

WOMEN'S WORK: SOCIAL RELATIONS OF QUILTING

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ABSTRACT

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This qualitative research explores how social relations and intersections of race, class, and gender are evident in the woman-centered space of quilting groups. Methods used are interviews with quilters and participant observation at quilt guild meetings and quilt shows in Northern California. Interviewees include both women and men from a variety of racial/ethnic groups. A cultural studies/popular culture approach is utilized, with concepts including cultural production, consumption, commodification, representation, appropriation, appreciation, hegemony and resistance. Elements from post-colonial and multicultural/multiracial feminist thought as well as critical whiteness studies are also integrated. Results show that quilters expressed shared values about quilting and the place of quilting in their lives as well as the place of quilting in our society. However, differences by race/ethnicity are evident in quilters' choice of quilting-related social activities and membership in quilting groups. Complex dynamics of the interplay of aesthetics and race/ethnicity are also present. Quilters' social location is reflected in their cultural production and choice of social activity around quilting.

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INTRODUCTION

In October 2012, I spent two days at the largest annual quilt show on the West Coast; it is like an entire mall, all quilts, quilt classes, quilting materials and merchandise. Thousands of quilters and quilt appreciators wander through aisles and aisles, room after room. As I look back now on the journey that I have travelled on this research project, I can see that many of the themes I would soon hear in interviews were foreshadowed in this event.

The variety of quilts displayed was immense, from highly traditional and completely hand-sewn to heavily machine-quilted (a technique called thread-painting) to edgy and experimental. There were quilts meant to be home adornments, quilts as commemorations and celebrations, quilts more attuned to becoming part of a corporate collection for exhibit in business spaces, and quilts carrying a message to educate, express, or challenge. Quilts included all possible commercially available cotton fabrics—calico and floral prints, jewel-toned batiks, West African textiles, etc.—as well as just about every other kind of fabric found in stores, clothing, or through other means.

One small group of quilters collaboratively made quilts that were versions of paintings by Wayne Thiebaud, with his permission noted—a clear tying together of quilting and the art world. Other quilts featured elements from famous paintings by Van Gogh and Klimt. One quilt, titled “Purple States of America,” featured a map of our country in purple; the accompanying statement urged viewers to think about purple rather than blue and red states in this period just before a presidential election. Another quilt depicted a farmer and tractor, with elaborate fruits and vegetables around the borders as

well as text calling on viewers to support local farmer's markets. Several quilts displayed scenes from faraway places their maker had visited on vacation, with a sense of the exotic; one titled "Maasi [Maasai] Men of Tanzania" portrayed several of these East African nomads near a dry and twisted tree amid a flame-colored, swirling sky, and its statement told about how the quilter went "to visit the people and see the animals." A quilter from Australia made a three panel piece, each section dyed with a native plant from the land on which she lived and then embroidered over with a pattern representing that plant in abstraction. A major art quilt association showed a juried selection of quilts all illustrating the theme, "I'm not crazy," with a wide range of mental illness and wellness conveyed, including one piece which simultaneously lamented and appreciated the need to take medication for depression and the effect of this medication of adding color to life and another by a mother whose son, struggling with schizophrenia, had committed suicide. Many quilts featured "improvisational" piecing techniques; others were built using precise paper-piecing or various techniques for piecing pictures and landscapes as developed by well-known art quilters and popularized in their books. One section was devoted to the work of Allyson Allen, an African American quilter who calls her work "storytelling," and centers the African American experience. Her quilts talk about slavery, from depictions of slave ships and handbills for slave auctions to celebrations of Harriet Tubman. Other quilts of hers show a jazzy Obama, Mandela, and other current figures of inspiration.

By the time I reached this display, I was tired. I also wanted to do some people watching, particularly of viewers' responses to these quilts about slavery. At least 90%

of attendees were white women over the age of 50. The occasional man or child would wander by, towed by women. Women of color passed by from time to time, usually in pairs or small groups; once in a while a small group with both white women and women of color went by. Quilters were often distinguishable from non-quilters by their attire—patchwork or embellished vests, jackets, bags; t-shirts with quilt block emblems—or the bundles of just-purchased fabric and other quilting supplies they carried.

Most white women looked only briefly at the quilts about slavery, and the most common verbal response was “Oh.” Some honed in on details in the quilts, remarking on the work it must have taken to make all those little cloth-people laid out on a diagram of a slave ship (“Precious Cargo”), or complimenting the “tribal” (West African fabric) in the quilt on Harriet Tubman. One white woman told her companion, “These are the most important quilts here.” Asian women tended to pass by quickly. African American women often looked closely and without surprise.

Eventually, I wandered again, listening for comments. “Now these just don’t do it for me like the innovative ones,” one white woman said as she passed by traditional quilts. “I like all the shiny ones,” voiced a white girl of about eight, referring to quilts using metallic threads, fabric with metallic dyes, and other embellishments. An African American woman exclaimed, “It’s like art!” And her companion, possibly her daughter, replied, “It really is.” A thirty-something white woman said, “I don’t know how people do this.” An African American woman told a white woman, “Now that’s cute, but I can’t put it on my grandbaby or my bed,” as she gazed at a section of small wall quilts which were not rectangular. “Look at the stitches here,” a white woman directed another white

woman. “This part is so beautiful.”

Research Question and Rationale

In defining “women’s work”, Mohanty (2003:142) says, “The idea I am interested in invoking here is not ‘the work that women do’ or even the occupations that they/we happen to be concentrated in, but rather the ideological construction of jobs and tasks in terms of notions of appropriate femininity, domesticity, (hetero)sexuality, and racial and cultural stereotypes.” It is in this sense that I use the term “women’s work” in the title for this research.

How are social relations of gender, class, race and ethnicity reflected, reproduced, and challenged within the world of quilting? This is the question I set out to explore. Quilting offers a unique avenue to consider these social relations, as it is a form of gendered cultural production both mythologized in many views of our nation’s history and one which has continually changed over time and which continues to do so. It is a rare space where women have created and continue to create material culture not just for the home, but for public display for a variety of purposes. It is both a passionate part of the daily life of its practitioners and a facet of our culture and society.

To consider this form of cultural production and its articulation with social structures, I use concepts and perspectives from cultural studies and popular culture theories. Culture includes our ways of being, knowing, acting and creating; within cultural spaces and activities, people find their way between their individual and collective agency and larger social structures. What I found is both a women’s space full of liveliness and self-actualization and the separations which permeate our society,

particularly those of race and ethnicity. In the words of bell hooks, "...we must first be willing to examine woman's relationship to society, to race, and to American culture as it is and not as we would ideally have it be (1981:124)."

Organization and Content of This Text

This chapter, as an introduction, will focus on introducing the world of quilting, including a brief history of quilting in the United States and information on the resurgence in quilting since the 1970s. It closes with observations from another quilt show.

The second chapter is a review of relevant theoretical literature to introduce concepts and frameworks from cultural studies, popular culture theory, multiracial feminist thought, and critical race theory, particularly whiteness studies, which I use for my analysis and discussion. It also provides a glimpse of other research and writing about quilting from a variety of other academic disciplines and perspectives, and some of the concerns I have with these.

The third chapter details both my epistemological stance and qualitative research methods, and indicates some limitations of my study.

In the fourth chapter, I describe the quilt guilds I visited as well as quilters I interviewed and some of their expressions in regard to quilting and the self; quilting and culture or society; quilting and relationships, social activities, and participation in quilting-related groups; quilting, class status, and related concepts; quilting and gender; and quilting and race and ethnicity, including whiteness as an organizing principle of social and cultural relations.

The fifth chapter takes up these topics again for discussion, linking them to theoretical and substantive literature and other empirical research.

Finally, a brief conclusion poses some questions for reflection and possible action as well as further research. It also features examples of quilting-related activities which illustrate aspects of these re-configured social relations.

A History of Quilting in the United States

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. (Marx 1977:10)

The history of quilting in the United States is generally told as a celebratory story of women's place in [white] American culture and nation-building. Hidden beneath this surface are stories of class and race. In actuality, the history of quilting is one of the intermingling of cultures and the expression of both hegemony and resistance along intersecting facets of gender, race, and class. The mythologized telling is usually one of how strong frontier women overcame hardships, and includes a carrying forward of this image to today's quilter, who is pictured as also navigating challenges, although these are often of balancing family expectations of a woman's tasks and a woman's desire to quilt (Cerny, Eicher and DeLong 1993:22). In both the obscuring or sidelining of stories of quilting by women who were not white and the use of the values of today's white middle class to interpret the past, whiteness is the underlying element.

Historians and material culture scholars have utilized the study of quilts not only to learn about women's lives, but about migration patterns and political and social issues (Creel 2006). Women's relationship with textile arts changed along with women's roles,

and quilts reveal not just personal but public narratives of agency and engagement in political, social, and economic aspects of historical periods.

In the new textile mills of the early 19th century, New England women were the first workers, making a transition from textile work in the home and agricultural economy to the industrial site. Soon, however, mill work was given over to new immigrants. The arrival of the sewing machine from the 1850s and 1860s changed home sewing, allowing both less time to be used on routine sewing and the movement towards clothing with flounces and other more intricate constructions.

Slavery made possible much of the “progress” of industrialization, as southern cotton fed the textile industry. Some abolitionists wrote and spoke about this web or “hideous tapestry” of connection (Ibid.:41). Some historians note that quiltings (gatherings in the slave quarters to finish quilts) were an important part of sustaining community and individual survival, supporting group culture and identity (Ibid.:48; Fry 1990). After slavery was abolished, many whites encouraged the learning of quilting and other sewing skills by African American women as a facet of teaching them the gender expectations of the white world; but these were also practical, necessary skills for keeping clothed and warm.

Patchwork quilts were generally viewed as everyday, made for functional use, and are associated with agricultural and working-class families. Applique quilts, such as the Baltimore Album style, are associated with families with more wealth, and are often deemed “best” quilts for special display and use only.

Quilts became more public in the later 19th century, supporting abolitionist movements, fundraising and mobilization during the Civil War, and women's struggles for the vote and temperance. Quilts were often used to invoke patriotism and nation in service of a cause. Women's organizations utilized quilts and other textiles in their meetings and other public displays to both demonstrate their participation in expected femininity and their resistance to these expectations. Quilts were not, however, only associated with progressive causes; Creel (2006:24) tells of how a quilt made to raffle as a fundraiser for the Ku Klux Klan featured names of members of the organization who donated money within its squares, leaving historical documentation.

In 1820, quilting was introduced to eleven chiefly and royal Native Hawaiian women who boarded a ship for a sewing lesson with New England missionary wives (Jarvis 2010:12). Although Hawaii had a tradition of making cloth from beaten layers of plant fibers, woven cloth was new. Hawaiian women did not adopt the patchwork style of the white missionary women, but instead developed their own unique style. Hawaiian quilts, with their distinctive motif in rotational symmetry applied to a background, use nature as their inspiration, featuring plants and flowers specific to an area or island and colors associated with them. The tradition is for each quilter to design her own patterns for these flora, often adapting one passed down within the family. Hawaiian quilts are given names in the Hawaiian language which are similar to those of mele (songs), celebrating a place, people, and emotions or experiences associated with it. These names often involve kaona (double or hidden meanings).

As white women moved westward, their quilting intermingled with new occupational possibilities as teachers and missionary wives, who taught sewing and quilting to Native women as part of converting them to Western family and gender roles. The first generation of settler women generally worked alongside men, with labor arranged more by what needed to be done than by pre-ordained gender expectations. But the next generation, like women who remained in the South and East, became increasingly influenced by the middle class “cult of true womanhood” or “cult of domesticity,” whereby woman’s value was in making the home a refuge from industrialization through choices made as a consumer (Culver 2009; Ferrero 1987:22-23).

These white women shifted from being producers of goods necessary for agricultural life to consumers of factory-made products, dependent on the wages of their husbands or fathers. Where sewing and textile work had been honored and highly functional, it became instead the signification of virtuous womanhood, instilling patience and selflessness, as well as adornment. By the Victorian era, “Women had become symbols of leisure; to have a wife who was leisured reflected very favorably on a man (Ibid.:25).” Quilting became a frequent means of fundraising for charitable causes. But in quilting bees and charity work, women also built friendships and created woman-centered spaces and consciousness. This was supported by the social view that women were more moral, more pure, than men.

By the later 1800s, quilt competitions were a staple in county fairs; even as urbanization increased, agricultural living was mythologized and celebrated. The

standards developed to judge quilts make clear that the quality of a quilt was closely connected with the amount of leisure time and resources available to its quilter, with their emphasis on a certain aesthetic of color and fabric and complexity and precision in needlework. These standards belie the current myth, popularized by feminists, valorizing the piecing together of scraps (Peterson 2003). Many women did, of course, make such scrappy quilts from whatever materials were available, recycling household fabrics as long as the fibers held, out of necessity to keep their families warm—but these quilts were not, at the time, considered of value by the dominant culture. In some ways, this is a gendered version of the “bootstraps” white ethnic myth which claims that one’s white immigrant ancestors were able to pull themselves up from poverty to middle-class status, and that others [i.e. people of color] have the same opportunity in America, if only they will work hard enough. This myth not only operates to cover over the real impacts of racism in our country, but to appropriate the quilting of women who were poor, which includes a large proportion of African American and Native women, making it over as the work of middle-class white women’s mythical ancestresses and inspiration for quilting today.

By the 1880s, quilting had been introduced to many Native American tribes through government and religious agencies, such as women’s church groups and teachings of home economics to girls in parochial and public schools, including Indian boarding schools (MacDowell and Wood 1994:108). “There may be a cultural basis for the widespread adoption of quilting among native peoples. The social nature of the production of quilts mirrored the social and cooperative work patterns of the preparation

and decoration of hides and other tasks (Ibid.).” Quilts correlated with “the notion of ‘wrapping’ and the cognate concepts of protecting and preserving widely shared by Native Americans in ritual and healing practice (Carocci 2010:70).” On the part of the European Americans who worked to teach quilting to Natives, the motivation was to encourage the Native women to conform to gender expectations within the white world, to domesticate them. Rather than accepting quilting for this purpose and function, Native American and Hawaiian women adapted quilting for their own cultural priorities. Anthropologist, visual and material culture scholar Carocci claims, “Blankets, and later quilts, are the quintessential emblem of Native survival in the midst of suffering, population decline, deportations, poverty, and starvation (2010:77).”

In Victorian times, patchwork bed quilts were seen as old-fashioned and associated with poverty, and crazy quilts made with new luxury fabrics as parlor decorations became the expected expression of middle-class and upper-class status. Crazy quilts were often made from commercially sold kits, demonstrating a shift to consumption and display. Women of the time often saw crazy quilting as being less restrictive than patchwork in both the required labor and the loosened links with moral virtue (Ferrerro 1987).

The Arts and Crafts revival in the early 1900s renewed appreciation for the “folk art” of antique patchwork quilts and the skill of their makers in designing and producing an individual work. This was the first time quilts were described as “an American art,” and artists trained in other media became quilters (McMorris and Kile 1986). Popular

aesthetics included Colonial designs (from antique quilts), Art Deco, and, after the opening of King Tut's tomb, Egyptian motifs (Ibid.:33).

With the Great Depression and World War II, quilting returned to a more functional emphasis, and kits were again popular. In the post-war period, quilting was again viewed as old-fashioned and undesirable, as women's roles as consumers became central. Although young women were still trained in "Home Ec" in high school, needlework was no longer seen as a necessary or defining aspect of femininity.

Quilting: Tradition, Resurgence, Change

Various origins of the resurgence of interest in quilting since the 1970s are given, including the "back to the land" movement and its valuing of handcrafts; the rise of second wave feminism and its emphasis on quilts as women's art; the influence of the Civil Rights, Gay Rights, American Indian and other liberation movements; preferences within the art world which re-framed quilts as like modern art; and the Bicentennial celebrations with their enactment of quilts as an American folk art.

Today, quilting is a popular activity practiced by women, and some men, and includes a variety of quilt styles and quilters' groups. An industry has grown around quilting, beginning in the 1980s, with specialized fabrics, sewing machines, tools, magazines and books, shows and competitions. When machine-quilted quilts were first awarded prizes at major shows in the late 1980s, this set off a heated debate, as the word quilting used to refer to the actual hand-stitching used to sew together a quilt's layers. In 2013, not only are most of the quilts exhibited in shows machine-quilted, but each year more and more of them are quilted using highly specialized and computer-controlled

“long-arm” machines, often by a professional quilter hired by the maker of the quilt top. But quilting remains a home-based labor, and the input of the individual quilter is deemed most important. Even when a quilter uses a pattern developed by another (or traditional), commercially produced fabrics, and any assortment of gadgets and tools which are marketed to her, she still chooses colors and makes other design choices unique to her quilt, and produces the quilt through her own skill and labor. Although blankets claiming the name of quilts are now mass produced by designer home goods companies in places like China, then sold in U.S. markets, this attempt at industrialization and commodification acts more to highlight the qualities of quilting so long valued by quilters, rather than compete with or change quilting.

Since the launching of exhibits of antique quilts as art in major art museums in the early 1970s, a new style of “art quilting” has developed, with large national juried shows and associations. Quilters in this vein usually consider themselves artists using quilts as a medium, and defying the expectations of traditional quilting is valued as part of an artist’s expression of unique creativity. Many traditional quilters object to this attitude about quilting as well as decry the disappearance of technical quiltmaking skills. However, current quilted works by quilters, whatever moniker they may give themselves, feature a high level and range of innovation and technique.

Quilting was also embraced by the feminists as a women’s art. Patricia Mainardi, formerly of the radical feminist Redstockings Collective and Art Historian, wrote on this topic in 1978:

[O]ne of the revolutionary aims of the women's cultural movement is to rewrite art history in order to acknowledge the fact that art has been made by all races and classes of women, and that art in fact is a human impulse and not the attribute of a particular sex, race or class (52).

Elaine Hedges, an early Women's Studies scholar, summed up the changes in the status of quilts and quilters in a book introduction:

Raised from the bed to the wall, judged in terms of their formal design elements, and bought and sold at ever escalating prices, they risk becoming depersonalized and commodified, divorced from the domestic spaces that once nurtured them. At the same time, their widespread popularity—evidenced by the vast network of quilt guilds, supply shops and how-to-do-it books—carries the attendant risk of trivializing them, turning quilts into hobby art (from Donnell 1990:x).

Quilting, with its roots in gender relations of the past, has come into the present as a complex and often contradictory space within women's cultural production.

The emergence of awareness of African American quilting coincides with the general resurgence of interest in quilting. Three major exhibits of African American quilting were held in the 1970s. New quilting groups, such as the international Women of Color Quilters' Network, formed in 1985, and a variety of local guilds, arose as spaces supporting African American quilting (Benberry 1995:31). A 1992 exhibit curated by quilt historian Cuesta Benberry was the first to show African American quilts from slavery to the present, with a wide variety of quilts represented (Freeman 1996:127).

