michelle Obama’s ancestral connection to a Georgetown plantation. In this quilt Rodrigues created blocks that feature a genealogy of what she believes are pivotal events in the first lady’s life, including figures who are responsible for her success, such as her great-great grandfather, Jim Robinson, for example, who was a cobbler. She tells the story in one of the quilt blocks:

> What happened to Jim, a tree limb fell on his arm and his stepmother did not take care of it so it became infected so they had to amputate his arm. The overseer of the plantation that was next to Michelle’s…he saw the incident and after that Jim would always follow him around so actually adopted him so he grew up in this overseer’s home.

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Each block of Rodrigues’ story quilts represents not only stories, but values. One contains an image of the church, “because that was very important to us,” she says.

Reflecting Rodrigues’ value of education, Bunny places Michelle in the center of the quilt in her graduation gown.

I thought that education was important. Here we are, we came here as enslaved Africans, and they said we couldn’t read or write… We couldn’t read or write English, but…we could read and write. Enslaved Africans escaped and wrote narratives in their own language and then they transferred to English…I thought it was important for children in the country—and not just African children—but all the children in America that you could go from humble beginnings into going to Princeton, Harvard, the two leading schools in the United States….I remember my grandmother went to night school to learn how to read and write. With determination you can do anything, so it was very important for me to put her [Michelle Obama] in the center of the quilt.

Rodrigues’ story quilts all follow the same format and contain the same symbols, though altered in color and design for each quilt. They chronicle the evolution of African-American culture, from Africa to the plantation, or from the slave cabin to the White House. As with many of the other quilters profiled, Rodrigues’ quilts have a spiritual function. In telling her stories she is transported to experiences and puts her creative energy into the story instead of the technique, giving her quilts a folk quality and emotional richness. She describes this phenomenon here:

The slave cabin…that’s where I felt the spirit of the quilt….With a story quilt I actually have to feel something about it…so I can actually feel it when I begin to work with it, and I try to quilt just like our ancestors. I don’t measure anything. There’s nothing on the quilt that’s ever straight….It’s a folk quilt. We quilt because it’s a spiritual thing…Ms. Powers, you know.

Rodrigues and her husband, Andrew, are activists in preserving history. They founded the Gullah Museum in Pawley’s Island where they hold educational tours and lecture on South Carolina and Gullah history. They use Rodrigues’ quilts to illustrate their lessons. Rodrigues and her husband participate in many area heritage events, such as the Mount Pleasant Sweetgrass Cultural Arts Festival and the Gullah-Geechee Festival, as well as museum and school programs.
Rodrigues is an avid researcher and a vessel of oral history, as she uncovers the forgotten history of African-Americans. She specializes in the history of her native Georgetown County.

I like to tell the story from a black perspective, being seventy-two, third generation from slavery, I always had a habit of being around older people...I was listening to conversations. I’m beginning to put the pieces together.

Rodrigues’s perspective also reflects the mindset of Africanist scholars and Cuesta Benberry, in that she traces the African origins of southern folkways and stresses that African-Americans had an enduring presence in the making of American culture. The subjects of her lessons include black cowboys, indigo and rice cultivation, the “first doctors” (black midwives), the first “cowboys,” religion, and the Gullah dialect. “There is much mis-information about the Gullah culture,” she says. Information about African-American history has been disseminated through mainstream institutions, Rodrigues believes, that feed a narrow, stereotyped, and mis-guided narrative. For example, historians tend to associate the economic development of the South and African-American slavery with cotton farming, when in fact, African slaves were brought to
Charleston for their knowledge of *rice* cultivation.

Rodrigues is passionate about digging deeper for the roots of culture. On the topic of religion she challenges the residual biases of slavery-era thought. “They’d like to say that they taught us Christianity. How could you?”

Christianity was always in Ethiopia.” And pertaining to her experience growing up Gullah, she says, “Everybody looked down on us because we spoke Gullah. We couldn’t write it but we spoke it to each other.” Rodrigues’ motivation to quilt is her way of shifting paradigms. Using quilts as her narrative and creating new mythologies, she exemplifies The Wayshower character by asking: “Who writes the book?”
CHAPTER 4

Conclusion

“We are stitching the stories of our lives.”

