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# BLACK NATIVITY: A SEASON FOR CHANGE

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## **Quilting and Cultural Cohesion**

Piecing together the experiences of those voices omitted from the official historical record is no easy task. Historians searching for information that details the experience of women or people of color in the early American archive have a daunting undertaking ahead of them. Not only are they faced with the massive—and some would argue deliberate—omission of female and nonwhite accomplishments and contributions to early American society, they are faced with having to corroborate and contextualize what bits they do unearth.

Left to early anthropologists and ethnographers much of the information that ran counter to the dominant story was relegated to the realm of emotional versus cognitive relevance and had little bearing on the historical archive. This information often described as childlike, primitive, illogical and arcane was usually overlooked. Women's experiences were consigned to that which was emotional in nature. Any contemplation or judgment considered worthwhile came from men who were believed to be naturally more even-keeled and less subject to the tumultuousness of human emotion than women. Hence the division of labor between the sexes made for one side to be thinking, rational and important and the other to be emotional, illogical and insignificant. Women's work was often considered trivial. Society was ordered in such a way as to imagine that women were minor contributors to matters beyond the home. Those duties and skill sets employed within the home were considered almost totally irrelevant to the development of this country. If left up to these early scientists and historians, such important and often subversive forums for record keeping would be virtually erased from the historical archive.

Artifacts are one of the primary materials for building alternate historical narratives that speak to those populations who were not documented through written word in the official archive. Over centuries, archaeological investigations have recovered a vast array of artifacts and objects created by our predecessors. It is the work of an historian to investigate how these artifacts of stone, pottery, glass, fabric, wood, and metal tell us about our collective past. Through the work of art historians and anthropologists, historians have a wealth of material to explore. Their work to situate the creation of these artifacts within a larger historical framework is a delicate and meticulous project of documenting what has been left out, giving voice to those who would otherwise remain voiceless.

As researchers like Robert Farris Thompson point out, cultures value certain modes of artistry over others and reward the achievement of excellence in these arenas. As practitioners strive to be recognized for their talent or skill, competition within a society grows and creates a standardized criterion for evaluation. Subsequently, specific cultures become known not just for particular skills, artistry or trades, but also for their aesthetic interpretation of the value of the

artistic products. The Mande of Africa, for example, are known for their skill in weaving and textile art, observable by their unique multistrip patterning and staggered rhythms. When piecing together the history of black people in the New World, cultural continuity can be explored through artifacts such as woven cloth or even the rhythmic patterning of a quilt. As Thompson explains, “slaves shipped from ports filled with captives from inland Mande-influenced areas certainly must have included weavers who would have remembered their craft in captivity.”<sup>1</sup> This also tells us something unique about history and the reasons why Mande presences are prominent in the New World: Thompson explains that “despite its inland position near the headwaters of the Niger and the Senegal, Mande was vulnerable to the reach of European slaving from its earliest period.”<sup>2</sup> Here one can see how the examination of artistic patterns in textiles can fill in the gaps left unexplored by the official record.

Thompson’s work does much to situate black Americans within a continuum of people that goes back across the Atlantic Ocean toward Africa, thus repairing a history that without this kind of research would remain vacuous and empty. Even though most of these characteristic elements of artistry “have been blended with local elements and improvised upon for so long that in most cases the practitioners of these traditions have no specific memory of Mande origins,” it is still an important link to understanding our origins. Continued exploration of the corresponding peculiarities between African American textile art and those artistic patterns from the prominent textile regions in Africa has contributed greatly to our understanding of the role of textile art in the preservation of culture. Thompson’s work illustrates the ingenuity, improvisation and adaptability of New World descendents of Africans as cultures began to blend together through the generations. Thompson explains that

“[t]he recombination of these variables to form novel creole art—also embodying European influences—is an autonomous development in the history of Afro-American visual creativity.... Nevertheless, the vibrant visual attack and timing of these cloths are unthinkable except in terms of partial descent from Mande cloth, a world of metrically sparkling textiles.”<sup>3</sup>

It is because of this kind of rich contextualization that we can piece together a history that runs parallel to, though distinctly different from, the dominant trope. Such extensive research and keen attention to methodology gives merit to oral history, artistic representation and storytelling as viable historical resources.

Foremost in the African American textile tradition is quilting. As Fry points out, a focused study of African American quilting opens up the possibility for an “environmental,

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<sup>1</sup> Thompson, *ibid.*, 214.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson, *ibid.*, 197.