Although quilting has been widespread in Native American communities, it was not until 1997 that the first major exhibit of a wide variety of Native American and Hawaiian quilts occurred (MacDowell and Dewhurst 1997). In fact, as quilt historians MacDowell and Wood express, "Of the various North American Indian art forms that

resulted from contact with Euro-American missionaries and settlers, perhaps the least well known is quilting (MacDowell 1994:108).” Art Historian Jehanne Teilhet-Fiske (1998:58) explains that although cloth was introduced, quilting “collated well with indigenous practices in meaning and use; she points as well to the high value carried by quilts in gifting within Native communities, rather than as an art object or commodity (Ibid.:65). Quilts are seen as imbued with the spirit of their maker (Ibid.:60). However, quilts are often discounted as not being entirely or authentically Native in the understanding of quilt collectors and collectors and exhibitors of Native art and material culture; MacDowell and Dewhurst respond to this notion, “Yet despite their relatively recent introduction into the Native community, quilts are as quintessentially Native as any other object that supports a Native belief system, worldview, or sense of identity (1997:ix).”

Every three years since 1994, the “Quilting in America” survey conducted by Quilters Newsletter and Quilts, Inc. has collected information about quilters. In 2010, this survey showed over 21 million quilters in the United States, a few million less than in the highest year recorded, 2006. About 14% of U.S. households include one or more quilters. These quilters spent over \$3.5 billion annually, with the dollars spent continuing to increase even as the total number of quilters has leveled off and even decreased. A small core of quilters, just 6% of the total, spent \$2.5 billion on sewing machines, fabric, thread, books, magazines, and other products of the quilting industry. A typical person in this group of “dedicated” quilters is female, 62 years old, completed college, and has a household income of over \$90,000. Data on race/ethnicity of quilters remains rare, but

the 2007 edition of the above survey found that 7% of quilters, or almost 2 million, were African American.

Quilting has also expanded internationally, and is now popular in many advanced capitalist countries like Japan, Western and Northern Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. In each instance, quilting, as it has always done, intermingles with local cultural features.

Another Glimpse of the Quilting World

Near the end of my research journey, I attended the annual show of a guild in a medium-sized city near a large metropolitan area, held at the local county fairgrounds in an agricultural area. Here, I saw a similar mix of quilts and vendors. But I noticed a few more details. Mennonite women with their distinctive haircovers walked through with confidence and purpose. I heard some attendees, seemingly Latino, speaking in Spanish with each other as they looked at quilts. I saw several attendees using wheelchairs or other technologies to assist their mobility. There were more men, more family groups with children, and a wider range of ages.

Tired and hungry, I sought a seat in the lunch area. Tables were full; I took one of few available spots. As I ate, I looked around. At least 90% of those in attendance were white women over the age of 50, but in comparison to the large show I attended a few months earlier, there was a little more racial and ethnic diversity, a few more men, children, and younger women. I noticed one African American woman, with what I guessed to be her church hat still on (it was Sunday), seated at a table, surrounded by white women. The women around her talked with each other animatedly. She sat

quietly, eating her lunch. Soon she finished, got up, and walked away. The women around her went on with their conversations.

Questions

As you read forward, I hope you will ponder some of the questions I found myself asking along my research journey. How does our history of conquest, colonization, and slavery carry over into quilting groups and practices in the present? How is this history, interwoven as it is with race and ethnicity, remembered through quilting? Does passionate involvement in the same cultural activity encourage the formation of friendships and alliances across racial and ethnic groups? Within the world of quilting, how are differences by race and class understood and addressed? What connections does quilting today have with gendered expectations for men and women, both in terms of sense of self and cultural production and consumption? These are questions that we will explore.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Quilting is a gendered material, physical, and cultural activity. It is practiced by women (and some men) from across the United States and from across many racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. Women's quilting practices range from leisure activity to self-expression to serious art to community involvement and the continuance of family and cultural history. The quilts that are produced range from being primarily functional to being solely aesthetic, with a wide range of uses in between. Given these complexities, there are a variety of theoretical frameworks that can help us consider how social relations of gender, class, and race are both reproduced and challenged in this cultural production.

Studies of quilting within the social sciences tend to focus on the use of quilts, the interplay of quilts and art, and the function of quilting in gender roles and the gendered family or gendered leisure. Studies of quilts and quilting within the humanities tend to focus on meaning, interpretation, and quilts as women's rhetoric or art. I will briefly review some of the perspectives and concepts explored in these works which are helpful to my work, as well as some of their limitations in regard to my research questions.

Gendered Leisure and the Gendered Family

Viewing women's quilting practice through a lens of gendered leisure is helpful because it recognizes that most women's quilting today is neither a form of paid labor nor domestic labor, but it is still an activity which is considered feminine in the sexual division of labor. Considering quilting as leisure is also helpful in that it centers the element of choice—quilters choose to spend their “free” time quilting. An interactionist

perspective views leisure as a space where women make meaning and construct their sense of self (Wearing 1998). Elements of a poststructuralist perspective on women's leisure as an alternative space to a binary construction of gender also offer some insight. However, existing empirical studies on gendered leisure in general have focused on white, middle-class women (Wearing 1998), as have those on quilting as a specific form of gendered leisure. Thus, social relations of class and race are not discussed in these works. The approaches that have considered quilting as gendered leisure have also neglected how quilting is a form of cultural production and material culture.

Gendered leisure viewed from other theoretical perspectives is less helpful for my study. For example, from a functionalist perspective, leisure is for latent tension management and "successful" leisure supports paid and domestic labor and the integration of society; in our patriarchal society, then, successful women's leisure primarily supports the leisure of the children and husband, the home and family (Wearing 1998).

Human development scholars Piercy and Cheek (2004) and Cheek and Piercy (2004) use this functionalist perspective in their studies of older, middle-class, married or widowed Amish, Mormon, and Appalachian women, who were selected as these groups "all give high salience to domestic roles for their women members (Piercy and Cheek 2004:18)." They find that the quilting work of these women provides a network of supportive friendships as quilters near the end of life; the women also talk about their quilting as a legacy they leave for future generations (Ibid.). Quilting provides these women with a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction, rather than feeling less able and

useful, as they age. Continuity narratives were particularly important for the women, as they felt themselves connected to their foremothers and traditional ways of living in their community through their quilting (Ibid.:333-334). Cheek and Piercy describe this as “successful aging” as the women both see themselves as fitting and enjoying gendered expectations of them matched to their age, and are seen as doing so by their families and communities. Using this functionalist perspective allows Cheek and Piercy to explore how quilting supports the reproduction and continuation of gender expectations, and may be fitting for the populations studied as the women accepted these expectations. However, it is not able to consider how women challenge or even re-construct gender expectations.

A conflict or Marxist perspective on gendered leisure looks at inequalities in leisure between women and men, and the constraints which are made on women’s leisure (Wearing 1998). The gendered family is a source of constraints, which include not just time and money or other material constraints, but those created by subjective values and beliefs, such as the “ethic of care,” which encourages women to care for others before themselves (Ibid.). Theories on emotional labor also point to the ways women become “capitalized” as they move into wage labor, so that leisure is then needed as a compensation for the alienation of emotion experienced in the workplace (Ibid.: 122). Humans have needs for self-determination and fulfillment in leisure as well as work, but inequalities of race, class, and gender act to inhibit some people’s access to and enjoyment of leisure. An interactionist perspective of gendered leisure considers leisure as a meaning-making process. Women who use leisure for self-expression are able to

move beyond some of the constraints associated with family and gender roles (Wearing 1998:46), and some studies of white middle-class women have shown that women who engage in leisure through women-only groups experience a strengthened sense of self and their abilities (Ibid.:47).

Both Stalp (2007) and King (2001) consider quilting as a serious leisure activity. Stalp (2007) uses aspects of both conflict and interactionist perspectives in her work. She explains leisure as an applicable concept to use because quilting as practiced by women in her study is something women do after the family's needs are met, often as a form of "unpaid carework (5)." Quilting is, though, important to their sense of identity as well as enjoyable and creative. "Quilting becomes an important means of autonomy and identity development for midlife women, even as they practice a somewhat old-fashioned process of cultural production traditionally defined (often pejoratively) as 'women's work' (Stalp 2007:5)." She finds that the women in her study, all white, midlife, and middle-class, struggle to find time for their quilting because of a "divided consciousness" between this work and their home and family work. In the gendered family, it is difficult for women to have time for themselves, and when they do find the time, they use it in a gendered activity; still, their quilting often upsets family dynamics, as husbands and children are often resentful about the time and money women devote to their quilting, viewing it as a choice to put their needs ahead of those of other family members (Ibid.:47-8). Stalp claims, "Quilting for women blends traditional and modern feminine roles (Ibid.:133)." The women in Stalp's study appear to all be heterosexual and mostly married, as she frequently refers to their husbands.

Similarly, textile scholars Cerny, Eicher, and DeLong (1993) studied a quilt guild in Minnesota, and found it to be a place for the socialization of women members into a shared ideology of quilting, featuring “a reconstructed past that celebrates ‘feminine’ values of family and relatedness” which is enacted in “ritualized activities (16).” Guild members were all female, mostly middle income, employed, married with children, ages 36-55, and saw their quilting practice as primarily a form of leisure (Ibid.:19-20). They do not provide data on race or ethnicity of guild members. Another study (Gay 1996) looked at an Oregon guild of white women, asking primarily about why members quilt and how they learned to quilt.

Wearing (1998) favors a poststructuralist perspective on women’s leisure, where no claim is made for “women” as a unified or essentialized group. She sees women’s leisure as a women’s space that is not just physical but mental, temporal, material, and emotional, offering an alternative to a society organized around masculinity. She describes poststructuralist woman as a composite of multiple, complex, contradictory, and overlapping variables—mind, body, and emotions. Leisure can serve to support the remaking of femininities which are not organized around, reflections of, or responses to masculinities. This perspective offers some insights into how quilting and quilting groups seem to operate as a women’s space.

In short, then, considering quilting as gendered leisure does offer concepts which help us look at how quilting fits in quilters’ lives, but provides little in regard to quilting as a form of labor, cultural production or material culture. Gendered leisure can be used to discuss varying access to the activity of quilting and how this may connect with larger

social relations of gender and class, as well as how quilting may operate as a women's space. However, studies of quilting in particular and gendered leisure in general have focused on white, middle-class, heterosexual married women—so that they operate in many ways to perpetuate the conception of quilting as practiced by these women and neglect quilting by quilters who do not occupy this social location.

Quilting in African American and Native American Communities

In contrast to the above studies which do not address race and ethnicity, several books look specifically at quilting as practiced within ethnic communities. Some feature stories of quilters and their quilts, while others offer some historical analysis. These texts are useful in that they demonstrate the importance and presence of quilting in these communities; studies which do not include quilters from these communities, then, misrepresent quilting in the United States as a predominantly white cultural activity.

Both Fry (1990) and Freeman (1996) consider quilting by African Americans as a form of folklore, and explore how quilting has been connected with community survival.

Fry (1990) documents quilting by enslaved African Americans, and says,

Folklore helped preserve the slaves' sense of identity, of knowing who they were and how they perceived the world. Folk traditions also served as a buffer between the slaves and a hostile world, both on and off the plantation. For it was in the slave quarters that African traditions first met and intersected with Euro-American cultural forms. What emerged were transformations, adaptations, and reinterpretations (63).

She has also been involved in organizing displays of and educational information about quilting by African Americans, from the times of slavery to the early 20th century, considering quilts as cultural story-tellers. Freeman (1996) writes of “the communion of

spirits” in “the power of quilts to create a virtual web of connections—individual, generational, professional, physical, spiritual, cultural, and historical (xv)” within African American communities in his collections of stories of quilters and their quilts. Freeman is particularly interested in the role of quilts in cultural transmission, both in continuity and evolution. Quilt historian Mazloomi (1998) gathered stories and quilts of African American women in the 1990s, documenting a wide diversity of style but also a common connection to African heritage. In an interdisciplinary manner, Teilhet-Fiske (1998) and MacDowell and Dewhurst (1997) discuss quilting in Native American and Hawaiian communities, blending aspects of material culture, art history, folklore, and ethnography. They detail the many ways quilts are important in ceremonies and ritualized gifting, and how in Native communities quilts’ value is connected with cultural context.

These texts offer insights on how quilting in the United States is marked by the intermingling of cultural practices and aesthetics from all of the racial and ethnic communities which make up our country. Quilters have always learned from each other, adopting visual elements as well as techniques which appeal to them from another quilter’s work. This constant adaptation and sharing has strengthened quilting. However, in the popular white imagination, quilting in communities of color is often forgotten or represented through visions of race which remain based in whiteness.

Quilting as a Cultural Metaphor, Rhetoric, or Literary Device

Numerous scholars have written on quilting as a cultural or psychic metaphor (Donnell 1990; Torsney and Elsley 1994), women’s discourse or rhetoric (Amelon 2011; Creel 2006; Pritash, Schaechterle, and Wood 2009), and literary device (Weagel 2007;

2011). They tend to feature essentialized visions of women and women's culture, romanticized views of art, and exoticized analyses of the cultural production of women of color from the viewpoint of white women, while not actually addressing race and class.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTS GUIDING MY WORK

To consider social relations of gender, race, and class in quilting and quilting groups, the quilting process and cultural production, I needed to employ a theoretical framework that brings together understandings and insights about social structures and significations. As evidenced in the literature reviewed above, existing studies of quilting and quilters undertheorize intersectionality; each study either focuses on white quilters and quilting groups or quilters of color. In the studies on white quilters, whiteness often operates as an unexplored factor. In order to more holistically theorize the intersections of race, class and gender in quilting, I bring together theoretical perspectives on cultural activity and production. I examine how social relations of race, class, and gender are reproduced as well as challenged in quilting and quilting groups. To accomplish this theorizing, I draw on cultural studies and popular culture theory, postcolonial and multiracial feminist thought, and critical race theory, particularly critical whiteness studies.

Cultural Studies and Popular Culture Theory

Contemporary cultural studies sees culture as the practices and processes of making shared meanings (Storey 2003:3). Cultural studies considers culture as the whole way of life, both macro and micro, and uses Gramsci's concepts of civil society and cultural hegemony to look at the influence on consciousness by cultural and meaning-

making institutions (Wearing 1998). Cultural studies also considers how individuals and communities create their own culture and meanings, so that both structure and agency are active. All of these concepts are useful in considering connections between social relations of gender, race, and class and quilting as both an individual and shared activity of cultural production and daily living.

Popular culture, in Storey's (2003) explication, is a mix of contradictory forces from above (the elite or state) and below (the people); commercial interests of culture industries and folk traditions or newly emerging cultural and social activities; resistance to oppression and incorporation of aspects of the hegemonic culture. Strinati (1995) names three themes in the study of popular culture: who and what determines what popular culture is; the influence of commercialization and industrialization; and the role of ideology—is popular culture produced to indoctrinate people or empower them to resist?

For the purposes of this study, I am thinking of popular culture as the ways in which people, in their everyday lives, produce and consume material and textual/verbal artifacts and the beliefs they hold about this production and consumption. In this conception, no special training, authorization, or economic or cultural capital is needed to be a cultural producer; one is a cultural producer because one defines oneself as such. Quilting, then, is a form of popular culture and cultural production which is practiced across lines of class, race, and gender. Quilting, like folk songs, spirituals, or other forms of music which people use in everyday life for themselves rather than an audience,

retains connections with its roots in the early period of industrialization in the United States—but it is also a form of material culture.

Culture, and by extension popular culture, is a vehicle for both transmission of systems of domination and challenging domination, a place both of conflict and change. A cultural studies perspective can address how groups with less power develop cultural products, understand their meanings and use them for enjoyment, resistance, and/or identity, as well as issues of representation. Leisure spaces are conceptualized as possible sites of organizing resistance. Cultural studies provides an avenue for considering new constructions of gender, race, and class. From this perspective, gender can be conceptualized outside of a binary, and struggles over power are not reduced to creating or employing power as constructed by dominant masculinity. Race and ethnicity, similarly, can be constructed with fluidity and hybridity. It is this dialectic between culture and power that is the focus of cultural studies (Storey 2003:3).

Cultural Production and Consumption

Cultural studies utilizes aspects of Marx in understanding labor, including cultural production. Marx asks, “If my own activity does not belong to me, if it is an alien, a coerced activity, to whom, then, does it belong (1964:115)?” Cultural production such as contemporary quilting can be non-alienated labor, belonging to the producer rather than controlled by the relations of production, as described by Marx’s vision of non-alienated labor or species being: “Man makes his life activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. He has conscious life activity...man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom....Man therefore also forms

things in accordance with the laws of beauty (1964:113-114).” Quilts are no longer made primarily as a means of survival, but as a self-determined labor of the quilter to produce beauty.

Under capitalism Storey (2003:115) explains, “There are in effect two economies running in parallel courses: the economy of use and the economy of exchange. We do not understand one by only interrogating the other.” Capitalism uses money, an abstraction, to establish exchange value on a market. This translates into a preference for the abstract and generalizable throughout social relations, and a devaluing of the local, concrete, and particular; these latter become women’s territory (Smith 1987:158). The division of labor, then, is not just by task or occupation, but is gendered. Women’s work becomes relegated to the home and family, while men’s work in the public sphere is considered more valued, more “real.” Women’s work is designated as caring for the family, while men’s work builds the social order and earns money.

Although quilting as an activity is gendered, it does not fit neatly into theories of sexual division of labor which conceptualize a simple dichotomy of labor in a capitalist system as either for wages or domestic. Capitalism values paid labor and exchange value over domestic labor; quilting, then is devalued as domestic and based in use value. But for most quilters, quilting is not a money-earning activity, nor is it primarily one of domestic production. It is labor they undertake for their own feeling of fulfillment as creative beings and to demonstrate caring for others. Fiske (1987) says cultural commodities in popular culture circulate in two economies, financial and cultural; “[t]he financial economy is primarily concerned with exchange value, [while] the cultural is

primarily focused on use (Storey 2003:32).” Quilts more often carry relational or use value, as they are embedded in a relational economy rather than a market economy; in fact, English scholar Roberts (1994) has proposed that quilts have their own unique feminine theory of value—quilt value. She posited that variations such as this on use value could operate as a “germ of antimaterialist protosocialist idealism (1994:130)” to intervene in the market system.