The quilters profiled in this study draw their creative energy and inspiration from different sources. The common thread among them is their common role as “Wayshowers” and storytellers. Cookie Washington is inspired by the feminine divine, and by universal, spiritual messages. The written word, language is Catherine Lamkin’s muse. Winifred Sander’s flair for fashion and style drives her quilts. Peggie Hartwell’s memories of home are channeled into her appliqué. Dr. Marlene O’Bryant-Seabrook is in pursuit of scholarly evidence. Lenora Brown is drawn to the works of abstract painters. Arianne King-Comer, like an apprentice, traces textiles to their sources and brings traditional practices to life. Dorothy Montgomery’s work is filled with sound, illustrating music traditions. Zelda Grant, the fabric artist recycler, sees infinite possibilities in all textiles. Bunny Rodrigues travels diasporic roads to tell her stories;

Using quilts as Voice, the “Wayshowers” are characterized by their respective sources of inspiration—ancient iconography, political movements, family folklore, African-American history, abstract painting, music, traditional techniques, and poetry. I focused on their sources of inspiration to define their artistic roles, as the Preacher, Teacher, Sketch Artist, and Poet, etc. Each quilter is an activist and individualist yet each
artist’s inspiration is rooted in history. This is their common thread. As Wayshowers, these fabric artists expand the African-American quiltmaking tradition and contribute to its richness. Their quilts are considered narratives and the quilters are storytellers. The art quilters profiled in this study are fabric “griots” who shape oral tradition through the making of pictorial and/or narrative art quilts. Their motivation to quilt is to document, to educate, and to preserve meaningful stories and, in turn, to uplift through story. All of the fabric artists here share Peggie Hartwell’s idea: “Fabrics have given me my VOICE.” “Denied freedom but filled with artistic genius, [African-American] quilters gave voice to the voiceless, transcended adversity, reclaimed history, and transformed the future of descendents of slaves through their work.”

Quilts are visual conversations. They facilitate dialogues about subjects that may be difficult to speak about.

When words fail me I make a quilt….I started out making traditional style quilts. Very soon after I started making quilts I made a shift from craft to art so I could find my own voice and express my own ideas.

Quilts essentially reflect the quilter’s values; narrative quilts provide access to the minds, hearts, and spirits of their makers.

Folklorist Patricia Turner recognizes this methodological phenomenon: “By asking African-American quilters about their quiltmaking and finished pieces, she would allow the quilters to reveal vital insights about their ‘every lives and aesthetic values’ and about their ‘artistic, social, educational, and economic circumstances.’” This study is not an attempt to define an African-American quilt style, but rather to present a gallery or

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chorus of voices. Focusing on the messages more than the techniques and elements of fine art criticism, the subjects and stories of the quilts rise to the surface of this study. I examine the role that art and craft play in anchoring the stories that African-Americans tell about themselves and their pasts. Through the gallery of biographical profiles we see what stories are told. How, then, do they function?

Acts of Remembering, Honoring and Healing: The Medium and the Message

“With our hands we have healed ourselves, blessed and nurtured others, and envisioned a new day.” –Carolyn Mazloomi

Choosing art over utility, these women create their identities as artists instead of simply quilters. Yet, by choosing the quilt medium, these artists link themselves to a deeply rooted tradition in American culture. Quilts, typically the patchwork quilt, are a symbol of American culture, and the African-American quilt has become a “potent and cherished symbol of black cultural identity, fortitude, and achievement.” 98 Quilts serve to build bonds between the community of makers rooted in kinship, memory, and shared female experience. As iconic symbols, quilts are powerful metaphors for constructing history and identity, representing a collage of diversity and connectedness. They are effective mediums through which to meditate and find meaning, as pieces are carefully chosen and deliberately placed to form whole narratives. As writing satisfies the writer, quilts provide “a sense of where to look for the threads,” says Eudora Welty, “how to

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follow, how to connect, find in the thick of the tangle what clear line persists.”