<sup>3</sup> Thompson, *ibid.*, 208.

historical, and cultural context” that becomes critical to the story of black people in this land. The use of textiles and rhythmic patterns throughout the South by black slaves laid the foundation for the rhythmic patterns of poetry, song and jazz that are hailed today as cultural art forms unique to America. Throughout this ever-expanding collection of black American art are striking similarities to rhythmic patterns dating back to the Mande and Wolof dynasties of Africa, signaling cultural continuity, innovation and adaptability. Fry contends that “the appliqué tradition that flourished in the American South was brought over by slaves from Benin (formerly known as Dahomey), [in] West Africa.”<sup>4</sup>

As mentioned before, similar research by Thompson traces the figures, color patterns and rhythms of textiles in the Caribbean to early African dynasties. The same research done to place women within the creation and formation of this country can be used to locate the origins of millions of forcibly relocated captive people to plantations in the New World. As Thompson and others point out, in order to maintain a cultural connection with their origins, many slaves of African ancestry interpreted the major stories and saints as recounted by Catholicism through the lens of the great deities and *orisha* of Africa. Thompson explains how a portrait of St. James in battle against the infidels might have been interpreted by Africans living in the New World as reminiscent of Ogun, the god of iron and war.<sup>5</sup> Today the two are synonymous in many South American communities.

### **Paper Tigers and Fabric Facts: Weaving Traditional and Colloquial Information**

Quilts are an important first-person testimony from the artisans of the antebellum period. The process by which these quilts are “read” today is both investigative and interpretive. Gladys-Marie Fry explains that antebellum slave quilts “record family history and legends, as they express the personal philosophy and religious beliefs of their makers.”<sup>6</sup> Color choice, patterning, staggered rhythms and metric repetitions can be read in relation to culturally specific aesthetic choices originating in Central and Western Africa, aiding in the tracing of cultural continuity and ethnic origination. Robert Farris Thompson’s extensive research on the corresponding peculiarities between African American textile art and those artistic patterns from the prominent textile regions in Africa has contributed greatly to our understanding of the role of textile art in the preservation of culture.

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<sup>4</sup> Fry, Gladys-Marie. *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum Period*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990). 12.

<sup>5</sup> See Robert Farris Thompson’s *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. (New York: Vintage, 1983). See especially his chapter “The Rara of the Universe: Vodun Religion and Haiti,” pp. 163-190.

<sup>6</sup> Fry, Gladys-Marie. *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum Period*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

The difficulty in corroborating the artifacts themselves with written data is a major challenge. Historians frequently rely in personal narrative and oral history to piece together the puzzles left between a finished quilt, its use and intent, and the life of the artist who made it. Another unique challenge to detailing early African American textile production is that “slave women were included less often than men in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historical accounts.” She uses the records from the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts in Winston-Salem, North Carolina as an example:

Only *two women* are found among the *twenty-five hundred* pre-1822 slave artisans recorded by the museum. Trades range from the more common carpenter, wheelwright, shipwright, and bricklayer to the less common coppersmith, bookbinder, gunsmith, and upholsterer. Only eight weavers or weaver apprentices and two dyers are listed, and here are found the only women on the list—Hester Hyeth, a free African-American artisan and carpet weaver, and Kim (who may be male), a slave artisan and weaver. Nowhere is there any reference to typically female trades, like that of seamstress.<sup>7</sup>

Fry purports that the perceived value of this work may have been lesser because “much handicraft was probably done in ‘spare’ time and was not considered a ‘main’ trade.”<sup>8</sup> Evidence as to how a racist, patriarchal regime not only privileges some details over others, Fry’s research demonstrates how certain voices are literally written out of the archive, silencing their contributions in the historical record.

Also, one can see the authoritarian European influence that organized plantation life. In West Africa, textile art was traditionally a masculine realm. Fabric arts such as weaving and dying served as apprenticeship models to induct young men into society with a learned trade and a mentor. In Europe, and subsequently America, the opposite was true. Sexism prevented early American communities from valuing textile work because it was regarded as traditionally feminine. Equally, it was sexism that prevented women from attaining accolades as artists for their skill and knowledge of textile technique, while men were esteemed for similar skills in West Africa. Yet African women did possess the technical skill and ability to sew, weave, dye cloth and do pattern work before their forced relocation to the Americas. However, because early American men did not see the relevance of female experiences or those of black peoples, society did not value their unique contributions.

Subsequently, one of the resources for Fry as she searched for information on these black female textile artisans were plantation records that were maintained by women. These logbooks may not have thoroughly detailed women’s work, but many kept a running tally of the supplementary work of their slaves. Because the white mistress was likely responsible for overseeing the maintenance of the household, which included the upkeep of clothing, linens and

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<sup>7</sup> Fry, *ibid.*, 4. Emphasis mine.

<sup>8</sup> Fry, *ibid.*, 4

other fabrics, the mistress had to be aware of the skill and craft work of her workforce. By simply documenting the tasks assigned to each female slave, white women were unconsciously preserving the contribution of black female slaves in the wildly lucrative enterprise of the American slave economy.