Cultural production and consumption are intimately connected. This is not saying, however, that they are predetermined or entirely under the influence of the relations of production. Storey (2003:132) explains the combined focus of cultural studies on structure and agency:

Although we should never lose sight of the manipulative powers of capital and the authoritarian, and authoring, structures of production we must insist on the active complexity, and situated agency, of consumption. Culture is not something already made which we consume; culture is what we *make* in the varied practices of everyday life, including consumption. Consumption involves the *making* of culture; this is why it matters.

There are thus two reasons cultural studies is concerned with the study of consumption: understanding how social meanings are constructed from texts and other cultural productions in the process of consumption in everyday life, and the political aspect of power in cultural production and reproduction. Cultural studies begins from this perspective to study the dialectic of culture: “It is not enough to celebrate agency; nor is it enough to detail the structure(s) of power; we must always keep in mind the dialectical play between agency and structure, between production and consumption (Storey 2003:5).” From this perspective, “Commodities are valued for their symbolic

significance. Consumption is an active, creative and productive process, concerned with pleasure, identity, and the production of meaning (Storey 2003:115).” Quilts are an example of a commodity which is a cultural production, carrying meaning, supporting their makers’ identity and self-determination, and created with enjoyment. Their use value is often held within families and other relationships. Vickery (1993) uses women’s gifting of textiles to daughters as family heirlooms as an example of “inconspicuous consumption” as opposed to conspicuous consumption, where consumption is part of a relationship (in Storey 2003:131).

Using a cultural studies approach, Bratich and Brush (2011) describe what they call fabriculture as an alternative to capitalism within mainstream Eurocentric societies, a carrying forward of a pre-industrial use value based economy. They claim capitalism pushed craft-work “from guild to factory, from artisan work to industrial labor, from use value to exchange value (2011:234).” Not just the craft-work, but the community formed around craft-work production and distribution was “captured by capital (Ibid.:235).” The resurgence of craft-work, then, is a revival of the time before capture. The transformation of labor was gendered as well as mechanized; men were deemed able to work with machines, and women relegated to the home. “This clearing for capitalism was the dispersion, deauthorization, and expropriation of women’s skills and knowledges along with the destruction of women’s bodies (Ibid.).” Thus, the return to making personally crafted cultural products within relational and communal networks is a means of resisting capitalism. Of course, the production of objects is not the only way that

people make culture; they also make or re-make culture and resist capitalism by re-figuring commodities as presented by the market.

There are a few studies which address aspects of quilting as cultural production, consumption, and commodification. Material culture scholar Goggin (2009:1) quotes historical archaeologist Beaudry to illustrate the special relationship between needlework and cultural production: “textile production and sewing of some sort have been tangled up with aspects of culture—technological, social, economic, ritual and so on—since early in human history.” She adds that production, consumption, and circulation of textiles and needlework “are among the most significant of embodied acts of in material culture (Ibid.:1).” Textiles are in direct contact with the human body, thus the most intimate of material objects, connecting our bodies with the outside world. They operate spiritually, emotionally, physically, socially, and culturally as well as bodily, sheltering people and binding together a society. Over history, more women have worked in textile trades than any other labor; indeed, these have been one of our few economic options (Ibid.:2). Goggin quotes herself from another work (Ibid.:3):

The relationship historically between needlework and women has been far more complex than previously assumed and than commonly held views certainly grant. For women of all stations in life and in all socioeconomic classes, needlework has been both a domestic and a domesticating labor, both a tool of oppression and an instrument of liberation, both a professional endeavor and a leisure pastime, both an avenue for crossing class boundaries and a barrier confirming class status. It has been constructed and pursued as a religious duty and a secular pleasure, as a prison sentence and an escape, as an innocuous pastime and a powerful political weapon. Depending on a woman’s station, needlework was either a necessity to live or a luxury reserved only for those who could afford the leisure time. Reviled and celebrated, it has nevertheless been a significant cultural practice of meaning-making.

Goggin expands the study of material culture to consider social relations of class and gender, but not race. She does provide a rich analysis of how women's relationship with needlework has changed over time, and how this has been intertwined with gendered and classed expectations of [white] femininity and womanhood.

American Studies scholar Sallee (2003) uses a framework of folk art as performative communication to consider class and gender in a quilt guild in the Southwest, where members are middle-class and almost all white. She sees consumerism as deeply connected with their quilting, despite the ongoing (and often commodified) notion of quilts as being an art of the common folk. She asks, but does not answer, "What does it mean that quilting—one of the most 'traditional' of women's art forms—has become entwined with class and socioeconomic factors, popular culture and consumerism, globalization and technology (2003:xii)?" She considers how class, consumption, and aesthetics interplay in the new non-traditional quilting, and analyzes how quilting, like a folk art, transmits values and cultural norms. Sallee also challenges the portrayal of quilting as group-centered, non-hierarchical and egalitarian, as claimed by many "feminist" treatments of it as an example of what woman-organized institutions would include, as she witnessed competition and desire for individual recognition in the guild's activities. Contrary to the popular image of quilting as expressing thriftiness and femininity, she found technical excellence and individuality as the core values in the guild (2003:22). She claims, "More importantly, quiltmakers take responsibility for keeping quilts relevant to modern life, and use quilts' power to show care, concern and

community with women across race, class and socioeconomic lines (Ibid.:24).” She does not actually discuss how this care and concern is demonstrated in actions beyond noting that quilters often make quilts as donations to community organizations. She does note that quilters efforts to be caring are complicated, though, as “[q]uilmakers are surrounded by the conflicting messages of consumption, spending and collecting, while also associating themselves with a non-materialistic concern for the poor, needy and hungry worldwide (Ibid.:28).” She concludes, “Quiltmaking, for a white, middle-class population, has historically been as much about social status, economics and technology as it has been about creativity and community (Ibid.:31).”

In a meticulous look at quilting in Ohio over the last century, historian Rake (2000) considers the interaction of commercialization, commodification and the popular mythology of quilting, as well how quilting has changed over time in terms of the place it has in women’s lives. She objects to a view of quilting as simply leisure, pointing to the industry which has grown around quilting. She sees the mythologizing of quilting as old-fashioned or pre-industrial as reinforcing the gendering of quilting, but then this allows women to claim time and money to pursue their quilting. The myths about quilting are connected with American ideals of independence and self-sufficiency, so that quilting then becomes part of supporting this national narrative. The gendered images of quilting also act to obscure commodification. While in earlier centuries quilting melded the home, family, and creativity, today, Rake claims, quilting is a defense of the family against commodification, a sort of reification of warmth and family. The myths around

quilting, then, are culturally useful for quilters both within their families and in our consumer economy, as quilters are able to use them to their own advantage.

Together, these three studies provide insights into interactions of quilting with gender and class status, consumption and commodification, and how these are navigated and understood by quilters, using many concepts integral to cultural studies and popular culture theory. All also include discussion of quilting within a historical context, an important facet as quilters define quilting as part of our cultural heritage. But the authors do not address social relations of race; they remain centered on quilting as a cultural production of white, middle-class women.

Representation, Appreciation, Appropriation; Hegemony and Resistance.

In order to discuss how quilting is understood, categorized, and experienced, and the interaction of these with race in particular, we need to consider the concept of representation. Representation includes processes of description, conceptualization and substitution. “Representation is, therefore, a practice through which we make reality meaningful and through which we share and contest meanings of ourselves, of each other, and of the world (Storey 2003:6).” This making the materiality of the world meaningful occurs in discourse, where power/knowledge operates. In representation, then, we can see the operation of both hegemony and resistance.

Discourses around culture and art are one place where power/knowledge, ideology and hegemony, and resistance are evident. Questions of who directs cultural production, who produces culture, and who consumes it for what purposes are integral to various theories on culture and art. Mass culture theory deemed as “folk art” that which

was produced preindustrially, while the Frankfurt School viewed high art as important because of the expansion it offered for the use of abstract thinking—but the ability to engage with high art had to be learned, and this often kept it the province of the elite; thus, high culture became one means by which the elite promulgated domination of the working class. Popular culture, what the masses were absorbed in, was simply distraction created by capitalist culture industries to maintain social control (Strinati 2005).

Contemporary cultural studies and popular culture theory have moved beyond these conceptions of art as belonging only to the elite and educated. From a postmodernist stance, where the standards for “art” are no longer clear, the distinction between art and popular culture breaks down (Strinati 1995).

There remains, however, an art market. Root (1996) discusses how this art market operates to attempt to re-separate what it designates art from popular or everyday culture—that is, the cultural production of those who do not carry the title of artist. “Once an object is named as art either by the relevant specialists or by the market, it tends to be exhibited alone, displayed as an aesthetic form rather than a source of cultural information... Art universalizes the object and places it beyond culture (Root 1996:111).” Root explains that from this elitist perspective of art, to be considered serious, artists must distance themselves from popular culture, which is seen as simple, boring, or otherwise distasteful (lacking in taste). Further, “the ethical luster of high art depends on a high level of dissimulation with respect to how art is produced and how it links up to and alibis other, often disagreeable aspects of the social order (Ibid.:139).” There is ongoing disagreement as to whether art “reflects the realities of the world—in other

words, politics” or is “able to transcend the social and political context in which it is made” and if it is able to “save people by providing them with the experience of beauty or new insights into reality (Ibid.: 142).”

Root (Ibid.:113) considers the devaluing of Native cultural production in particular, and sees a pattern which claims “that knowledge is not knowledge unless white people possess it but also negates the value of songs, stories, and other indigenous ways of recounting histories.” Western cultural production is positioned as “high,” while Native cultural production is viewed as childlike or not yet developed. She details how cultural production is commodified for consumption, and the connections between Western white male cultural production and colonization:

The commodification of elite culture is dependent on a manipulation of some of the most cherished ideals of Western culture. These include notions of racial and cultural superiority, the belief that various kinds of aristocrats are the true guardians of the European artistic heritage, and the ambivalent position of white women as consumers of images of difference (Root 1996:121).

This resonates with Sallee’s (2003) discussion, as referenced earlier, of white women quilters’ ambivalence as cultural producers and consumers. I will explore this ambivalence and its interrelation with appropriation and appreciation later in my discussion chapter, but for now we need to consider appropriation and appreciation as concepts.

In her work on art and the commodification and appropriation of difference, Root (1996:68) explains, “Appropriation occurs because cultural difference can be bought and sold in the marketplace.” Although some colonizing Europeans found difference, in

terms of ideas and facets of culture, fascinating and used images and aesthetics from these cultures in this vein, most colonizers saw colonized cultures and peoples as sources of raw materials and labor. From the latter perspective, the cultural production of the colonized was something to be avoided, feared, and denigrated as “uncivilized.” These views of whose cultural production is valued and whose de-valued are expressed within nations, such as the United States, which were founded on conquest and colonization utilizing a racial hierarchy claimed as natural or God-given.

Appropriation, then, is an act of using the cultural production of those seen as Others for the benefit of oneself or one’s own group, particularly for making a profit. Appreciation is far murkier to define and consider ethically, but I pose the guideline that appreciation, as a feeling of esteem for differences, can be positive when it includes active work to challenge any material, political, or other inequalities and Othering itself.

Pieterse (1995, in Storey 2003:162-3) reminds us that cultures have long been hybrid, as they interact and exchange goods, people, and cultural elements; but in their hybridity can be seen varying terms and conditions of mixture. Globalization means that hybrid cultures are themselves being hybridized. This hybridity can disturb notions of nationalism, racism, and other conceptions of social hierarchies. Quilting demonstrates this long history of hybridity, as it has evolved through interaction and cultural exchange between all of the racial and ethnic groups in the United States. In the 21st century, quilting has spread to other areas of the globe with advanced capitalist economies, so that this hybridity has expanded. Questions of representation, appropriation, and appreciation thus are frequent and complex.

Existing works on quilting address some of these issues of the interplay between high culture/art and popular culture, representation, and resistance. Smith (2011) uses a case studies approach to consider how quilts are displayed in local and national contexts and institutions, how this relates to the gendering of quilts as feminine, and how this is interconnected with public culture. She sees the display of quilts in museums and other spaces as an insertion of women's cultural values and aesthetics into the male-dominated public and art world. Issues of race and class, however, are not included in her discussion. Further, although considering how quilts are displayed ties in with the concept of representation, she does not explore representation as understood by viewers or quilters themselves.

Peterson (2003) chronicles how quilts came to be seen as art and the display and discursive strategies used in this transformation, drawing largely on concepts from Bourdieu which link class and art, including the pure gaze, cultural entrepreneurs, social and cultural capital. Through these strategies, quilts are detached from their prior context in order to ““redefine the cultural value of quilts and to legitimize them as artistic works (2003:462).” Quilts were thus moved from being part of a domestic and familial economy to the market economy. While the interplay between art and craft is certainly an important facet of quilting in the last 40 years, considering quilts as art, as noted by Peterson, distances them from everyday cultural production. The focus is on the product as a commodity meeting standards of art; the actual practice of most quilters, who are not actively engaged in the market-based art world, cannot be adequately explored from this perspective.

Similarly, philosopher Bernick (1994) asks who has benefitted from the elevation of quilts to art, and laments the side effects of this change in status, which she sees as a “splintering” of a deep tradition. She questions the embracing of quilting by the second wave feminist movement, which has hailed quilting as a woman-centered cultural activity, and sees middle-class, educated [white] feminists as neglecting other women’s concerns and realities as they seek to valorize quilting as women’s art. She explains her concerns,

Broadly speaking, the art quilt culture claims to have made quilts into art, while the feminist quilt culture claims only to have discovered that they were art all along. The former is arrogant as well as erroneous; the difficulty with the latter is that it presumes that *no one* knew quilts were works of art before the feminist discovery that they were, which is also false (Ibid.: 145).

The interrelationship of quilting as cultural production, art, and gendered labor is complex.

There are issues, also, with judging quilts using the values of traditional quilting, as these standards were developed by only certain women—white and middle-class—and have functioned historically to devalue and obscure the work of women of color in particular. Political scientist and quilt collector Behuniak-Long (1994) adds other concerns about these standards:

While quilts are judged on technique as well as interpretation, standards of “quality” seem remarkably similar to those imposed on the assembly line: uniformity, precision, replication... Yet, if quilts are a form of women’s expression, the imposition of standards stifles the voice of individuality (163).

The values of industrialization and capitalism have permeated the judging of women's work. Contrary to the mythology of quilting from scraps, the cost of new fabrics and materials for a bed-sized quilt today is usually several hundred dollars.

African American scholar of African American Studies, African Studies, and American Studies Patricia Turner (2009) looks at representations of African American quilts in popular culture, museums and exhibits, literature, and historical documents, as well as scholarly studies and texts. She sees African American quilts and quilters as exemplifying “the larger points I wanted to make about African American history and culture (Ibid.:99).” She uses this history and present to “demonstrate the ways in which the status of African American quilts and quilters reflects the obstacles, challenges, and achievements of black America (Ibid.:100).” Throughout her text, Turner discusses differences between how African American quilters understand their self-representations and how African Americans are represented in white-centered American histories and cultural myths—the dialectic of hegemony and resistance.

In another example of African American quilting as resistance, Hood (2000) writes about the practice of selected African American women art quilters using an Afrocentric womanist perspective. She sees African American art quilts as narratives for healing, “restoring and (re)membering New World African experiences that would otherwise be lost in the histories of an economically and politically dominant group (Hood 2000:44).” In her analysis, African American quilters are conjurers, providing testimony and witness, facilitating healing and resistance for individual and collective survival.

Bedard (2011) similarly describes art within Native cultures, and emphasizes engagement in process over the end product, as the process is a time of communicating with spirits. The purpose for which an art object is produced is as important, or more important, than its aesthetics or the experience of a viewer. Art is embedded in life rather than being separate from it. Art by Natives in today's world is both an active engagement with cultural heritage and an exploration of how this heritage is enacted in the present, a bringing together of understanding worldview and cultural identity (2011:2).

These texts on Native American and African American quilting and quilters offer crucial insights into representation as well as resistance and hegemony in the racialized hierarchy of the United States. My work seeks to explore the operation of whiteness in the quilting world, thus delving more into the operation of hegemony. To explore this hegemony, both multiracial and postcolonial feminist theory and critical whiteness studies offer useful concepts.

Multiracial and Postcolonial Feminist Theory

Collins (1991:88-89), in her original edition of *Black Feminist Thought*, points to quilting as a place where African American women could both express themselves and create a functional object to support their everyday lives. Quilting combines a valuing of individual uniqueness and connections with culture, family, and community. Later, she returns to this theme, adding that quilting demonstrates an ethic of caring, centering “personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy” in knowledge validation, in contrast to the values of dominant white male culture (Ibid.:215).

Collins calls for the creation of an alternative aesthetic as a crucial part of a culture of resistance and self-determination in response to intersectional oppressions. She affirms art, the active construction of this alternative aesthetic, as supporting freedom (Ibid.:31), and quotes Angela Davis (1989), “progressive art can assist people to learn not only about the objective forces at work in the society in which they live, but also about the intensely social character of their interior lives. Ultimately it can propel people toward social emancipation,” then continues in her own words, “art is emancipatory because it fuses thought, feeling, and action and helps its participants see their world differently and act to change it (Ibid.:103).”

Collins explains that home for women of color in the United States is not the same as for white women—home can be a site of resistance and solidarity, a safe place from racialized oppression. Wearing (1998:32) cites hooks (1984) as echoing this difference. As such, cultural production of quilts in the home is integrally connected not just with individual resistance, but supports the survival of the family and community. Collins describes women who take care of others outside of the nuclear family vision of mother-child as othermothers; othermothers care not only for the community’s children, but for the African American community. African American quilt guilds and quilting groups, as well as individual quilters, are a form of these women-centered networks which carry out othermothering. Quilting within African American families has had both the qualities of activism Collins describes—the conservative aspect of maintaining traditional culture, and the radical aspect of challenging and working to transform racism. Quilters are cultural workers and community intellectuals.

A postcolonial perspective is helpful, in that it provides insights relevant to the experience of ethnic and racial groups within the United States which have been subjected to conquest and colonization, including internal colonization of the lifeworld, such as Native Americans, Hawaiians, and African Americans. Postcolonial theory emphasizes moving the margin to the center, to look from the spaces of the colonized back towards the colonizers, often from outside of capitalism and (Western) modernity. The goal is self-actualization and collective struggle for community economic, political, and cultural determination. In this view, leisure is a community space as well as an individual space (Wearing 1998).