Like the art quilters in this study, Welty, in fact, used the patchwork method to construct her narratives. Working with the quilt medium ties women to tradition. “Stitching fabric into quilted narratives inevitably taps into the long history of a traditional craft.” Quilts connect their makers to tradition, to home, to faith, and to themselves. Interview questions that referred to “lived experience” revealed various functions of quilts—as creative expression, as therapy and healing, as honoring, and as educating.

Quilts grew out of a practical need to provide warmth and to reuse fabric from old clothes, and this function extends to spiritual needs associated with healing. As the threads connect pieces of fabric, the quilters connect with their pasts and themselves. Furthermore, quilt making is an act of “contest[ing] their experiences and express[ing] their meanings of the world,” and represents a “ritualized practice of … unification and harmonizing.” Telling stories through fabric is an act of “connection-making;” connecting to self; connecting to home, whether Africa, the family homeplace, nature, or Heaven; and connecting to history. The narrative genre has a healing function on both personal and public levels. First, the act of working with one’s hands and the fabric itself is therapeutic for the makers. Many quilters explained that the fabric “speaks,” that it communicates with them during the creative process. Fiber artists engage in conversation with their medium.


100 Mazloomi, Threads of Faith, 14.

Secondly, constructing narratives, quilts are acts of remembering, honoring, celebrating, worshipping, and educating. From the studio to the museum, contemporary story quilts serve the individual by channeling intellectual and emotional expressions while confirming a group identity. Storytelling and religion are integral elements of southern culture, and they find expression in the African-American narrative art quilt. Faith inspires many of the artist’s work. Historically, religion and spirituality have been foundations for the African-American community. Churches were places where people organized for political or other social purposes. In the tradition of the Harriet Powers’s story quilts, faith is a common thread in the fabric artist’s body of work. “Making quilts with a narrative interpretation of Bible stories is relatively unusual in American quiltmaking; however, this type of quilt is idiosyncratic to African-American women living in the South.” These fabric artists expand and adapt the Powers Bible quilt model by telling stories and expressing faith, either in the form of institutionalized religion or personal spirituality.

Alluding to ancestral origins, either in Africa or family homeplaces, quilts offer a means of connecting to home and evoking a “sense of place.” Fabric artists in this study stress the importance of knowing your history. A connection to your past is essential to grounding, keeping memories alive, and affirming identity. Roots and home are a source of life, of creativity. As Roger Pinckney, author of Blue Roots, a study of Gullah folklore, writes: “A devotee enlists the aid of ancestral spirits to help along the way and, in so

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doing, finds spiritual destiny." Fabric artists profiled here use African-themed materials, such as African fabric and embellishments like cowrie shells to connect to their history.

Our collective unconscious still seeks healing from that experience—hence our interest in Africa…They [African-American quilters] use their quilts as a medium to tell of the important links between our lives today and those of our ancestors….When you know where you come from, you won’t be what others call you. 

Quilters also trace roots to their homeplace by recounting family folklore. Poet Maya Angelou proclaims, “The black southerner and the white southerner are locked to the land and to history.” All the quilters in this study identify the South Carolina Lowcountry as home. They are aware of being in the South and their work is inspired by this sense of place. Folklorist Richard Dorson writes, “In the folk region, people are wedded to the land and the land holds memories….Their loves and hates, pleasures and hopes and fears, are governed by tradition.”

Quilts represent a connection to tradition, which is a creative resource for narrative art quilters. “Many people…draw upon tradition to create objects or to perform, and thereby fabricate a personal identity and social role for themselves.” Quilts made for social or political causes are effective at delivering messages by virtue of connecting its audience to Home. Human rights activist and founder of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial quilt, Cleve Jones writes about the quilt: “an expanse of multicolored placards covering the national mall. It’s the perfect symbol of war, fuzzy, middle-class, middle-

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American traditional family values—female art.” One can argue over “genre,” as contemporary story quilts are not considered “patchwork” quilts, but the contemporary story quilt and the patchwork quilt share the process of piecing and are both part of quilt tradition. Quilts have come to symbolize America itself, as a “quintessential folk art…linked to nineteenth century sewing bees and a nostalgia for a past sense of community.”