The fact that many of these quilts, especially those stitched for family members, were made during the time when slave women were not “working,” is further testament to their dedication to family. It is also one of the factors that complicates the documentation of this work. For slaves, no time was “free” time or belonged to them. One who is owned can own nothing; that time must be instead regarded as borrowed, stolen or preciously saved up. Those quilts stitched for a mistress are often well documented, sometimes under the name of the white slave-owning mistress and not the black artists who crafted and created the quilt. Fry calls “the notion that the quilts made by slave women on antebellum plantations were crafted under the watchful eye of the mistress and were made according to nineteenth-century concepts of Euro-American design traditions,” a “damaging stereotype.”<sup>9</sup> It is thus even more important that art historians specializing in African and New World African art are included in the contemporary interpretation of any art from the antebellum period. Their expertise lends itself to following those American aesthetic choices to similar dictates from Africa that demonstrate the presence of a culturally specific and unique model. It is only through this sort of transatlantic register that we can appropriately situate the growth of an artistic mode over six centuries of blended cultures. It becomes an unconscious signature for the artists whose names were lost.

Another major complication to historical research is the racism that intentionally ignored the experiences of people of color, and sometimes deliberately distorted the events or, as in the case below, supplied misinformation of the circumstances in which people lived. For example, below is an excerpt from a letter written to Gladys-Marie Fry by the white president of a Southern historical society addressing African American quilting:

Quilts made by slave labor in the South were a sorry affair, both as to the pattern devised and the workmanship thereof. Some few slaves were educated well enough to sew....but all the clothing on the plantation—for white and black—was made by the wife of the plantation owner—working night and day.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Fry, Gladys-Marie. *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum Period*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990). 7.

<sup>10</sup> Fry, *ibid.*, 8. To cull material for her research, in 1979 Fry mailed “thousands of letters to museums, private collectors, quilt shops, and scholars asking for the names of African-American quilters in their communities.” She sent self-addressed, stamped envelopes along with the letters and soon they began “trickling in.” This quote was excerpted from one such letter, though Fry takes care not to mention the museum, or its president, in name.

Fry's historiography counters this messaging and deems it prejudiced. She does this by searching the archive for alternate testimonies that speak to a different reality. One of the resources of which she makes good use is the WPA Project that documented the narratives of freedmen and women who had been born into slavery and could speak first-hand about their experience as slaves in America. Nancy Dodson's story is one such example:

At 16 [Nancy Dodson] was sent to Mrs. Jones' home to learn to be a tailoress. Nancy remained for a year or two but instead of being taught her trade she was made to do general housework and mind the child. . . . One day the overseer sent some cloth for Nancy to cut a coat—he wanted to see how much she had learned—Mrs. Jones say nothing to Nancy, but took the cloth cut the coat and partly made it—basted the other seams and gave them to Nancy to sew while she went out to pass the evening with a neighbor—no sooner had she gone than Nancy rolled up the coat and ran away home with it. As soon as the overseer saw her he asked if she could undertake to cut out some cloth for the hands—Nancy replied “I have a pattern and I can make them by it.” She sat up that night and ripped the coat all apart, cut an exact pattern and then put it together again. She did the same with pants and vests and then she undertook her *trade*. From this time she made and superintended the making of *all the clothing*—pants, coats, vests, shirts, etc. for all the men and boys on two large farms.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to recognize that the disenfranchisement of women and people of color in this country is directly related to a sexist and racist system that omitted certain experiences from the documentation of this country thereby stripping these groups of any potential to reap the benefits of their toil in making this country one of the most powerful in the world.

The divergent narratives explored above raise an important question: what is the difference between reliable oral history and hearsay? Increasingly it is becoming more apparent that alternate histories can be corroborated through innovative methods of tracking events, circumstances and stories. Gladys-Marie Fry is actually exemplar for her methodology and is hailed by her contemporaries for her unique and thorough historiography. Betty McKeever Kay, Director of the Oral History Program of the Maryland Historical Society, points to Fry's work as “commendable [based on two features worth noting] First, [Fry's] . . . prologue critically examines what is available as historical source material for earlier periods (such as the slave narratives of the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s). Second, the author's own interviews, obtained from people who were children in . . . about 1900, are compared with contemporary city records for the same period as a means of corroboration.”<sup>12</sup> Today Fry is considered one of the preeminent historians on the textile arts of African Americans from the antebellum period.

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<sup>11</sup> Excerpted from the papers of Susan Walker, Cincinnati Historical Society, as quoted by Gladys-Marie Fry in *Stitched from the Soul*, *ibid.*, 16. Emphasis original.

<sup>12</sup> Key, Betty McKeever. “Publishing Oral History: Observations and Objections.” *Oral History Review* 10 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) pp.145-152; 150.