Mohanty (2003:196) describes how this struggle occurs in places of cultural production and representation: “Resistance lies in self-conscious engagement with dominant, normative discourses and representations and in the active creation of oppositional analytic and cultural spaces.” She connects this struggle to the Western masculine definition of labor, and states, “Analyzing and transforming this masculine definition of labor, which is the mainstay of capitalist patriarchal cultures, is one of the most significant challenges we face (Ibid.:151).” She connects the categorization of “women’s work” to gender and race hierarchies in specific places and times (Ibid.: 141), and calls for a re-conceptualization and examination of “women’s work” not as “the work that women do,” “but rather the ideological construction of jobs and tasks in terms of notions of appropriate femininity, domesticity, (hetero)sexuality, and racial and cultural stereotypes (Ibid.: 142).” Mohanty, similarly to Marx, sees labor as “necessary for the psychic, material, and spiritual survival and development of women workers”, and calls

for a labor that is self-determining, enables economic autonomy, and is non-alienated (Ibid.:160).

The goal of resistance in a postcolonial perspective is to construct social, cultural, economic, and political relations which are not built on the Western capitalist patriarchal/masculinist racial model. While multiracial feminist and post-colonial thought explicitly challenge the Western, capitalist, and racialized elements of this, post-structuralist feminist theory adds an explicit challenge to binary thinking about gender.

As Butler (2006:18) explains,

Feminist critique ought to explore the totalizing claims of a masculinist signifying economy, but also remain self-critical with respect to the totalizing gestures of feminism. The effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms. That the tactic can operate in feminist and antifeminist contexts alike suggests that the colonizing gesture is not primarily or irreducibly masculinist. It can operate to effect other relations of racial, class, and heterosexist subordination, to name a few.

Together, these theories and discussions encourage us to see oppression through interlocking hierarchical systems of class, race, and gender as well as culture and nation as socially constructed and thus to be challenged and changed within the realms of culture.

Whiteness and Race

Omi and Winant (1994) demonstrate how race is and has been foundational in the United States, politically, economically, and in our sense of identity; conceptions of race are carried out in our social structures, the organization of our country, and in signification and representation, where meaning is assigned. Jacobson (1999) details the

intersection of whiteness and citizenship, from the definition of citizenship as Anglo-Saxon defined in our Constitution to the processes by which later immigrants of European origin were absorbed into whiteness, thereby becoming American. White Americans from ethnic groups once not seen as white often become strongly attached to whiteness once they gain this status for themselves (Lipsitz 2006:155). Because whiteness continues to be equated with citizenship and Otherness is seen as less fully American, the close connections between some historical and contemporary quilting and patriotism or nationalism are concerning.

While earlier dominant discourses were explicit in portraying whiteness as supreme, contemporary discourses of the dominant group, whites, about race have become skilled in concealing systems of power and attitudes of racial superiority. Whiteness is “the unmarked category against which difference is constructed (Lipsitz 2006:1)”, so normalized and pervasive that it operates largely unseen. It is an arrangement of power, where those who are white benefit from structural advantages and cultural practices. Frankenberg (1993) discusses dominant paradigms of thinking about race as well as the dimensions of whiteness. Whiteness is constructed in discourses, locations, and material relations that are “historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced (Ibid.:6)” and support the continued domination of whites as a group and the white elite in particular. Lipsitz (2006:155) emphasizes economic inequality as the outcome of whiteness, continued through segregation and ignorance of our history and structural problems in our economic and political systems. Because of this segregation and ignorance, we construct cultural explanations for inequality.

In studies with students at a predominantly white college, Bush (2004) investigated white students' thoughts about racial and ethnic diversity. Whites supported abstract values of equality and equity, but when confronted with information which pointed out to them actual inequality and inequity, they tended to use various narratives to negotiate and accept the contradictions between their beliefs and reality rather than engage in trying to change the reality. Several of the narratives and mechanisms Bush (2004:221-232) outlines are widely evident in the world of quilting, including the naturalization of inequality (that's just the way it is...); a lack of motivation to change as things are going okay for them; practicing self-segregation in daily life to minimize contact outside of whiteness; embracing and expressing the values of Western culture such as individualism, competition, and an ahistorical and decontextualized vision of the world; and the regulation of discourse to ensure that certain claims (such as of history and context) are transmitted and resistance to these claims is stigmatized. Whites cite fear as their reason for not socializing with people of color (Ibid.:172). An important finding of Bush's, however, is that when whites have light exposure, as in brief casual interactions or simple contacts in daily life with people of color, this can support whites in thinking that they are not operating from whiteness, that they "understand"; thus, they do not engage in further self-reflection, and remain unaware of how little they actually understand (Ibid.:232). Whites tend to see only intentional explicit, and essentialist racial discrimination as racism (Frankenberg 1993:139).

Whiteness has a complex relation to multiculturalism. White culture is often pictured as empty (Frankenberg 1993.:194) and commodified (Ibid.:199) or

homogenized. This “empty” space of whiteness and the silences around it serve to maintain its hidden centrality. Quilters, however, view their activity as connected to a long heritage of quilting. White quilters draw upon an active and diverse historical and contemporary cultural heritage which is conspicuously white; and whiteness operates to both maintain this center and naturalize it, so that it mostly remains unconscious or hidden and unseen. When whiteness is unseen or seen as empty, fascination with Other cultures as more natural or spiritual (Ibid.:199) is seen as an avenue to fullness, and appropriation occurs. But fear of the Other is as prevalent as fascination. What often results is a form of additive multiculturalism, where Other cultures are celebrated for what they can offer to whites; in this multiculturalism, whiteness remains the center (Lipsitz 2006). Inclusion of Others is claimed publicly, but through a variety of means exclusion continues in actuality. The perceptions of people of color who see this and challenge it are denied as inaccurate by participating whites.

Sallee (2003) includes a mile discussion of the common interest in and sometimes imitation of Other quilting and fabric traditions by white, middle-class quilters. She points to the number of how-to books on this topic, and explains how this interest seems to function for the white quilters:

[M]any contemporary quiltmakers share the Piecemakers’ passion for learning about “other” quilters and traditions, whether or not these traditions are authentically—or even respectfully—represented in such sources. In Los Alamos, interest in these forms of quilting is, perhaps, a familiar and non-threatening way for white women in a community lacking a great deal of racial, ethnic, and class diversity to explore commonalities and differences with quilters of other races (2003:11).

Sallee recognizes that this interest and imitation may not be respectful to those it treats as Others, but she seems to accept it, as it may be beneficial for white women, allowing them to explore racialized difference in the abstract, where they have no reasons to fear since they do not actually leave their self-segregated space. Whiteness remains centered, and multiculturalism is an add-on to this, with whites benefitting while Others remain Othered.

Eichstedt (1995) constructs a typology (drawing from Omi and Winant, Frankenburg, D'Souza, Gomez Pena, and Giroux) to consider approaches of individuals and groups to multiculturalism and art. Each paradigm has a political view of race and one of art. In the neo-liberal/conservative paradigm, art is neutral and has standards, artistic achievement and recognition is based on merit, and art should not include markers of its maker's social location. In the liberal power-blind paradigm, which she found predominant, race is acknowledged but seen as a "difference"; oppression is a thing of the past, and people of color can be supported to become "competitive" in an artistic playing field which is seen as neutral. In the radical paradigm, race and class biases in the art world are seen as needing to be challenged and changed. Power, culture, and the distribution of aesthetic resources are linked. The first two paradigms are assimilationist and cultural pluralist, with whiteness remaining as a neutral and hidden hegemonic "universal." Other ethnic and racial groups are seen as practicing separatism when they articulate a race-cognizant position or raise questions of power or white exploitation. All three paradigms see art as a conduit to decreasing racism, but only the radical one includes any vision of how this is to occur in materiality rather than psychology.

At the time of the beginning of the resurgence in quilting, the dominant paradigm of thought in academia and much popular [white] discourse was that certain groups, particularly people of color and the generationally poor were disadvantaged economically and socially because of the differences between their culture and white middle-class culture—they supposedly came from a culture of poverty, where poverty was reproduced. Thus, the economic, political, and social structures of our country were not seen as responsible for persistent inequality. This kind of thinking is still frequent more than 40 years later, and plays into views of material culture and cultural production or art, operating to devalue the work of some people and groups. Lipsitz (2006), on the other hand, discusses examples of the critique of whiteness and resistance against it in popular cultural production within communities of color in particular. He links the predominance of Western romanticism in views of art as a mechanism supporting a focus on the individual and aesthetic rather than the collective and material; but he sees art as also being capable of supporting human connections. Romanticism “looks so hard for individuality, emotion, and an aesthetic rendering of social pain that we overlook the collective, material, and political dimensions of our lives. All art entails understanding the world as it appears to others; identification with others and their experiences is what enables art to exist (Ibid.:129).” Cultural production can include the production, reproduction, and maintenance of whiteness as well as challenges to inequalities of class, race or ethnicity, and gender.

As we move forward into the data I collected and my discussion, I ask you to think about how our history influences our cultural production of quilting. How are

notions of high art or elite culture and popular culture reflected in the quilting world, and how are these entwined with gender, race, and class? How are binary conceptions of gender as feminine/masculine, which are then translated into a binary conception of the sexual division of labor as, respectively, based in the domestic and public spheres, reinforced and questioned by quilting as a gendered labor? How is the cultural production of quilters from different racial and ethnic groups, in particular, represented and understood by quilters? Is appropriation in operation in the quilting world, as quilting by previously ignored groups, such as Native American and African American women, is embraced by the art world? As aesthetic and creative elements from these quilters' works are adopted and adapted by white quilters, does appreciation grow? Does this continued adapting support the building of an aesthetic which is an alternative to a Western masculinist aesthetic such as underlies much of high art? How is hegemony, the acceptance of the status quo, visible, and how are efforts of resistance evident? All of these questions ask about power—who and what is centered in culture—but they also encourage us to change both our consciousness and the material relations of inequality of our society.

METHOD

Inquiry of this kind builds in an open-ended character. It is like the making of the piece of a quilt that remains to be attached to the other pieces in the creation of a whole pattern. We begin from where we are. The ethnographic process of inquiry is one of exploring further into those social, political, and economic processes that organize and determine the actual bases of experience of those whose side we have taken (Smith 1987:177).

My methods have been cumulative, a gathering of fabric, an unfolding, cutting apart, and stitching together. I began from my own feeling of being a quilter on the margins of quilting, and yet with a hopefulness that quilting was an inclusive and connective women's activity.

Myself As a Quilter

I have been quilting for 20 years. Although quilting is not a recent tradition or practice in my family, my family was my first inspiration. When I asked my sister how I could be an aunty to her coming child, she asked me to make a quilt. I did--I drew a vague design, found some fabrics, and started cutting and piecing. I had no understanding of technique, but just kept sewing. By the time I felt finished, the quilt was huge and I was hooked. Soon, I met the man who became my children's father and had new inspirations for quilts. I began to learn about some of the quilting traditions within the U.S. continent, as well as that of Hawaii, where we lived.

My quilting practice has changed over the years, largely in relation to my employment and family needs. For many years, I had little money to spend on tools and materials, but lots of time at home—so I sewed largely by hand. After I became a school teacher, I bought a quilting sewing machine, but had little time.

I joined a small quilting guild where we lived in rural Hawaii. Yet I mostly felt on the margins of that quilting community, as my work was not like that of other members. Mostly, I quilted on my own. I've come to embrace my own strong preference for creating functional quilts, meant for the bed; our beds are places of dreams and renewal, warmth, and beauty. A quilt can transform a bed into a strong and sacred place, a personal nest, throne, or sleep-altar. Quilts are an area where many things come together—tradition and innovation, art and craft, color and texture. I find a deep metaphor of life and human connectedness in each joining thread, in all the bits and pieces. Quilting for me is meditative and dreamlike, combining sharp focus in the present and creation outside of time. My own philosophy of quilting has evolved, especially since beginning my study of sociology.

Quilting As a Metaphor for Research

I first began to think of quilting as having any connection to my sociology as a response to a reading assignment in a qualitative methods class, Richardson and St. Pierre's (2008) "Writing: A Method of Inquiry," in which the authors encourage the linking of personal and research interests, narrative and academic writing. They provide some activities we can use to try out new ways to write and engage in research, including exploring new metaphors for research as both process and product. For me, quilting was the metaphor.

It is a long-term endeavor with known beginnings, constant decision-making junctures, and unknown ends. I begin a quilt with a vision of some graphic quality, which I sketch out and use as a guide. Then I choose a color scheme and fabrics. I cut

small pieces of fabric and sew them together in new blocks, which gradually accumulate into a new whole, a complex cloth. Throughout this construction, I may change my vision and methods many times, adapting to new possibilities and problems as they arise. This process may extend over days, weeks, even months, as I work in what niches of time I can manage; and throughout that time, I feel an elevated energy and excitement. It's like I am playing and praying together. I feel a great sense of reward when I finish the quilt top, step back, and look at this new surface I have created, unlike any other in the world. Then comes a tedious stage where I have to baste together the top, batting, and backing. I do not enjoy this step, but it is important to the impact and functionality of the final quilt. I have to clear and clean a large space on the floor to spread out the quilt layers, pin them, then sit uncomfortably for extended periods to anchor the layers together. Then comes the also uncomfortable step of actually quilting—but as I quilt, I can see the result of my work. I have to create steady tension and speed with my shoulders as I move the quilt under my machine's needle with my hands and arms, and every stitch shows. Finally I sew on the edging, and suddenly my quilt is finished. But my quilting process isn't done, as I still have to find an audience and home for my product.

My research question, with some grounding in prior readings and experiences, was my guiding sketch. I chose methods, gathered pieces of others' research and experiences, and gradually created a new crystallization. I have spent time in the writing process, putting together my layers and stitching in my design. Sometimes, I had to work through tedium and uncomfortable academic and bureaucratic requirements. Throughout

this long process, I strove to keep my creative energy active and open, to adapt to possibilities and problems. Finally, I need to find the audience for my work. Who will see its colors and textures as beautiful, and wrap themselves within it for warmth?

I wrote the above passages just prior to attending my first sociology conference—the annual meeting of the Pacific Sociological Association. I was really excited about attending, doing so was also very difficult for me, as I had to bring one teen with me, worried about the one I left at home, and money was tight. I took one break from the conference and ran off to visit a quilt museum and gallery. As I paid the entrance fee, the women at the desk asked what I was doing in town; I answered that I was attending a sociology conference. Immediately, one woman jokingly asked, “Oh, are you studying us, quilters?”

Within an hour, I had decided to do just that.

Romantic Notions—A Beginning

I imagined I would be exploring a magical world of women’s creation, where the immersion in this creativity would act as a bridge or bond, bringing together women across the usual divides of class and race which permeate our society. I now recognize that I was beginning from the predominant romanticism in thinking of art and artists. As Lipsitz (2006:121) explains, “Romanticism imagines an art immune to commercial considerations, an art capable of reconciling antagonistic social realities, of bringing people from very different circumstances together through aesthetic and emotional affinities.” Lipsitz links this romanticism with whiteness and Western culture, as a means by which realities of material and social inequality are glossed over in our

conception of art. My own understandings and conceptual frameworks thus were challenged as I engaged in this research project; I had to explore how whiteness works in my own life.

In the words of a white male traditional Hawaiian quilter I interviewed, “quilting will always reflect our society. Quilting will tell the story of who we are as a people.”

Epistemology and Methods

My epistemology and methodology is guided by multiracial and postcolonial feminist theory (Collins 1991; hooks 1981; Mohanty 2003), institutional ethnography (Smith 1987), and the use of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) as well as my own social location and life experiences. My aim is not to seek causal explanations or consider how formal variables interact, to “find” any universally generalizable interpretation or theory, but to offer a partial and particular exploration with empirical roots in the “how” of lived experiences. In conducting research on a traditionally female-gendered kind of work, I choose to begin with the experiences and expressions of quilters themselves and the context in which they quilt—their particular and material social location. From this beginning, I aim to explicate the dialectic of connections to the larger social, cultural, political, and economic structures in U.S. society, building up from the problematics of our everyday world and activities. As Dorothy Smith explains, this is a methodological refusal to make women and women’s work the object of research, instead maintaining their subjectivity (1987:88) through investigating the everyday world as a problematic.

The method of institutional ethnography assists with explicating these social relations. With a little flexibility in application, quilting fits Smith’s definition of an

institution as a “complex of relations... organized around a distinctive function” where “the intersection and coordination of more than one relational mode of the ruling apparatus” operates (1987:160). An institutional ethnography involves three procedures: an analysis of how ideology is reflected in work organization, a viewing of work as “the ways in which people are actually involved in the production of their everyday world” and how this is organized by institutional processes, and finally the building up to how these are social relations, or the making explicit of connections to relations of ruling which underlie and are interwoven in individual accounts (Smith 1987:166-7).

Patricia Hill Collins’ (1991) concepts of both/and rather than binary thinking, connections between the mind, body, and heart, and self-definition and self-determination have informed my thinking about this research project. Similarly, hooks’ (1981) challenge to work towards a feminism where women of all races and classes will feel supported and affirmed in racially mixed groups is integral to this research. Mohanty (2003) extends this vision transnationally. Smith (2008) encourages a decolonizing approach to research that is an alternative to the Western positivist practice of hunting, racing, and gathering to “discover.” Together, these thinkers urge us to engage in reflection about ourselves and the social construction of Others through culture and ideology.

My experiences in the academy have deepened my learning through reading, writing, and asking questions; but my experiences in life, particularly almost 20 years of living in a very rural and Native area of Hawaii, have taught me to value and practice listening and watching. There are many ways of knowing. This research project is a

small piece towards decolonization, a change in worldview “that forces a society to confront its past and address it at a structural and institutional level that challenges the systems of power (Smith 2008:121).” In particular, I aim to induce experiential understanding on the part of those who are in the dominant group (Bishop 2008). As such, I hope that this research will be of interest and accessible not just to academics, but to quilters themselves.

I am a white American woman who has mostly lived from paycheck to paycheck, first those of my mother and later my own. While economically I am working-class, educationally I am in the upper middle-class. But in some ways, I am an outsider within whiteness, as I am a mother of children whose “other half” is Ethiopian. I have a deep, personal interest in issues of race and ethnicity, as well as gender and class, within the United States and in this world of globalization. Thus, my positionality and identity is intertwined with this research in multiple and often conflicting manners. All analysis and interpretation represents only my own partial understanding and limited position within a scholarly and community discourse.

Data Collection and Analysis

To gather empirical data, I have visited meetings of three quilt guilds in Northern California, observing and interacting with guild members. Along the way, I have conducted in-depth interviews of an hour or more each with 13 quilters using a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix A). I chose interviews as my method of data collection because of its usefulness in investigating patterns and themes (Warren 2002:85). Johnson (2002) suggests that in-depth interviewing is useful when research

questions seek knowledge of depth, about something often taken for granted, where there may be conflicted emotions, or where different groups have varied perspectives on a phenomenon. He also advises that it is productive to be flexible during interviews, as often insights come from unexpected diversions (2002:111). This qualitative study offers the perspectives and lived experiences of participants; this “capturing of the individual’s point of view” and “examining the constraints of everyday life” (Denzin and Lincoln 2008:16) is important. It does not answer “why”, but seeks to construct a crystallization (Richardson and St. Pierre 2008) of the interaction of my analysis and stories shared by participants.