The piece of art is a quilt—a specially made functional piece of cloth—and by its nature it resonates with warm, cozy associations.

Narrative quilts are also a means of connecting to oneself. A common motivation for working through the narrative art quilt medium is: “I wanted to express a sense of myself that I had repressed. The slow process of making the quilt by hand was not unlike the process of self discovery.” Each quilt is a statement about a particular woman’s lived experience. Quilting is a way of connecting with oneself and constructing identity. “It is precisely the construction of modern femininity which contemporary quilling negotiates”. Working with cloth and with hands has a meditative effect, feeling the textures of cloth, and reflecting as the quilt is carefully stitched. Because of its intended closeness to a person’s body, the quilt evokes human emotion and hope. Narrative quilter Heather Williams describes her motivation to quilt referencing these qualities: “I quilt because I have to. The feel of the fabric, the play of color and texture and shape, the quiet

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108 Ellen Danforth Interview by Bernard Herman.

109 Langellier, 66.
excitement and energy of coaxing a design, all nourish my spirit in ways that nothing else quite does.”¹¹⁰ Like Williams, most story quilters use sewing machines which allow them to focus on the *art*, design, and aesthetic of the quilt instead of spending most of their energy on the *craft* of hand-sewing and quilting. Several of the artists do, however, use both machine and hand sewing techniques, balancing convenience with intimacy.

The private expressions of art quilts do not stay within the confines of the domestic. Given that most quilts are commissioned exhibition pieces, these personal conversations are exposed to public interpretations. The choice of fabrics and ornamentation is always made with longevity in mind. Quilts are made to last through time, and this quality influences the art quilter’s subject matter. Whether personal or public, these stories become timeless. The depictions of historical moments and timeless commemorations match the durability of the medium.

Quilts are vehicles for remembering and honoring. Meditating on family or cultural history connects the quilter to groups of people, builds identity and reinforces values. The use of archival documents and photographs of individuals is a common technique used by these fabric artists. The quilt’s imagery triggers the memories of the viewers, transports them to another time, and invites them to experience the personalities and contributions of the subjects. These African-American art quilters are essentially preservationists who chronicle their culture. Carolyn Mazloomi claims that, “African-American women are often memory keepers and dream catchers. We are storytellers for

¹¹⁰ Heather Williams, “Quilting History,” *NC Conversations* (Winter/Spring 2010), 45-49.
our children, our people, and ourselves, and it so often falls to us to catch and propel forward the grandest as well as the most precious of dreams.”

**Reinventing Tradition**

Quilting is a vernacular tradition, and these fabric artists recognize that they are participating in an activity that reinforces their identity and group solidarity. Like quilts, folk traditions define events, mark major passages in life, and are used to express, reinforce, and promote group identity. They are symbolic constructions of the past in the present for the future.

The Wayshowers represent a new chapter in story quilts. Enacting a new application of an old medium, story quilters become involved in artistic production and are positioned to negotiate identity and vocalize cultural critique. The women profiled in this exploration of African-American quiltmaking are “activists” through their quilts as they urge the re-examination of people and events in history and prompt a new understanding of their culture. The work of these fabric artists is a graphic means to express the values associated with family, faith, and history. The artists actively build their own histories, choosing people, events, and stories to represent their individual perspectives. Quilt narratives, then, are a way to read a multi-vocal history and to view history and tradition as consciously constructed, or “pieced,” rather than unconsciously followed.

In creating narratives, quilters self-consciously adopt and adapt tradition as an element in their discourse about who they are or want to be, utilizing tradition in the

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symbolic construction of their identity. African-Americans are seen here as the subjects of their own history.

Common threads in these quilts are rooted in the shared experience of being an African-American woman art quilter/fabric artist. And there is also diversity in the sources of inspiration and intentions for each piece: emotional expression, preserving family traditions, worshipping, or teaching lessons. The Wayshowers compose stories that function as social charters as they draw people together and refine their relations on the basis of a shared cosmology. Drawing upon the history of a cultural group, African-American story quilters build new ideologies from a common experience.