A good example of the way in which oral histories and official records intersect and complicate one another is the question of the role quilts played in the clandestine liberation of black slaves along the Underground Railroad. Research on the Underground Railroad—which includes the logbooks of “station agents” who would receive and reroute runaways to safe houses—does not account for the use of quilts as signal devices, though there are accounts of packages being delivered that include quilts. William Still, largely considered “the father of the Underground Railroad,” documented this account from 1860:

ELLINGTON, Jan. 2d, 1860.

WILLIAM STILL:—Dear Sir:—Enclosed are \$2,00, to pay freightage on the box of bedding, wearing apparel, etc., that has been sent to your address. It has been thought best to send you a schedule of the contents of said box. Trusting it will be acceptable, and be the means of assisting the poor fugitive on his perilous way, you have the prayers of our Society, that you may be prospered in your work of mercy, and you surely will meet with your reward according to your merciful acts.

Two bed quilts, 32, \$8,00; five bed quilts, 24, \$15,00; one bed quilt, 28, \$3,50; two pairs cotton socks, 3, 75 cents; three pairs cotton stockings, 4, \$1,50; one pair woolen stockings, 6, 75 cents; one pair woolen stockings, 4, 50 cents; three pair woolen socks, 2, 75 cents; five pair woolen socks, 3, \$1,88; eight chemise, 32, \$4,50; thirteen men's shirts, 66 cents, \$8,58; one pair pants, 12, \$1,50; six pair overall pants, 80 cents, \$4,80; three pair pillow cases, \$1,00; three calico aprons, 2, 75 cents; three sun-bonnets, 2, 75 cents; two small aprons, 1, 25 cents; one alpaca cape, 8, \$1,00; two capes, 1, 25 cents; one black shawl, 4, 50 cents. Total, \$56,51.

The foregoing is a correct list of the articles and the appraisal of the same. Please acknowledge the receipt of the letter and box, and oblige the Anti-slavery Society of Ellington.

Mrs. DR. BROOKS.

We are left to imagine who made these quilts, their patterns and where they were going. Presumably, these quilts were in-kind donations to be distributed amongst recent arrivals from the Underground Railroad.

A pattern known as “Underground Railroad” is often used as an example of a signal quilt, however there is no evidence documenting the usage of this pattern for quilts in the antebellum era. One historian on American quilting, Barbara Brackman, encapsulates her dilemma with the Underground Railroad pattern, “as a quiltmaker I’ve always loved the pattern and the secrets hidden in the name, but as an historian, I’ve come to realize that there are no known quilts in this pattern dating back to the days of the Civil War or to the decades before

the War when the Underground Railroad flourished.”<sup>13</sup> Still, many families tell stories of quilts hung from porches carrying signs and signals for travelers. The incongruity may never be resolved. Given that the preservation of such artifacts was not necessarily foremost in the minds of those whose need became largely utilitarian in a time of war, we cannot know what was lost along the way, or bartered for nourishment or protection. Fry explains that “the number of surviving quilts made by slaves for their own use on their own time is astonishingly small. Many factors contributed to their destruction, beginning with the increased mobility brought about by the emancipation of slaves.” One freed slave recounts the experience of having to leave in the wake of liberation:

When we started from Mississippi, dey tol’ us de Yankees ‘ud kill us iffen dey foun’ us and dey say, “You ain’t got no time to take nothin’ to wher you goin.” Take your little bundle and lev all you has in your house. So when we got to Texas I jus’ one dress, what I had en. Dat’s de way all de cullud people was fer freedom, never had nothin’ but what had on de back.<sup>14</sup>

The plantation system was under siege, mansions and properties burned, and people scattered. People venturing out from familiar territory for the first time were particularly susceptible to such fraudulent behavior on the part of resentful white Southerners. Inherent in the quote above is the deliberate attempt to deceive recently emancipated slaves by spreading rumors that the soldiers of the North were not allies but in fact marauding murderers on the hunt for black travelers. This misinformation played upon horror scenes familiar to slaves of Southern planters sending out search parties armed with whips, guns and dogs after runaways. Framed in these terms, traveling light became about survival of self versus preservation of culture or legacy. “The Civil War was a major contributing factor in the loss of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century quilts and their histories.”<sup>15</sup> The sum of what vanished with the fall of this monstrous, peculiar institution will never fully be identified.

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<sup>13</sup> Brackman, Barbara. “Quilts and The Underground Railroad.” Online article: <http://www.culver.org/news/quilts.asp>.

<sup>14</sup> George P. Rawick, *Georgia Narratives*, vol. 13 of *American Slave*, page 198, as quoted by Fry, Gladys-Marie. *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum Period*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990) 39.

<sup>15</sup> Fry, Gladys-Marie. *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum Period*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990). 10.