I did not use a specific or purposeful sampling method to select quilters to interview, except that I aimed to hear from as wide a variety of quilters as I could, including men as well as women, and quilters from a variety of racial and ethnic groups. Interviews mostly occurred in quilters’ homes, but a few were conducted face to face in another location, such as a café, and one through email exchanges. My questions focused on quilting as a personal and cultural activity and quilters’ participation in quilting groups such as guilds. I began with a question asking quilters to tell me what they felt to be important about themselves, their lives, families, etc. I did not ask explicit questions about class, racial/ethnic identity or sexuality, but quilters offered this information in telling about themselves. I also did not set out to ask interviewees about their own experiences and thoughts about race and ethnicity, but I did listen for these threads in our conversations.

I took notes immediately after each interview to record additional data, such as comments the participant made before or after the recorder was in operation, the overall tenor of the interview, reflection on my own performance in guiding the interview, etc. Although I did not explicitly use a collaborative, interactive, or co-constructed interview form, as suggested by feminist methodological theorists such as Ellis and Berger (in Gubrium and Holstein 2002), I did strive to create an interview context wherein participants felt comfortable and that their knowledge and experience was honored.

All interviewees' identities are confidential; I made the choice not to include any names, as I felt this might bring out a desire by some possible interviewees for publicity; having your name in print is, after all, a major pathway to increasing artistic reputation. I digitally recorded interviews, transcribed them, and then analyzed them using grounded theory methods of constant comparison, with concepts arising from a combination of sensitizing concepts gained from a review of related theoretical and substantive literature and the data itself (Charmaz 2006). Other aspects of grounded theory which guided my work are its emphasis on the engagement of the researcher, research as "fluid, interactive, and open-ended (Charmaz 2006:178)," and creation of categories which related to life and social relations, and the building up towards abstraction in analysis rather than beginning there. I coded interview data using Atlas.ti software to explore themes and begin to develop a theoretical construct. Throughout the process, I wrote notes and memos based on emerging themes and further questions to consider as I worked towards a "conceptual analysis of patterned relationships (Ibid.:181)."

Finally, in addition to interviews with quilters and visiting guild meetings, I attended a major West Coast annual quilt show, an annual show of an established guild, and a small show put on by a new “modern” guild. I also participated in a Black Heritage Month event, put on by one of the guilds I visited, to teach quilting to any interested people.

The Guilds

The three guilds whose meetings I attended exhibited very different organizational structures, purposes, and membership demographics and qualities (Table 1).

The first guild was located in a small city in Northern California. In many ways it represented a typical guild, with a mid-sized membership of about 200 predominantly white, middle-class, mid-life and older women. The majority were in heterosexual marriages and had adult children. This guild met once monthly on a weekday evening in a large building at the local fairgrounds, where it also held a biennial quilt show. Its focus, as described on its website and observed in meetings, was to support appreciation and knowledge of, as well as interest in, quilting; it supported member’s enjoyment of quilting as a leisure and/or art activity and the making and donation of quilts to community charities, particularly those serving veterans, people receiving intensive or chronic medical care, families coping with poverty, and people who had experienced a natural or other disaster. In these activities, the guild functioned as a means for members to participate in community caregiving. Members also utilized guild

Table 1. Characteristics of Three Quilt Guilds in Northern California

Characteristic	First Guild	Second Guild	Third Guild
Location	Small city	Metropolitan area	Metropolitan area
Focus	Leisure, community	Career connections, art	African American history, community
Location of meetings	Local fairgrounds	Church in wealthy neighborhood on hill overlooking metropolitan area	Public library in historically Black neighborhood, blighted by urban redevelopment
Community activities	Charity; community caregiving	Charity; long distance and international caregiving	Community intellectual; Othermother
Networking	Community economic exchange	Women's network with art world, culture industry	Black women's professional groups; community organizations
Membership	About 200; predominantly white, few Native American, other ethnicities	About 400; predominantly white, few Asian American, African American	About 80; predominantly African American, few white

membership as a path to community economic exchange, as they were cognizant of who in the guild was connected with what economic enterprise or service in the community, and often chose to patronize businesses of fellow members or members' families before other businesses in the community. The racial/ethnic makeup of this guild, predominantly white with less than 5% of members Native American and a few other racial/ethnic groups, was reflective of the demographics in its geographical area. I will

discuss some of the complexities of this racial/ethnic makeup in a later section.

Membership in the next two guilds was also mostly middle-class, mid-life and older women; however, membership did not reflect the racial/ethnic demographics of the major metropolitan area in which they were located, although in both cases it did more closely match the racial/ethnic makeup of the immediate residential area near where the guild met. Again, the complexities of this racial/ethnic makeup will be addressed in a later section.

The second guild's stated purposes were similar to those of the first guild, except that it was noted that "fine quilting" was the focus. There was also clear pride in the fact that membership included many well-known names in quilting, with updates provided on members' quilts being featured in major shows and winning awards, members' participation in art quilt or other art association shows, members publishing books and teaching quilting, and other activities which demonstrate a high level of connectedness with both the larger art world of museums and galleries and the culture industry which had grown up around quilting. One white woman member described the guild as being a "pretty diverse group" in terms of these connections, and added, "We have, do have members who are, you know, internationally known quilters and things like that, and not all groups have that." This guild met monthly on a weekday evening in an elegant church located on the top of the hill, in a wealthy and mostly white neighborhood, with a view of the major metropolitan area. It had the highest membership fee of the three guilds. While this guild also participated in charity and caregiving through quilts, many of the organizations it donated quilts to are international or far from the guild's geographic area.

Through its depth and breadth of connections to the larger quilting world, art world and culture industry, the guild functioned as a network to support members' building their creative careers. The guild's organizational structure included committees with chairs for some of these networking functions, and its website featured sophisticated design with extensive links to members' personal artist websites. Membership was predominantly white, with a small number of Asian and African Americans.

The third guild featured "African American" in its name, and did have a primary focus on quilting as connected with African American history and the African American community. However, its website and all guild literature were very clear that any and all who were interested were encouraged to attend and become members. As a white woman quilter visiting meetings and attending a community event sponsored by the guild, I felt entirely welcomed. This guild met monthly on a weekend during the day in a public library in an area which has a rich history of being the center of the Black community in this part of the state. At the time of my visit, however, this was a neighborhood which had been left poor and blighted by the cumulative effects of "urban redevelopment" since the 1960s and social and economic patterns which have operated to create similar inner city areas across the United States. Many members had lived nearby earlier in their lives, but at that time lived in other areas, from which they travelled sometimes significant distances to participate in guild meetings and activities. The guild's focus was reflected in their provision of brief informational handouts on the history of quilting by African Americans, including a thoughtful resource list for further learning, and the availability of free quilting resources, such as magazines and books.

Community activities focused on teaching youth, particularly African American youth, about quilting and how to quilt, as well as making quilts for donation to organizations active in the local African American community. As such, the guild and its members functioned as community or organic intellectuals in the Gramscian sense or as Othermothers (Collins 1991). Community activities were facilitated through close work with local divisions of national Black women's professional organizations. Membership was predominantly African American, with a few white women; however, attendees and participants at an annual Black Heritage Month activity sponsored by the guild included a wide range of ages and racial/ethnic groups.

Participants

This analysis incorporates data from 13 in-depth interviews with quilters. All interviewees were members of one or more quilt guilds, and all but two were members of the above guilds. Their level of participation in guild meetings and guild-sponsored activities varied from occasional to daily. Ten participants were heterosexual women, and all but two were married at the time of the interview. Eleven of the women had one or more adult children. The three men interviewed all self-identified as gay and single. Participants largely matched the profile of the "dedicated quilter" as seen in triennial surveys by Quilters Newsletter and Quilts, Inc. in terms of age and class status markers of education and household income. Four were in their 50s, six in their 60s, and three in their 70s. Eleven completed college and had worked or were working in professional occupations. I did not collect data on household income, but based on participant's reports of their own working careers and those of their spouses and observations of

residences and other markers of class status placed most of them in the middle-class, upper middle-class, and perhaps one or two in the upper-class. Seven participants made or had made some or all of their income through quilting-related work, including writing books, teaching classes, working in quilt industry jobs (quilt shops, publishers, etc.), and selling quilts or providing quilting services (Table 2). All names are pseudonyms, and in some cases some information about a participant was abbreviated or not included as necessary to support confidentiality.

While I conducted a 14th interview, I have not included that data in this work. This interviewee made statements about her activities within the quilting world which I was not able to confirm through publically available information.

One interesting pattern arose as I talked with quilters. All African American and Native American interviewees talked about their own involvement in and learning from liberation movements, including women's, civil rights, and American Indian movements. They continued to use these values within their daily lives and quilting, and in what work they chose. Similarly, two of the men interviewed expressed the importance to them of the gay rights and women's movements. In contrast, none of the white women interviewed spoke about these movements.

Participants' stories, experiences, and my observations at quilting events formed a dense and complex fabric, often dialectic and contradictory. Threads of gender, race, and class emerged but were woven together intersectionally. Patterns included celebration of creativity and cultural production, particularly in a women-centered craft/art; enjoyment of the process of quilting as well as pride in the product and the ways in which quilts

Table 2. Information on Interviewees

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Race/ethnicity</u>	<u>Quilting practice</u>	<u>Other notes</u>
Amy	White	Art	Works for major quilting publisher
Barbara	White	Fabric manipulation	Connects to “ladies of leisure” in family history
Bea	African American, Jewish	Recycled fabrics; inspired by Afro-traditional, innovative	Active in civil rights, women’s movements since 1960s
Dave	White	Traditional, innovative	Worked in beauty, floral industries
Dora	Filipina	Art; formerly traditional	1 st generation immigrant
Dorothy	White	Art	Dyes own fabric
Grace	Native American	Art	Works in Native program
Joy	Mexican American	Traditional, innovative	2 nd /3 rd generation immigrant
Kay	African American	Art	Teaches quilting and African American history to children
Maude	White	Art, innovative; some	Worked in health care
Michael	White	Traditional Hawaiian	Learned from Hawaiian “Aunty”
Nancy	White	Innovative, traditional	Active in community organizations
Ray	White	Art, innovative	Long time quilter

carry values outside of the economic sphere; and deep engagement in quilting-related social activities as the core of one's life within the community. Each person's story contained some of these threads, but each also featured unique aspects and expressions of self which embellished [in the textile sense] and brought sparkle to the metaphorical quilt formed in patching them together. In the next chapter, we will explore some of these stories.

Limitations

Several limitations to my study are prominent and important to note. First, my sample of guilds and interviewees were concentrated in just two geographical areas, each of which has its own uniqueness in terms of local culture, economics, and demographics. My sample size was also small, and when quilters were considered according to variables such as gender and race within this small sample, these subsamples represented only one to three individuals; this is a major limiting factor in my study. Further, the number of quilters interviewed from a particular guild or group varied and in some cases was small, which limited my analysis of dynamics at a group level. Also, I was not successful in interviewing any quilters who were participants in both a predominantly white guild and one composed primarily of quilters of color; the stories of these quilters would surely have added insights and experiences which are not adequately included in this research.

Another limitation is that I did not prominently feature my interests in reflections of class or race and ethnicity in the quilting world in my recruitment information to interviewees. Perhaps my sample would be quite different if I had, as some interviewees

may not have chosen to participate if they anticipated in-depth conversations about these topics. Because I had not made these areas explicit in my recruitment information, I also did not push for further conversation around these topics beyond what an interviewee offered in response to mild queries on my part.

DATA ANALYSIS: THREADS

“[M]an produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom....Man therefore also forms things in accordance with the laws of beauty (Marx 1964:114).”

Quilting as Culture and Identity

Participants consistently expressed how quilting was beneficial and even necessary for them, as creativity, self-determination, relaxation, self-care, and a means of connecting with and caring for others. They also emphasized the importance of quilting in our culture and society, both as a women-centered strand of material culture and as an alternative to consumption.

Quilting was seen not just as a form of passing time, but as an active and ongoing accomplishment. Quilters expressed wonder at how others could live without an activity like quilting in their lives. As Joy, a Mexican American woman said, “I don’t know what they do with their life.... I can’t imagine not having something to do. Yeah. I can’t imagine it.” Kay, an African American woman, said, “I like to do fun stuff; otherwise, I’m bored.” Maude, a white woman, summed up,

It's having something that you really have a passion about, to go to, and just thoroughly enjoy, so it's really nice to have something that is so enjoyable, and so creative, and we can donate or, you know, to organizations if we want to make something in that sense, or for other family members, and know that it's appreciated and will be cared for, and just the satisfaction I think that you get from creating something, and that you just like to do it so much, and it's always there.

Producing a material object, the quilt, was highly valued, whether the result was seen as an object of art, a unique and highly personal gift to another, or simply a practical means of providing warmth. Ray, a white man, told about hearing himself talked about

by another male quilter, who remarked that he made all his quilts as gifts; he was surprised that this was noted by the speaker, as "...I just thought to myself, I thought everybody did that."

But for many, the process of quilting was special time, relaxing and rejuvenating for the quilter. Dorothy, a white woman, said,

To tell you the truth, when I'm actually quilting at night at my studio, it's a very meditative thing, and I bet you find a lot of women telling you that...It allows me to focus on something completely out of, that has nothing to do with the worries and stresses of my business or my personal life, so. And at the same time, I'm being constructive. I'm making something.

This was echoed by a Joy, a Mexican American woman,

I absolutely love it. I mean, quilting is a huge, huge part of my life. When my mother called, she'd go, "What are you doing?" "I'm sewing." "Well, don't you have anything better to do?" And she's a very uptight woman, but for me to go into my sewing room, it's like anybody else going out for a one hour massage. I go in there, and I can just decompress, and just feel everything just go.

Bea, an African American woman who had been active in struggles for women's rights, Civil Rights, and against inequality in income and wealth since the 1960s, laughed and noted, "You're the first person I've really talked to from this sociological, trying to look at it from this [perspective]. For me, it's, I'm enjoying my quiet time, you know, and given the fact that I'm extremely political, I find that it's relaxing, getting away from all that heavy political stuff..." Grace, a Native American woman, told of how becoming a quilter supported her in coming out of a period of depression. Nancy, a white woman, used quilting as a time for self-care after taking care of her responsibilities and necessities, particularly when she was a working professional, mother, and spouse, saying, "I tend to

reward myself for doing those other things by quilting.”

Quilters also described feelings of self-determination in the creative process and the pride they felt in their creation. Dave, a white man, said,

I do the kind of quilting that I want to do...I just use what I like with what I like. People say I have good color sense, but I don't care what other people say. I put together what I think goes together. ...It's the sewing, it's the thinking. That's what I enjoy.

Amy, a white woman, explained, “I like experimenting with different things, I'm influenced by a lot of different things.”

Maude, a white woman, noted the social aspect of quilting as important, “There's just a lot of enjoyment in working with other people, through the guild.” Joy, a Mexican American woman, added her valuing of being a part of a historical tradition, “And that's what I enjoy doing, is passing that knowledge on to the next generation. I think that's important. That's our legacy to others, is to pass on to somebody else.”

Quilters noted not just how quilting was important to them personally, but in our culture and society. They described quilting as an open space for creativity and an alternative to a consumer orientation, where the emphasis was on making something with one's own hands to give to others, producing a material form of caring. They also valued the woman-centeredness of quilting's history, and how quilts could tell the stories of both individuals and our collective culture or society.

Several saw the breadth of possibilities within quilting as a strength. Dora, a Filipina woman, said, “Quilting is, and it encompasses everybody, whether you're a traditional quilter or an arty type quilter.” Nancy, a white woman, described the variety in

quilting today,

I really like it. It, it opens up all, much greater creative possibility, many more ways that you can be creative, and I like to look at the new things. I'm not necessarily going to do them, but it's good to, there are always people pushing the boundaries, because then the bound begins to be included in the boundaries.

Several quilters noted how quilts provide warmth, functioning both as a symbol of caring and as an actual material object. Joy, a Mexican American woman, explained this and added her objection to our society's orientation towards consumption,

Because there's a lot of you going into that quilt, giving it to somebody. Yeah. I think that's really important. And as far as our culture, I think we've gone too much into a throw-away society, and it's very much okay, use it once and toss it. And with quilts and quilting, it's passing ourselves on to somebody else. Or giving of ourselves to somebody else.

She continued, "It's like sending little children out. One of my, the quilt guild ladies, she calls it covering the world, one quilt at a time." Nancy, a white woman, centered her appreciation of quilts on their provision of warmth and beauty within the home,

Well, there's something about quilting that um, quilting is something that the result, the quilt, has warmth and beauty. And I think that that's something that as a quilter pleases me, when I think, oh, that turned out well, that's really beautiful. And we share this among our group, and I think each one in many ways was realizing that that's a part of it they really liked, and it enhances the home. Yeah; providing warmth, providing a way of being cared for.

Several expressed thoughts about quilting's place in United States history. Amy, a white woman, noted quilting as a special aspect of women's history as well as creative work done with one's hands,

I think it's, I think it's cool that it's an activity, I mean, there are some men in it, but that it is so woman-centered. And that it can be such a source of creativity, and accomplishment, and it's something to you know, I like the

fact that you do it with your hands, and that you physically get involved with it, even if you might use a computer to help you design or plan things. There's the tactile part of it, you know, and I like the fact that there are so many things that you can do with it, you know, that you can find a niche, or a style or whatever that works for you. I think for a lot of people, it is their social activity, and I think that's good.

Joy, a Mexican American woman, reminisced about some of the aspects of quilting that she values that are no longer practiced, particularly women quilting collaboratively and the holding and adapting of quilt patterns as a form of common intellectual property,

But I see us plugged in, and nobody's listening to each other, everybody's in their own little world, and we've lost that quilting bee kind of thing, where you get together and you socialize and everybody would see each other, learn new patterns, yes. And quilters were very giving, and I see a lot of quilters that are very giving even now, but even in our own guild, I see people, "Well, did you get permission for that? Did you ask if you could do that?" And I think we're getting too much into that. And unfortunately I see it with the artists that have crossed over, I guess, to our world. And they're very protective of their work. They're very protective of their work. Yeah.

Another white woman, Amy, who serves on the Board of a major quilt museum, said "But I think the idea of conserving the history of quilting, what it came from, how it spreads and how it grows, and recognizing it, that's important."