**Quilting as Metaphor: Stitching Narratives**

How do we conceptualize history? Henry Glassie claims that,

> History is not the past. History is a story about the past, told in the present, and designed to be useful in constructing the future….Writing history is speaking truth…the past as a mythic resource for the historian—open to endless transformation during the crafting of engaging narratives, suitable to different philosophical traditions and environmental conditions.\(^ {113}\)

*Piecing* is a mode of representation that “undermines linearity and the cause-and-effect logic that derives from it.”\(^ {114}\) Writing history, like quilt making, is a process of framing and arranging pieces. History, like a quilt, is a dynamic and ever evolving whole retaining the integrity of its separate pieces, or chapters. As each piece of fabric is deliberately placed and invested with meaning, each chapter of history is carefully chosen and presented.

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Thinking of quilts as texts we are engaged in a rethinking of history as a socially, culturally, and textually constructed process, realizing the active role of language, symbols, and narrative structures. “Writing, as piecing, is the art of arranging disparate scraps of material into a unique and distinctive design…A text is always a second-hand piece, made of words which have had a life of their own in previous arrangements, as are the fragments of fabric of a patchwork quilt which have served other purposes and which, stitched together in a particular fashion, form new patterns.”

What, then, are the “silences” that inform accepted notions of history? The quilters in this project are breaking these “silences,” these gaps in historical consciousness, as they create a subjective account of the past and combat the objective, hegemonic voices of history. Historical narratives are particularly vital for the marginalized as a mode of knowing, of remembering, as a means of accessing “real” events, ideas, and meanings. The patchwork and piecing that these women do with their quilts creates webs of meaning.

Art quilter and professor of history Heather Williams says, “I think of [my work]…as documentary or history quilts that tell a historical narrative or raise questions about the past.” She continues, “As an historian I rely on the written word to convey stories of the past; as a quilter I am able to use words and images and color and physical texture to develop a narrative and convey and perhaps evoke emotion.”

115 Chouard, p.7
116 Chouard, 7.
117 Williams, 44.
118 Williams, 49.
Art quilters profiled here share common threads: their work is pictorial and/or narrative, with people as main subjects; their quilts have personal connections either through material or subject matter; the process of making the quilts is transformative; the quilts depict links to African culture; and the quilts express religious and/or spiritual messages. In sum, as art quilter/consultant Catherine Lamkin describes, “Among the things connecting us as African-American art quilters: telling the stories of our lives and paying tribute to those that have come before us.” The quilts all have an intimate connection to the quilters as evidenced by their materials, their relationship to the subjects, the physical and emotional investment made to create the quilt, and the effect that the quiltmaking process has on the quilter. Each quilter stitches her way to her roots.

Just as stories are categorized as “fiction,” “non-fiction,” “poetry,” or “documentary,” these art quilters tell stories through narrative genres that reflect their respective voices and identities. The quilters literally and figuratively put a face on history and reclaim it. By recognizing, honoring, and remembering individuals through pictorial and/or narrative quilts, they re-tell history. Carolyn Mazloomi poetically reiterates this point: “Through the eye of a needle African-American women have found their voices and become authorities on their life experiences. The voices of African-American women are stitched into their quilts.”

Graciousness is their common attitude and strength is their common denominator. Paying homage is the most frequently mentioned shared goal of these quilt artists. As Cookie Washington explains, the Wayshowers are “telling stories in a way that works for us.” They symbolically construct the past and themselves through their fabric art and demonstrate how material culture can express ideology, re-invention, and metamorphosis.

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119 Mazloomi, Quilting African American Women’s History, 10.
Moving from the technical aspect of the quiltmaking process to the subject matter of these pictorial, narrative quilts captures the quiltmaker’s belief systems and acts as a window into their identity. Using a vernacular tradition for modern messages, the Wayshowers use quilts as their voice. Though these women consider themselves studio artists, their subject matter is folkloric in that it speaks of a common cultural experience.