Michael, a white man, viewed quilting as a cultural activity linking primary needs for survival with telling the stories of the society,

As long as human beings live and require the three primary elements of food, housing and clothing, there will be quilting. And quilting will always reflect our society. Quilting will always tell the story of who we are as a people....Like the arts in general, quilting is essential to telling and sharing the story of our culture. Perhaps even more so than other art forms, quilting is born and grows forth from the very heart and fabric of our lives. Always! Quilting tells the story of who we are as a people.

Quilters interviewed aligned with quilters featured in many other studies, as they were in their 50s, 60s, and 70s. Whereas other studies simply cite that this typicality of quilters as middle-aged and older is due to demands on women's time earlier in life by family and work, interviewees pointed to some other reasons why they themselves are quilters at this point in life. Bea, an African American woman then in her 70s who had been highly politically active since the 1960s, explained that she had not become a quilter until after her retirement about 10 years ago because, "I was too busy making a revolution to do things like sew." Both African American women stressed that they sought out social activities with others their age who are active and creative. One participated in the physical activities of tap dance and tai chi as well as her own creative pursuits.

Grace, a Native American woman, positioned women's creativity blossoming in mid-life as evident in her people's tradition as well as common among quilters:

What I've always believed is Indian people, Indian women, even some men, but Indian women, they did not start basketry until they were older and their children were grown. It's true, people don't believe it, but it's true, because, and I learned this from my grandmother; she never said it or anything, but I realized just from her. After your children are grown, then you've got it; it's just like quilting! Exactly like quilting; you're working, you're raising your kids, you don't have time. Some did, some could do both, but mostly these were older women, because like my grandmother and I knew other women, they were making baskets good, you know.

Quilting as Community

Quilters talked about the bond they felt with other quilters and what they felt were common values held by quilters. Amy, a white woman, said,

It's just, it's like um, whenever you go to a quilting-related event, you

know you're going to have something in common. It's kind of like you can go by yourself to a quilting retreat and know that you can sit down next to anybody at dinner and tell the topic of conversation, because it's all about quilting. You don't have to go through the whole who are you, and what do you do. It's like you already have that, there's already that instant, "Oh, I know you're a quilter; we'll be fine."

Kay, an African American woman, explained, "Well, I do find that quilters are loving people. Yeah. And friendly... but um, I rather like, because we're the same, we have something really in common, the love of quilting, and the love of being creative. Um. And the love of having something of your own."

Male quilters told about how they were helped to feel welcome, even when they were the only man in a large group of women. Dave said,

Quilters are the friendliest people. They will help you with any question if they can, or direct you to someone that can help you.... And someone will say, I think I've got something [the fabric one is seeking], and share it....And when worst comes to worst, you can always ask, "What are you working on?" Or, "How's your husband doing?"

Ray explained,

You just make friends, and the friendship is on the level of how we go through life, and you get my jokes, and I get yours. I understand where you're coming from, and you understand mine. So I guess I just cotton to people that are similar in their thoughts, you know, and not exactly similar, we just get to discuss things.

Quilters spoke of the importance of guilds as their quilting communities or even "families", and their appreciation for this coming together in today's world. Grace, a Native American woman explained her choice to join a guild near her residence,

Um hm. Be a part of a community. And I think that's something we don't have too much anymore, because we're just so isolated from each other. That's what I like about the quilters' guild, because we have become a community. That's what I really like about it.

Some mentioned ways that members behave that help to support this feeling of community. For instance, Nancy, a white woman, said,

And people, definitely it's people with some shared values. You don't normally in the guild hear people talk about politics. You don't hear them talk about religion, although you know that there are some people there who are very religious, and it's very out front, but they're not proselytizing, and um, but the value that's shared is the quilting itself and the sharing of that. The best part of any meeting is show and tell, and we all know that [laughs]. And the other thing is that people are making things to give to other people, and that's a shared value, that, yeah, we need to be giving.

The same woman talked about the need to find one's way within the large group of the guild, particularly through becoming involved in guild activities and projects.

And it's a big guild, so that if you just go and you just sit in a chair and participate in a program, you really don't get to meet anybody. People are friendly, and they smile, they speak to you, but you don't really get to...so I realized that what I had to do was to volunteer for committees and things, which is what I did.

She also had a perspective on some of the fracturing that happens within guilds,

Well, there are, in any group, especially a women's group, you're going to find cliques, and women who've known each other from somewhere else, or who've known each other for years, or they share something else in common that brought them together, and I really don't think the problem is those cliques. I think the problem is the people standing outside of those and wanting to be part of it and not knowing how to do it.

In summary, she expressed, "You just have to kind of go where you're comfortable, and find a way to be comfortable, where you are."

One African American woman, Bea, described the reasons she saw for the existence of a guild especially focused on African American quilting, as a place where African American quilters in particular feel comfortable and where their participation is

highly valued and supported. Telling about why some fellow guild members travel fairly long distances to participate in this guild, she said,

So she comes all that way, because she's also participating with a group of women, and she feels an affinity. So what are some of those streams? Some of those streams are an appreciation of African American history, an appreciation of trying to move forward black women's role in history that has not been adequately recognized, and actually creating something.

Another African American woman member of this guild, Kay, explained some of the reasons she had chosen not to participate in a predominantly white guild near her home.

But that, negative people I can't be around. It just sucks my enjoying energy. So that was the only other group, but we have a quilt guild here in town, and they're a giant one, with a lot, a 100 plus people, but I've never been interested, because they do little triangles and stuff. I'm not, I don't want, that doesn't inspire me at all.

She wanted to socialize with other quilters who shared some of her aesthetic preferences, and where she knew she would have positive relationships with other guild members. I will return to this connection of aesthetics and race in a later section; briefly, the standards used in predominantly white quilting shows and groups has served to obscure and de-value quilting work by many quilters of color.

Most (10 of 13) interviewees belonged to smaller quilting groups as well as guilds. Eight of these participated in sub-groups composed of members of their guilds, with about five to nine members. These smaller groups were often arranged around particular quilting interests or styles, but sometimes also around creating collaborative group projects. Participating in a small group was described by several quilters as encouraging their development as quilters and/or artists. For example, Dora, a Filipina, talked about her mini-group:

[Q]uiling, I think is a social thing, also. There are people who just quilt, but you really need other people to give you...I have lots of ideas, but you need somebody to say, ok, I want to see that, you know, such and such. And I missed that. So when we did this, I was back into it, I was quilting more again....And I was honored, because the women that were in the group, I thought were all so talented. So, then that, they've been really pushing my envelope, as far as that's concerned.

Bea, an African American woman, participated in quilting groups at senior centers near her residence as well as her guild. Several interviewees were members of more than one quilt guild.

In addition, 11 of 13 interviewees reported occasionally to frequently taking single-event or ongoing classes to learn and improve skills they used in their quilting work.

Race, Class, and Community Work: Charity or Change

One area where variation in norms was illustrated was the framing and choice of community work done by a guild. The two predominantly white guilds shared similarities in their focus, very much aligned with the hegemonic values of middle-class whiteness and community action as charity, while the predominantly African American guild seemed to work from a perspective that talked back to some of these norms and sought social change.

Barbara, a white woman, told about the purpose behind her guild's making and giving of quilts to a charity organization.

Yeah, that's sort of to encourage them to be nurturing. That's what the doll quilts are for, because, you know, the children who are getting Salvation Army gifts...and so the point, if they pick a stuffed animal or doll toy, they get to have a quilt to go with it to practice cuddling and nurturing their little thing.

Another white woman, Nancy, shared some of the process that her guild went through in deciding whether or not to support pregnant and parenting teen programs in local schools through donations of quilts.

And there were some people that didn't think that was a real good idea, to be supporting the teen parents, although as soon as you tell them what that really was, it was, "Oh, yeah, I know that we need to be helping those parents to be better parents."...And we had the criteria. I was the chair of the community quilts at one point, about 10 years ago, and we, I went and um found and evaluated every school district that had a teen parent program in it, and we concluded that the programs that we wanted to support were those that were providing parent training, not just a babysitting service so that someone could go to school, but in addition to that, then there needed to be sessions where they talked about, you know, how do you treat tantrums, and basically parenting children.

The underlying belief here seemed to be that people coping with poverty and teen parents were in their difficult situations due to some sort of deficit in their family, some lack of parenting knowledge, desire, or an emotion, so that they were not able to adequately nurture their children. These families were not meeting the expectations of the white middle-class, which was assumed to be the correct way of being a family. Further, gestures of charity, of giving without direct relationships, were community action which sustained social distance and did not question the underlying social structures of inequality. Notably, the geographic distance across which these acts of charity occurred differed between the two predominantly white guilds. The guild which had a mostly middle-class membership and held being an active part of its community as a central value gave within its own immediate community, while the guild in the metropolitan area which seemed to have a membership of higher class status on average often gave quilts to

organizations in faraway places both in the United States and internationally.

In contrast, the predominantly African American guild focused its community work on providing opportunities for children, especially, to learn about quilting and African American history. This guild did give quilts as donations, but seemed to choose organizations which were closely connected with the African American community and engaged in work to address some of the structural aspects of inequality which particularly impacted this community.

Quilting as Class

Given the class status of most of my interviewees, I can make only limited observations about the interplay of class and quilting. Higher class status did seem to correlate with quilting as art, whereas lower class status seemed to correlate with quilting as leisure activity or for utilitarian, functional purposes. Related to this, the ways in which art quilters and other quilters placed their focus within their quilting differ. However, overall, there were more commonalities than differences, and the divisions and patterns were not clear and consistent.

Three interviewees who grew up in families with less material resources articulated how this informed their quilting practice. Bea, an African American woman, told about the making of quilts for warmth by her father's family,

But their clothes were passed down from one child to another, and then finally put in the rag bag, and made into rags for cleaning, and quilting. So that's how I was introduced to quilting. My understanding of it comes from what I remember; my own understanding of how these things work is that it was a poverty thing. This is how, you know, using those things up.

Bea further discussed the links between race, class, and gender in this early experience of quilting:

Well, the point is, the problem, even though we often articulate it in racial terms, there are also fundamental class issues....But my experience was rooted more mainly in poverty than in conscious social resistance to racism. On the other hand, it's also an expression of female, you know, contribution.

Bea described her own quilting practice as being an expression and honoring of this heritage within her own family and many other families coping with poverty. She objected to the aspects of quilting today which push it towards being a middle-class leisure activity or art simply as art.

One of the things is quilting has also become an industry. And I'm very rooted still in my own background, where quilting was how poor people were able to take pieces of material and sew them together and make something both utilitarian and aesthetic.... I never go to quilting shops, fabric shops. I buy all my materials at the creative re-use center, you know. I use old clothes. I use scraps that I find in these second hand stores. And like that. That's how I pay tribute to the tradition of working-class, you know....Because I hear people talking, "Oh, I went to the fabric store, and I can't believe it, I spent \$300." You know. So as a matter of fact, I feel it's somewhat offensive, you know. And the other thing is, I much more enjoy the quilting style of like the Gee's Bend people, you know. It's fun, beautiful, they use used materials; they pay tribute to me to the roots of quilting, at least from the African American tradition.

Grace, a Native American woman, similarly recalled her grandmother's making of quilts from the family's clothing, "Yeah, that's what I liked about quilts that she made, because it was, we were wearing it, or she was wearing it, and back then that's what they used, was their old clothes, their old garments and jackets. And you know, I liked that." In her own quilting practice at the time of our interview, however, Grace chose to use new fabrics, including those of her own design, and considered herself mainly an art

quilter, making quilts to be viewed rather than used. Although she did not grow up in a family with a quilting heritage, Joy, a Mexican American woman, valued quilts as functional, and these are what she herself created. In her words, “I’m back to the roots of quilting. Give it to somebody to make them feel better, keep them warm at night. That’s where I think it’s important. Because I want you to lay under it, and fall asleep under it, and so most of my stuff is bigger.”

Bea grew up in a working-class family, but she herself attained an advanced education and had worked as an intellectual and academic. Although she did not participate in the quilting fabric industry, she did own three sewing machines. Grace also had attained an advanced education, and worked as a professional. For both, quilting was closely connected with their cultural heritage, rather than being a simple leisure activity.

Joy grew up in a working-class family, and had built her own career working within quilting shops and running her own small sewing and quilting-related businesses, raising her children in a middle-class status. A fourth interviewee, Dave, had worked in service industries. Of the various interviewees, these two practiced the most traditional quilting, and expressed the most concern over possible loss of quilting skills as the quilting world had expanded to include art quilting. They emphasized the need for a certain level of craftsmanship and sewing technique to carry quilting forward into the future, and worried about some of the techniques, such as gluing and raw edge applique, which had become common practices in art quilting; these produced a quilt which could not stand up to functional use. Still, both expressed appreciation for quilts which included the quilter’s personal aesthetic and creativity within broad traditions. Dave said,

“I want every quilt I do to be a one of a kind. It doesn't have to be an art quilt, it doesn't have to be something that shouts out this is different, but I've got to know that it's different.”

Quilting as Art

Several quilters mentioned concerns with trends in what was considered art quilting. These centered around the movement of techniques and priorities away from a sewing-skills based form of production, not the concept of quilting as art. The following quotes illustrate common objections.

Joy said, “We're going more into that, in the art quilt world, cut and paste, or just glue it on. Or whatever.” Barbara clarified why she did not consider herself an art quilter, “Well, I'm not an art quilter. I think they look messy.” Dave emphasized the shortcuts taken by some art quilters and the impact he saw these having on the outcome, “It just doesn't look like you felt it was worth your time to do it right.” Others talked about the movement within art quilting to consider oneself a “surface designer” working in textile as a medium rather than a quilter; they felt this was a distancing tactic as well as unnecessary. Dora said, “There are quite a lot of surface designers now...to me that's like re-inventing the wheel. There's so many beautiful fabrics, and here we're trying to paint something.”

Several participants objected to the move to make what have been publicly shared block and quilt designs proprietary through copyrighting, and the intrusion of this economic model into the cultural activity of quilting. While they generally agreed on the right of a person who has created an art quilt, a unique design not based on traditionally

shared patterns, to claim that as intellectual property, they objected to the commercialized extension of this into traditional quilting. Participants generally valued quilting where the maker produced a unique quilt, and did not value the use of commercially produced kits or simply following a pattern as published in a magazine or other quilting resource. It was fine to use these resources for ideas, inspirations, and technical learning, but the quilter then should insert him or herself into the creative process, at least tweaking the design to personalize it and make it their own. This showed a commitment to creativity in quilting, rather than just producing a quilt; creativity was more valued than simple production.

Quilters who identified themselves as artists or art quilters tended to focus on aesthetics, speaking of their quilts as visual messages from themselves to viewers and the importance of thinking about the experience of the audience to guide a quilt's design and execution. They used elements of the language of the art world, talking about color values, line, composition, etc. In contrast, quilters who did not identify themselves as artists talked about their quilts in the context of relationships, telling stories of how their quilts connected them with other people, expressed their own personalities or identities, supported their feeling of belonging within various groups, and formed a link with their familial and cultural heritage.

Amy, a white woman who worked in a professional position within the quilting culture industry, viewed this industry as being more quilter-driven than driving quilters' practices. She described industry companies as being always on the lookout for new

trends within people's quilting practices, and working to be responsive to these trends as a necessity for remaining profitable.

I think it has to rise up from what quilters themselves want. You can't afford to take too many risks by trying to impose what you want, you know, fabric manufacturers can say, okay, this is what we're going to do, and if people don't buy it...so you really, obviously the idea is to catch the trend at the beginning.

None of my interviewees described their own quilting practice as being driven by the quilting culture industry; instead, they talked about how they found their own ways to make what they wanted to make. They did talk about enjoying seeing and trying new techniques and styles, adapting them to their own tastes, and what kinds of fabric they prefer.

Gender and Resistance: Women's Space

Interviewees' responses as to how they thought about their interest in quilting and their quilting activity in relation to gender varied widely. Some interviewees, such as in the quote from Amy included earlier, explicitly related their connection to quilting as a women-centered activity. In a quote from Nancy also included earlier, she expressed how she valued quilts as bringing warmth to the home; this connects with gendered labor visions of the home as women's sphere. One white woman, Dorothy, indicated that she did not feel gender to be important; "I hadn't thought about it [quilting] that way. Sewing was an interest, and I don't think about it being gender-related." In contrast, Bea, an African American woman, shared extensive thoughts about quilting and the women's movement. I asked her about the use of quilting as a metaphor for women's culture by some feminist groups, particularly in the 1990s; she answered,

I think it has some value. There's some affinity to that. Particularly since we don't, haven't had in the last 20 years or so that mass mobilization of women, like we had in the 70s...so using the quilt; I don't think we should carry it too far. The point is, we are oppressed, as a social group, and unless we come together as a group... in other words, each of us going our paths is not going to make something change....But as a kind of an idealistic idea about women doing this, women, where I think it breaks down is women go off to these fabric stores and spend thousands of dollars on fabric... The other thing is, I really like the types of women who have come together to do quilting...The very fact that they're making something, that their lives have meaning, that they're active. I love that.

Bea seemed to appreciate quilts as a metaphor for unity in diversity, and women working together to build a society which is not patriarchal. But patriarchy and capitalism were intertwined and needed to be addressed as such if change was to happen; engaging in consumption of quilting as a culture industry rather than a cultural activity was counterproductive.

Bea noted that women she has met through quilting are active and creative. These qualities, indeed, shone through in my conversations with quilters. Although only two women (and two men) interviewed identified themselves as feminists, throughout conversations women defined and valued themselves as adventurous, productive, accomplished, and self-determined. These are not qualities contained within the hegemonic, patriarchal vision of femininity, and there is no simple way in which quilting expresses "femininity." This vision of women as active producers of culture encompassed a bridging of the private, domestic space of the home and public spaces of compensated labor, community organizations, quilt shows and galleries, through the women's work of quilting. The quilting world was a space largely constructed by and for women.

Amy, a white woman who is on the Board of a major quilt museum, noted several ways in which quilting could be supportive of women's feelings of self.

I think it can be very empowering. The museum partners with an organization, and they teach women who have been um subjects of domestic violence, you know, and there really is for them, it's a real sense of empowerment. "Oh my gosh, I made this. And it's beautiful."... I think the way quilting has branched out, especially more into art quilting, I think it's really kind of liberated people to follow their passion. You know, you look at people who have made their living in quilting. It's giving another avenue to be independent. You know, men don't have it all.

This resonated with Grace's observations about how creating art quilts served to strengthen a positive sense of identity in Native women participants in quilting circles she coordinated.

Amy also talked about a concern of hers, that women who were not quilters or not confident in their quilting often saw the creation of beautiful cultural products as something only other women can do.

One of the things that I see and that really just bugs the heck out of me, and you'll see it when you go to a quilt show, women will be standing in front of something, and they go, "Oh, I'd love to do that, but I'm just not creative." And somewhere along the line, there's this lack of self-esteem, you know; someone told them when they were seven, "Oh, you can't draw," or...and it stifles them. And I think there's a lot of that that influences what people do.

This quote pointed to the myriad of ways in which women's sense of self, agency, and creativity was stifled in our society, and how quilting could be an avenue to overcome this.

Men interviewees also shared their thoughts on quilting as a women-centered cultural activity. Michael, a white man who made Hawaiian quilts, said, "Well, it *is*

‘womens’ work’! Always has been. That’s part of the society’s labeling and understanding of quilting.” He added,

Going against that grain—well, that struggle is as basic and fundamental as the entire sexual revolution and feminist movement of the past 40 to 50 years. I have lived and embraced that revolution in my lifetime. I often think and sometimes express, “There should be a balancing male-ist revolution!” I do and have always done “mans’ work.” I also cook, sew, quilt, nurture, cry, share. I do and have always done “women’s work.”

For Michael, being an openly gay man and quilter was part of a larger lifetime of challenging gender-patterning of activities within a heteronormative structure. Ray, also a gay white man and quilter, talked about a writer he had read in college who, while defining certain personality traits as being male and female, also considered that these were open rather than being determined by biological sex.

And what's great about it, like the male personality, it could be a man or a woman, but if they can do these one step at a time; going up a ladder is a typical thing, going up a corporate ladder, whereas women have more of a net thing, the family, budget, the group consciousness, and that's more of a female mentality that can be in a man, as well. So that's really helped clarify for me, like that's where I come from, I come from more of that background, that kind of mentality.

Ray considered himself to have more of a female personality, and quilting fit just fine with this sense of self. I noted that a fellow female member of his guild, in a press release for the guild’s quilt show, described the guild as a “sisterhood,” and asked how it worked for him, being a man in a group of women.

It works fine by me, because I often refer to myself as just one of the ladies. So it's uh, I even joke about, someone says, why don't you join the [city where he lives] guild, because you live in [city], and I say, well, there's that rule of NCQC [Northern California Quilt Council], they say you're only allowed one male member per guild.

Ray was the sole man in his guild, but his friend, another man, was a member of the guild referred to in his joke. Dave, another white man, was then the only male member of his guild, also, although there had been other male members at times. He, like Ray, thoroughly enjoyed socializing and working within his guild. I asked if it ever felt odd; he replied that it did not, and pointed out the many ways in which he, like Michael, challenged heteronormative gender roles in his daily life.

No. Because of having been a hairdresser, and I like women, I have more interest in common with them, sewing, cooking, and things like that; clothing, arts, Broadway, movies, things like that, that I've always had more in common with women. So, most of my friends have always been women.

Dave elaborated on how he initiated friendships with women in the guild, as well as some of the ways he had found to be open about his own sexuality within this female and heterosexual environment.

They, just that there's a guy interested in this stuff startles most of them into wanting to chat. And it develops. One of the things that I find that I do have a little bit of a problem with is that because of the general age group...they tend to be a little more, I want to say staid, but I mean, I figure they're all adults. We all try not to intrude on others' beliefs, but I don't feel I have to drop to the lowest common denominator. I don't want to. And that's where I find that sometimes I don't talk as much, because I can't say the silly things about whatever, the non PC [politically correct] things that I find amusing to hear and say and all. But I don't say them, because it might upset [name], or it might upset whoever, or be out of line, because it's not PC.

I asked him if he felt that women in the guild adjusted their own comments with similar respect for him. He said,

Yeah. I'm sure there are some that, say, do not talk about menstrual things, the bodily functions, things like that, because they figure I'll be upset. I'm 66 years old, I've heard about menses. I know about marriages,

about children, and you know, the fact that I don't have children, but I'm gay, and that uh, they don't think I would want to have any involvement with this stuff. I, everything, and this is one of the things I found years ago that just makes me nuts, is I've always been interested in everything. I want to know everything.

He added that he had built special relationships with some of the women who had sons who were gay, where he could share understandings from his own life that the women appreciated. Dave felt that there were more men quilters than we were aware of, because many did not participate in quilting groups. He recognized some aspects of quilting, particularly technical ones, as appealing to men who were invested in maintaining accepted masculinity, while other aspects were off-putting to these same men.

I think there are men quilting all over the place, it's just you don't hear about them. And men might be more interested in doing that, because it is a precision thing. But so many men are not comfortable with themselves to do anything that is not thought of as manly.

Nancy, a white woman, expressed similar thoughts about men who were prominent in the quilting world as well as why relatively few men quilted, and aspects of quilting that she considered to appeal to accepted ideas about masculinity, although she did not question these gender expectations.

Men, nationally, men have really been professionals. They came from either drafting or engineering, and so they're intrigued by the...[me: Geometry...?] Yeah, right. And yeah, the graph paper and the computer programs; and have done some wonderful things, have led us to different places that we wouldn't have gone. So, that, it tends to be something that isn't basically appealing to, to men, and I'm not sure why, but...

Joy told a story about a man who used to be a member of her guild:

We did have a husband and wife team that were members, and they moved to southern California. And it was very interesting, because it was that typical male thing, that she sewed for years, just on a regular little sewing

machine; okay, fine. And he started in, buys himself a sewing machine, all of a sudden they're remodeling the barn, they put in a longarm machine, all this new stuff comes in, because he liked the toys. And I just thought it was really hilarious, because all these years she'd been making do with this tiny little machine, but no, when he got into it, then the toys came into the house.

She noted with humor the differences between what the husband felt was needed to be a quilter once he was involved, compared to what he had thought when only his wife quilted.

Quilting and Race/Ethnicity

Several themes involving race and ethnicity emerged first in my observations of quilt guilds and then were confirmed in interviews. For a few participants, quilting was a major part of a change in their ethnic affinity and social associations. For African American and Native American participants, quilting was closely connected with being and remembering, expressed as “ancestral memories,” cultural pride and connection, spirituality and ways of knowing. White quilters exhibited several features of whiteness when asked about ethnicity and race. Quilters of color also shared strategies they used to navigate within predominantly white quilting-related environments.

Becoming.

For two interviewees who were both women of color and first or second generation immigrants (Filipina and Mexican American), quilting was a major part of supporting their transition into life in a predominantly white area after marrying and having children with white men. Neither reported race or ethnicity as a highly salient aspect of their own life experiences at the time of our interviews, although both shared

stories of their heritage and its impact earlier in their lives.

One did share stories she had heard, in a very rural white community where she had lived and been the founder of a quilt guild, of acts of racism against an African American family who had recently moved to the area. For example, when the family's children got in the community pool, many white families directed their children to get out of the pool. She expressed anger about this and amazement that people would act this way in the 1990s in California. When I asked if her own multiracial/ethnic child or she herself had felt comfortable in this community, she answered,

Yeah, I think it was, I never did feel that kind of... I don't know, I think because I was a pretty strong personality, you know, I don't tolerate it. So they probably, most of my, I mean, I never met that kind of hostility or... so I don't know. Maybe I didn't want to feel it, or...but I would probably have gotten in somebody's face if they did.

In this response, she used an individual perspective to address issues of racism, viewing this as primarily interpersonal, and herself as having the power to defend herself as needed. Structural and historical aspects of racism were not described; she had not grown up within the American environment of race, and had not had experiences of racialized inequality. Her husband was a senior administrator in local public institutions, and she herself came to the United States with an advanced degree and worked as a professional.

This participant was highly active and successful in creating for herself the opportunities she desired in this rural community. She entered her quilts in local fairs and shows, used this as a place to meet other quilters, and then encouraged them to meet as a group first at her own house and later as an official guild in a community center. She

became a teacher of quilting through various community avenues, including the extended education program of a university and an adult education program. Later, she taught quilting at various guilds, travelling around Northern California. At the time of our interview, she was selling her work, mostly small pictorial wall quilts, through art galleries. She was part of a small group of quilters who made collaborative quilts, with each person making a segment, whose work had received awards at major quilt shows. Quilting had been and continued to be a central part of her social network.

The second participant for whom quilting had been a major avenue for building a satisfying life within a predominantly white community had also been very active in her guild, holding multiple elected offices, and had become an expert on the history of quilts as brought westward with white settlers and other antique quilts. She had a passion for finishing and restoring old quilts, and felt a sense of pleasure in the hidden presence of a quilt's original maker's spirit looking over her shoulder as she completed and honored their work. She highly valued traditional [white] quilting and quilted mostly in this style, and gave extensive time to supporting her guild's (and often neighboring guilds') work in making quilts for certain charities, particularly for veterans. Thus, patriotism and a celebration of the hegemonic narratives of American history were interwoven with her quilting.

This interviewee had been successful in building her entire working life around quilting. She began by working in quilt stores, became a teacher of quilting in store and guild settings locally, and then purchased a special longarm quilting machine which she used about 30 hours a week to quilt other's work for a fee. She taught about quilt history

to a variety of audiences, as well as teaching quilting techniques to quilters. Although she herself grew up in a working-class family, and she and her spouse had been lower middle-class, all of her children had attended well-known universities and become employed as professionals.

She was also an active ally of other members of her guild who were outside of the white female heterosexual norm—she was named as one of the people who made participation in the guild an enjoyable social activity by both a white gay male interviewee and a Native American woman interviewee. She was aware of and praised the work this Native American woman was doing with Native American women’s quilting circles, and actively and materially supported this work. Her own ethnic heritage was not always visible to others, and she found that people sometimes made negative comments about Mexican immigrants in front of her, which bothered her. She hoped that white Americans would learn more of the facts about immigrants and Mexican Americans to un-learn these stereotypes. She was proud of the work ethic of her family and the Mexican American community in which she was raised.

Whereas these two participants’ stories illustrated quilting as an avenue for first and second generation immigrant women of color integrating into predominantly white social activities in predominantly white environments, the story of another participant demonstrated quilting as a means of moving from a white identity to a deep affinity with Native Hawaiian culture. This man, who identified himself to me as white and gay, had been a resident of Hawaii for some time. Then he met a Native Hawaiian woman who was a traditional Hawaiian quilter, and apprenticed with her in the traditional way to

become himself a Hawaiian quilter. In addition to learning quilting from his kumu (teacher), he learned Hawaiian language, culture, and spirituality, as traditional Hawaiian quilting is an embedded cultural practice. He said,

Then I met Aunty [form of address used for woman older than you within Hawaiian culture]—and everything changed. I adamantly adhere and teach that Hawaiian quilting needs and deserves to be taught in the old style—from grandmother to granddaughter. It is an art/craft, which needs to be passed from elder to student. Hawaiian quilting is much more about the inner spirit, *ka mana*, than it is about technique. And that needs to be passed from *ke kumu* [the teacher] to *ka haumana* [the student].

He elaborated that he did not see himself as the active agent, but the conduit for spirit: “I am not really the quilter/artist/designer/maker. I simply hold the needle and thread and Ke Akua [God] does the work.” Again, he expressed, “I truly recognize that my role is something more passive than that of artist. These kapa [formerly bark cloth; now quilts] have a mana [spiritual power, energy] of their own.” He evoked beliefs about the importance of the quilter’s spiritual and mental state while quilting, such as “focus on loving thoughts for the quilt and for the person who will receive it,” as well as technique, “stitch always towards your heart.”

He found his direction and made choices about his quilting in relation to this spiritual receiving and giving. At the time of our interview, he was gaining recognition within the traditional Hawaiian quilting world as well as the larger quilting world, and planned to devote his next series of quilts, each of which would take several years to complete, to commemorating Queen Lili’uokalani, the revered last monarch of Hawaii who was overthrown by American sugar planters, bankers, and descendants of missionaries. He noted the heritage of quilting in Hawaii as a legacy of the “merging of

cultures, Hawaiian merging with malahini [foreign],” his own “passion for all things Hawaiian,” and his feeling of being “almost kama’aina [Native; literally child of the land].”

Being and remembering.

Native American and African American interviewees, as well as the white male quilting in the traditional Hawaiian style, explained their quilting practice and product as being highly connected with their Native and African/African American heritage, both aesthetically and historically.

Grace, a California Native American woman, described her quilting: “And I think it's, it doesn't necessarily represent my tribe or any tribe, but it just, if you were to see it, you would say, “Oh, yeah; that's Native.” She had worked her entire life in Native organizations supporting Native people; at the time of our interview, she was the coordinator of two talking circles for Native women, where participants created art quilts as they shared life stories and knowledge. These circles included young mothers and grandmothers raising grandchildren, coping with financial challenges and all the tasks of navigating parenthood as well as being Native in America. One circle did traditional basketry work as well as art quilting; Grace was also an expert in her tribe’s weaving practices. These groups had been mostly funded through grants from private foundations, but Grace hoped to have support for them sustained through tribal funds. Of note, some of the funding had been made possible through the quilt guild of which Grace is a member; the guild fundraised, then gave the money to a local foundation, which allocated it to community applicants as grants and scholarships for fiber-related projects according

to guidelines set up by the guild. This was, however, short-term only funding which could not be continued after the end of the grant cycle, due to the established rules of the fund. Grace began her quilting circles aiming for completing bed quilts, but found this to be difficult to accomplish, given the short times of actual group work and the absolute beginner status of many participants, who were not familiar with using a sewing machine or working with fabric. So she shifted her projects, and participants then created small art quilts, largely using machine applique techniques. She provided a wide variety of fabrics, and participants could do whatever they wanted. Grace noted that participants overwhelmingly chose to work in a similar aesthetic, creating scenes of nature and expressing a sense of Nativeness. In Grace's words,

That's what I do more, art quilts, and I do a lot of Native scenes, a lot of yeah, more Native. Animals and nature, yeah, like that. And so, smaller art quilts you can see the results in a smaller amount of time, and everyone seems to like that. So that's what I'm doing here... So when we started and people realized what we were doing, we're not just here to talk, because it takes a while for people to get used to other people and talk about what's going on in their lives, and so doing these activities is, you know; so now, it's, I don't know, there's a natural kind of, when you make friends, you know how hard that is, it takes a long time for you to open up...and so I just said, you know, do whatever you want. Well, everybody did nature, they did. And it's not, I think, I said, it's an art quilt, just make it whatever. So that's what it was, I just wow. Yeah, so I don't know, I don't know if that's just innate...

She told of her circle participants' feelings after creating a piece of art, "So I think they have pride in that, because it's something they totally, it came out of their head; and when I look at some of these things, for the first time, and it's like, 'Oh my god; you did that. Wow.' Yeah."

One challenge Grace experienced in her quilting was the lack of fabrics which fit

the aesthetics of her Northern California tribe. She told about the ready availability of Southwestern Native designs in fabrics, as well as some Pan-Indian, Northwest Coast, and Plains Indian designs. She said, “But if there were to be fabric made California [Native], all of California, it would be basket designs.” This was a complex issue, however, as the commercial use of these basket designs by outsiders would likely be a new instance of cultural appropriation, yet another act of disrespect in a long line of such promulgated by whites against Natives. Grace said, “I think like Native people, we always are trying to protect our culture, because so much was taken away...” Another aspect was that, traditionally in her tribe, basket designs did not belong to any particular person, so even a Native person producing fabric with these designs for sale was problematic; “It’s just like we don’t feel like it belongs to us, to give, to charge like that, to sell, you know, and we would get a lot of flak for doing that, we would.” Grace had chosen to develop small amounts of fabric featuring basket designs for use in her own quilts, using technology which was only able to be used in this private manner. She said, “But you know, printing it yourself, and making an art quilt like that, that’s fine. It’s just not mass producing.”

An African American woman, Bea, talked about why quilting was important to her, both in her own life and in our larger society, “...the artistic aspect, the educational aspect. The identity aspect of it; and I guess from a similar point of view, that there’s these, you contribute on some level with what you do.” Bea chose to make functional quilts using fabric she recycled from used clothing or that was given to her; she felt this was an honoring of the roots of quilting in working-class and poor families and

communities, African American as well as other races or ethnicities.

Kay, also an African American woman, expressed similar thoughts about quilting as personal creative work and as a connection to history, family, and community. She was clear that her quilting work is art, “I don’t do quilts; I do art. I do wall art. I do projects that have purpose. So I have a historical interest as well as a, from the standpoint of creating what I call art.” The purpose she referenced here may be aesthetic, connected with her self-actualization, or an expression of a message. For example, she told about one of her quilted projects,

And I did a triptych, with domestic, you know, service in America... it was really a uh, from slavery to domestic service. Actually, it's slavery by another name. So, I mean, so those are things that, you know, they happened; it's real. And so I did a triptych, I did from slavery to reverse slavery. Where slaves came, Middle Passage, that's one [piece of the] triptych. The middle one is when they were actually working on the plantation, raising children, raising crops; and then the third one was being the workers in the white lady's house.

This statement that slavery and other forms of active oppression of African Americans “happened; it’s real” was an important part of the quilting activity of both African American interviewees. In order for us to recognize and address the ongoing nature of racialized inequality, racism, and discrimination in our country, we must face not just the historical facts but their continuing impact. Bea explained how this history encouraged her interest in becoming a quilter,

...and there was a group in the [her neighborhood] senior center, and I said, “Oh, I used to do that. And I'd like to take it up again.” So I went down. And there were a number of women there from an African American quilters’ guild, and they shared their skills, and made connections, you know. And I was trying to learn. I learned this and that. Went to quilt shows. Became fascinated by the stories of African

American quilting as an expression of resistance to slavery. And that's that.

Bea continued,

If you want to meet interesting people, go to the places where interesting things are happening, you know...and so my quilting has an approach, many of us have an approach, that African American history *is* American history, and that if you are white, you should know these things, just like we should know about Lincoln and Washington and other figures. You know. African American history *is* American history. Just because you're not black doesn't mean it's not as much a part of being American. The history of slavery and black people's courageous fight against it, you know, it's also *your* history. And which side of that struggle you want to take is a whole 'nother thing.

Bea thus issued a call for inclusiveness and mutual understanding, as well as a challenge to actively continue the struggle for equality. In contrast, several attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors which have been detailed in studies of Whiteness and the maintenance of our country's racial hierarchy could be heard in expressions by white quilters.

Whiteness.

Whiteness could be seen in expressions of difference and distance as well as views on what was "true" history and the interplay of aesthetics and culture. Sometimes this took the form of "centering" white quilting history as if it was all of quilting history, as seemed to be the underlying message in Maude's words:

I'm proud of the fact that it does have a lot of history, and enjoy that, too, seeing old quilts and the fact that a lot of the women who came across the United States in covered wagons were carrying their work with them, so they could work on it on the way. And you know, I really appreciate that, because there's something that's rich about that connection, only it's not something I think about every day. It's just there.