These artists also share a common desire to tell their stories through cloth. Their stories hint at the complexity of history. By glorifying, remembering, educating, re-imagining, recognizing, and honoring events and people, quilters reclaim their history and themselves. “We all have a passion to get our stories on cloth. It’s almost like we don’t have a choice,” Washington exclaims. Quilts are the prayers, poetry, lessons, dreams, and memories of these ten women. They are individualized records and invaluable contributions to an evolving quilting history. Narrative art quilts prompt the examination of the multi-layered meaning of quilts within a narrative and artistic tradition that is defined by the voices of their makers.

Stories are cultural stitches that bind a people, inform their history, and reinforce cultural identity. Gathering stories for quilt subjects is a process of learning, a “pedagogy of empowerment and liberation.” The African-American quiltmaking tradition has roots in the familiar and the new. The quilt medium represents both folk art and a political symbol of resistance.

Charles Joyner writes, “People neither remember nor forget without reason.” The quilt model—the piecing together of history is an alternative way to conceptualize and reconstruct the past. Far from linear, static, uni-vocal, hegemonic conceptions of history,

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the Wayshowers explore the past through pieced fabric, demand the re-interpretation and re-examination of history, and uncover the cyclical, web-like nature of historical narrative.

The quilts in this study are both ethnographic narratives and cultural documents stitched within a complex web of influences. “Similar to a slave narrative as a cultural artifact, quilts are distinctly rhetorical documents because they ‘reveal a dimension of language that serves as a means towards an end, with hopes of agreeing upon a distinct vision of society.’”121 They are infused with a complex set of narratives relating history, family, folklore, and faith. Story quilts build identity and faith, and are created as an act of remembering, honoring, and empowering. The quilts of the Wayshowers are autobiographical, political, fictional, folkloric, and poetic narratives. Their purpose is to educate, to enlighten, to challenge and prompt conversation and contemplation. These narrative/pictorial art quilts are at once both the old and the new, they celebrate the past, as “legacies in fiber,” in Marlene O’Bryant-Seabrook’s words. As Jacqueline Tobin urges, “The stories are there; it remains for us to claim them.”

My study demands active listening to the diverse voices of an artistic community and dismantles the illusion of homogeneity of a cultural group. Though common threads connect these artists with one another, I find scholarly virtue in the studying of a folk group as a patchwork, a collage of biographies.

121 Davis, 67.
Appendix A: The Gallery

Sophia Rising, Torreah “Cookie” Washington
Saadeka Eternal, Torreah “Cookie” Washington
Ain’t Nobody Gonna Turn Me ’Roun, Catherine Lamkin
Camouflaged: Female Buffalo Soldier, Dr. Marlene O’Bryant-Seabrook
Dizzy Bopped Out of South Carolina, Dr. Marlene O’Bryant-Seabrook
Who Do You Think We Are? Dr. Marlene O’Bryant-Seabrook
Tree To Hope On, Dorothy Montgomery
The Lesson, Dorothy Montgomery
Tek Me To Duh Watuh, Dorothy Montgomery
Zanthia, Lenora Brown
Jump at de Sun, Lenora Brown
Pathways of Yesteryear, Arianne King-Comer
It’s a New Day, Arianne King-Comer
Hair, Hair, Hair, Or Maybe Knot, Winifred Sanders
Market Day, Zelda Grant
Animal Fantasy, Zelda Grant
Ode To Harriet Powers, Peggie Hartwell
Mother Hale’s Children, Peggie Hartwell
Eve’s Garden, Peggie Hartwell
From the Slave Cabin to the White House, Vermelle “Bunny” Rodrigues
Appendix B: Exhibition Postcards

FROM QUILTS IN THE ATTIC TO QUILTS ON THE WALL:
Exploring Textile Art by African Americans

HONORING ZORA: STITCHING WISE WORDS
Art Quotes and Art Quilts
"QUilTING THE STORIES OF OUR LIVES: AFRICAN AMERICAN QUILTERS & FIBER ARTISTS"

Come join us for an exhibit that will take you "under the sea..."

**Mermaid and Merwomen in Black Folklore**
For an exhibit that will enchant you, charm you as well as enlighten you.

Exhibition Opening and Reception
Saturday, February 21, 2009, 4:00 pm
Avery Research Center, McKinley Washington Auditorium
Exhibition through March 31, 2009

Quilt: *Eloham Kept Us by Deborah*
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