Maude described one strand of the history of quilting in the United States, by white

women in the move to colonize the West. She saw this as a “rich” history, but did not think about it often or feel it in her own daily quilting activity; it was just there, hidden in the background. Another white woman, Nancy, talked about quilting as a bright spot in the hard lives of many women in United States history,

I collected a lot of really, uh, the books that came out with stories of women who quilted during the Dust Bowl, and during various critical times... And they're writing about what quilting meant to them. It was the place where they took a breath, and um, did something beautiful in lives that were not terribly beautiful.

Noting that this description centered on white women's experiences, I brought up slavery as a critical time; she responded with a simple, “Yeah,” with no elaboration. Quilting during slavery was not what she had been thinking of. This overlooking of slavery and racialized inequality, even when thinking about United States history, is a feature of the centering of whiteness.

When I asked questions about guild memberships being predominantly white, most white interviewees' responses indicated some puzzlement, unawareness of this as a concern or notable pattern, or avoidance of the topic. For instance, Dave said,

We have such an active guild, and it's such a major part of our area; it's like, considering how many Hispanics we have in the area, I'm always a little surprised that we don't have more in the guild. But then, I've never heard of quilting as being a standard in Mexican families.

He noted that the guild membership did not include a segment of the population of the area, in this case “Hispanics”, but attributed this to a cultural difference—“Mexicans” don't quilt.

When I asked a white woman member of the predominantly white guild in the

metropolitan area about any links between her guild and other guilds in the area, she responded that there was some connection with a guild in a nearby city, more than 20 miles and a toll bridge away, but that time and distance tended to be limits. Noting that she had not mentioned the “African American” guild, which met only 10 miles from her guild, I asked her if there were any connections with this guild, noting its location rather than name. She answered, “Oh, the African Americans? Yeah, there's crossover.” I asked what this crossover was, and she answered, “Going to meetings, or belonging to both.” Her tone seemed to indicate that she did not want to talk about this further. Later, after the voice recorder was turned off, I told her I was going to this guild’s Black Heritage Month activity, an opportunity for anybody to make a mini-quilt, learning how to quilt and leaving with their product. I was particularly interested in this activity, as I had not found another like it. I asked if she had ever participated in any of this guild’s activities; she replied that she had not, but received their newsletter in connection with her work for a major quilting publisher and a member of the board of a quilt museum. Interestingly, this guild actually met in a location closer to her residence than the guild of which she was a member. Distance thus seemed to be more social, based on perceptions of difference, than geographic. De facto social segregation largely continued, with whites choosing membership in a predominantly white group, despite the common valuing of the cultural activity of quilting.

Bea, an African American woman and member of the “African American” guild, was explicit in addressing that her guild welcomed quilters of all colors. “Even though that's the name and the goal of the guild, and the participants, even though there are more

African American women there, white women as quilters are made to feel welcome, and all kinds of people who are experts come and talk about their skill and um they feel, you know, really positive.” She also pointed to geography as an explanation for why whites might choose not to attend her guild, but in a social sense, positing the guild’s meeting location in a historically Black neighborhood which had been heavily negatively impacted by social and economic policies and priorities, “Well, one thing is they probably don't feel comfortable coming to the location where these meetings are. That's one thing. And there is, you know, there's like a racial blindspot in white people particularly in the quilting circles.” Bea connected this with other aspects of the quilting world which concerned her, particularly links between the quilting culture industry and patriotism and how this operated as a hegemonic force supporting ongoing inequalities in our society and our world.

There's another aspect that disturbs me a little bit. I don't know if this is true, or it's always been that way, but some of the quilters’ shows that are on TV really promote this Americana, American patriotism...but I wonder, is that a true part of American heritage, or is that something that has been imposed upon the quilting?

I asked Kay, an African American woman who grew up near where the predominantly white guild meets, “I went to the [guild], and I was looking around, like, okay, here I am, in [metropolitan area], and what's going on here?” She answered,

And all white ladies. Yeah, yeah. Well. Let me see, what can I say about that. I've never had an interest in joining them. But I've gone to their quilt shows, and they've been very welcoming and confirming. I think it might be the age group... even though we're in a community where everybody is accepting, but older white women don't have experience with Black people...and so their opinions and, you know, their interpretations of who you are, they're amazed that you're just a normal person. I mean, there are

different; let me tell you, there's Black people I don't ever want to be around, and I'm gonna tell you, there are white folks I don't ever want to be around. I mean, different cultures that, that I am able to move through them, but not to, to develop or spend time with them. I'm able to relate to them, I'm nice, and I move on. But it's the, the interpretation that people have of Black people, that we're all one way. And I guess some Black people figure all white people are all one way.”

Kay’s response illustrated a fundamental pattern—people of color had experiences with and were able to navigate in predominantly white environments, and frequently did so, while few white people had similar experiences in environments which were not predominantly white. Whites have little awareness of the experiences of people of color in predominantly white environments. They tend to feel that predominantly white environments are inclusive of people of color, while environments which are not predominantly white are not inclusive of whites.

When I asked Maude, a white woman, about the presence of some Native American women in her predominantly white guild’s membership, she said,

It is really nice, and I've commented to my husband about it too, that we have some um Native Americans that have stepped right up and taken some significant jobs, assignments. Yeah; they're very connected, and they're kind of bonded with each other, you know, you can see this. There's a closeness there...and very, very well accepted all over. And I really appreciate the fact that they're doing some quilting in their Native designs, some beautiful work, and I'm just thrilled to see that.

Although on the surface Maude’s response was positive, several aspects of whiteness lingered underneath. First, there was a noting of differentness and a certain amount of social distance. Second, there was an observation of the Native women as being almost a sub-group within the guild; although Maude saw the Native women’s bonding together as positive, she also seemed a little puzzled by this, and seemed to view this as a choice of

theirs to be somewhat separate, without any note of any behavior by whites that may have been at play. Third, it seemed that the Native women were noted as having earned respect by actively demonstrating that they wanted to be members of the guild, agreeing to the structures in place and participating in processes set up by the white members of the group. The women of color were, again, navigating in a predominantly white environment, using skills and strategies they had learned from practice, while the predominantly white environment was largely unaware of its whiteness.

A Native American member of the same guild shared a contrasting view; in fact, when she first attended a guild meeting about 15 years ago, as she was actively becoming a quilter and seeking ways to support this becoming, she decided that it was not a positive social group for her. She said,

And they were older, and they really were racist. And we know like with those older women, it's still there with some of them. Just, you can just tell. And white people say, oh, racism no longer exists, but well, you don't even know what racism is, 'cause you've never felt it.

When she tried again some years later, she found the group more welcoming. At the time of our interview, she was a highly active member of the guild, and felt it to be a positive group. She was one of the Native women who had chosen to engage with the existing structures; but these structures had also shown some support for her work with Native women. She said, “So I think that's a good thing; I really do see a change there. Yeah.” However, she demonstrated what she called “an airhead thing,” a strategy she used when she felt whiteness at work in some interactions, whereby she put on a falsely happy voice and nonverbal posture as a sort of mini-resistance, while also dodging the micro-

agression without feeling hurt.

Glimmers of exoticizing racial Others, another feature of whiteness, could also be seen in the quilting world. Although quilting had spread around the world, it was concentrated in advanced capitalist societies, largely in Northern Europe and areas where white Europeans had been colonizers, such as South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. Japan, however, also had a vibrant quilting community, with Japanese quilters both using elements of American quilting and developing quilting techniques and styles which were rooted in Japanese culture and aesthetics. The use of Japanese fabrics by American quilters had become widespread as a trend. One white woman interviewee, Barbara, almost exclusively used Japanese fabrics in her quilting work. She said, “And I went to Japan, not long ago; it was a textile tour and shopping for fabric, and going to Kimono museums, and, you know, that sort of thing. It was fun to take a class from a Japanese teacher.”

Touchstones: Gee’s Bend or “African Aesthetic” quilts and the Underground Railroad Quilt Code.

Over the 20 years prior to my study, two conversations about quilts and quilting by African Americans became prominent in quilting circles. Examining these conversations provided a window into how beliefs and attitudes about race and United States history intertwined with the cultural activity of quilting. African American Studies and American Studies scholar Patricia Turner (2009) used these conversations to teach African American history, particularly about slavery; she explained, these “demonstrate the ways in which the status of African American quilts and quilters reflects the

obstacles, challenges, and achievements of black America (100).”

The first conversation concerned whether or not African Americans retained and continued to have special access to aesthetics and cultural practices from their West African roots. A whole complex of attitudes and beliefs about race were enmeshed in various perspectives on this question—various stereotypes and biological or essentialist views of race and culture, and a spectrum of appreciation to appropriation. In promulgating racialized slavery, whites built the belief that Blacks were biologically different and less than whites. To control Black slaves, severe limitations were put in effect on any expressions of African culture. By the 20th century, prominent white sociologists, using the racial beliefs of whites of their time, argued that African Americans either had no culture or had only pathological elements of culture; in either view, Blacks were seen as somehow becoming a “blank slate” culturally after their forced immigration to the United States, although other groups were seen as retaining culture after their voluntary immigration. African Americans, on the other hand, especially after the growth of Black Consciousness in the 1960s and 1970s, refuted this view. Afrocentrism and appreciation of African aesthetics became integral aspects of resistance to white hegemony.

In the 1990s, both Black and white scholars were involved in documenting and discussing what they deemed to be an “Afro-traditional” style of quilting, found mostly in the work of elderly and poor Black women in rural areas of the South or who had grown up in these areas. In the Bay Area of California, one white man, Eli Leon, began to collect these quilts, and eventually mounted extensive museum and gallery exhibits of

them, building his career along the way. But the best known example of this style was the lavish exhibits of quilts from the African American women of Gee's Bend, Alabama in 2003 and 2006 in major museums across the United States; these exhibits broke attendance records across the country. Again, a white man, Paul Arnett, was the collector and promoter. He was extremely successful in his marketing, garnering much media attention and creating a whole array of Gee's Bend-flavored merchandise. Quilters thus were quite aware of these quilts, although they varied in awareness of the dynamics involved in the exhibits.

In many ways, the Gee's Bend quilts were perceived by the white traditional quilting world as a kind of challenge, as these quilts, praised by the art world, did not fit their aesthetic expectations nor use the approved techniques. Many of the quilts were made from highly recycled fabrics which are not "quilting cottons"; colors were vivid; patchwork designs were large-scale, highly unique and variable rather than regular and symmetric; and the sewing and quilting emphasized function rather than precision. However, aspects of these quilts became frequently seen in the work of art quilters working in patchwork, including many well-known quilters who sold their work through major galleries. A new term was given to these aesthetic elements as they have been adopted and adapted within the wider quilting world—"improvisational."

Quilters I spoke with expressed a wide variety of views on the Gee's Bend quilts. Dave, a white man, brought them up as an example of changes in quilting, "Like the Gee's Bend quilts are wonderful, wonderful quilts; they're not generally what has been considered art quilts, though they have a very art-felt feeling to them now." He noted

how these quilts had stretched boundaries in quilting, particularly art quilts. Amy, a white woman, pointed out the involvement of the culture industry, as well as the impact the quilts had made on the quilting world.

You know, you look at like the Gee's Bend quilts, and I think a lot of people quilt in that style, and I think the Gee's Bend became prominent because somebody was a very good promoter, but there's a ton of quilting that was done in that style. It's very contemporary, very modern. I think it's more that stuff to be recognized. And I think the achievements of common people, it's amazing work... Basically what the Gee's Bend quilters did was what we're calling improvisational quilting. And then, you know, Nancy Crow [a very well-known white art quilter] came along, and refined that process, and really brought it to a more sophisticated level, and she teaches, so a lot of people have been very heavily influenced by her... You know, so, yeah, that one thing has gone from something that was born out of necessity, you know, and to a more sophisticated art level, to getting assimilated out, to some people are very good at taking what somebody else teaches and really bringing it in themselves where it will make it into their work. Where others are kind of clones, yeah. And it's like, so now it's kind of internal.

Amy noted the affinity between the Gee's Bend quilts and modern art; this connection was highlighted by Arnett in his promotion of them along with representing them as expressing African aesthetic and cultural retentions. Although Amy recognized these quilts as "achievements of common people," she also described art quilters who have adopted elements of this style as "refining," improving them, making them "more sophisticated," and she noted that the art quilt world has renamed this as "improvisational quilting." This renaming functioned much as Amy's description did—it glazed over the aesthetic roots in the creative work of poor, rural African American women, and reimagined them as part of an assimilated [white] aesthetic that could be "internal" to anyone.

However, Kay, an African American woman, pointed out some of the positives in the celebration and embracing of Afro-traditional and Gee's Bend quilts. She praised Eli Leon for bringing awareness of connections between some African American quilting and African art, cited this as inspirational for her own work, and further noted that African art had been a major inspiration for many modern artists over the prior century.

And he, you know, he equated them to African art. And I have a leaning kind of more to the African art, the abstract art. Picasso; that's where abstract art came from, the African art. And so I do have a kinship to that, from, they call it ancient memory... So those two cultures, African cultures and the abstract art, in particular, I love it.

Further, Kay saw this attention to the quilting of poor Black women as encouraging a bridging within the Black community. In particular, she told about her own growing up in a family where advanced education and professional occupations were the expectations, and how she herself was thus little aware of quilting within African American history and communities until later in her life.

So, but for the bigger picture, and we're talking about that there's a, DuBois talks about a talented tenth, a tenth of the population, and it probably still is a minor small percentage in this given group; and so I never, I never knew anybody that quilted. I never knew anybody's grandmother that quilted, because all my friends were all alike... And I was amazed with this guy's [Leon's] book, of the people; I didn't even know these ladies, but they were right in my own neighborhood. They were in my neighborhood. And they could have been some of my friends' grandmothers, or aunts, or even mothers. You know. So that was a eye opener for me, too, his book. It takes people to bring things to the light.

Kay continued, talking about the Gee's Bend quilts and quilters.

I have an affinity for them, because their stuff is kind of abstract. I love it, their stuff. Because I look upon them as being like an isolated community, and they had very little outside influence, and so they drew on some ancient memories, and things that they had available to them, and

not much contact with the outside world.

I asked what she thought of white quilters embracing the aesthetic of these quilts, while still largely participating in predominantly white quilting groups. Kay was not concerned about this adopting and adapting of aesthetics, and saw it more as a broadening of the quilting world, a rare instance of positive and substantial recognition of the creativity of African American women, and the positioning of these women as teachers and inspirations. She placed this within a context of how artists develop through seeing.

Well, it's kind of like, well, I would say, when you, as an artist, you take in things visually, and then when you take them in, it becomes yours. Because that's what I do. I use my brain as a computer, and so I'm going out and I'm drawing stuff from everywhere, and um, and even from magazines. I'm a visual person. And so, my stuff eventually evolves. I watch my stuff evolve from somewhere I don't know where it came from. So they like the art...and it's probably introduced them more to color. And putting colors together, becoming colorists... because it, uh, some people are just stuck in a beige world. [laughs] ...But African stuff explodes...So, yeah. But that, they're drawing on, and that's a good thing. That they, you don't call it copycat so much as just learning new things and applying it, and then awakening something in you. Now, uh, probably that artist, probably she'll make more money than any of the average of us, because she probably has the outlets for it.

Kay recognized that white promoters and later white art quilters may have made money from this addition to the quilting world, but this was not a major concern for her, and was outweighed by the recognition that was given to these Black women as creators.

The second conversation in the quilting world in which race played a significant part was more openly controversial; at its core, it involved differing views as to whose story is history. Beginning in the 1990s, and especially after the publication of one particular book, *Hidden in Plain View: The Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground*

Railroad (1999), various scholars and quilters debated whether or not certain quilt patterns were used as signals for escaping slaves on the Underground Railroad. Oral histories passed down within African American families and communities said that this was the case, but written records or material artifacts from the time had not been found to confirm or disprove these stories; of course, literacy was forbidden to slaves. So it came down to whether or not a person believed that oral histories of slaves and their descendants should be included in the historical record. At a deeper level, though, was what narrative was told about slave resistance. Histories maintained by whites tended to portray white abolitionists as the active agents in the struggle against slavery, with slaves themselves either being rescued or simply not seen, let alone represented as using their strength, intelligence, and creativity to escape and aid others in escaping.

On this issue, Kay, an African American woman, was both well-informed and active, as she taught this controversy in her quilting work with school children.

Um hm. Yeah, some people um, the academics say it didn't happen, and they're, but there's no proof; there's no quilts around that survived any, you know. But how I approached the Underground Railroad story is by emphasizing the Underground Railroad story, and the signals that were used, and then I introduce the um, the Underground Railroad quilts, I mean blocks, as being just that—it's possible that they were used as signals, as well. So, but some people just really don't, like [someone she knows] doesn't believe it... So she, I've downloaded some information from the internet that also didn't, uh, saying that some of those blocks weren't invented until later, you know. So...

I expressed that it was one thing to question specific points in a particular book, but that it was another to completely disregard the stories. She agreed, and added, “And in our community, the uh, the verbal stories are, is what goes...it's not in the books. Nothing in

books.”

This controversy came up in only one conversation with a white quilter, Nancy, who had told me that her son worked as an archaeologist specializing in slavery in a colonial town on the East Coast. After our interview, as she showed me her shelf of books on quilting, I noted that she had several on this topic, and asked her thoughts about it. She did not believe that quilts were used as codes on the Underground Railroad.

We will return to these themes of quilting and class, gender, and race and ethnicity in the next chapter.

DISCUSSION: FABRIC

What is it about quilting that is so important to our culture? It is certainly more than just the aesthetics. There's a reason why so many of us quilt—no matter how well we may do it—or preserve and treasure the quilts we've obtained from others. There's something about the experience of quilting that draws us to it—it keeps us warm, it soothes our pain and relieves our burdens, it commemorates special occasions, it preserves family history, it demonstrates skill, it encourages social interaction, and it supports intimate communication (Freeman 1996:xviii).

Resonance With Other Research

Participants echoed many themes found in other research on quilters and quilting (Freeman 1996; Gay 1996; King 2001; MacDowell and Dewhurst 1997; Mazloomi 1998; Stalp 2007). These included how they became quilters and how they had developed as such over time, the purposes for which they made quilts, how and why quilting was important in their lives, what they liked about quilting-related groups they belonged to, their attendance at quilt shows and events, and what they felt was special about quilting as well as some concerns about quilting in the future.

Quilters I talked with were mostly very interested in sharing stories about their quilts, telling about the context in which they were created and also the process of their creation. I think of this as illustrating the importance of quilting to quilters as part of our voice, our expression of self. Many described themselves as “hooked” on quilting, and as being fabric fanatics. Most talked about the importance to themselves of constantly learning, trying new techniques and using new technologies. This development of skills and abilities to make something beautiful with one's hands was a common value, and often explained as being necessary to sustain within a society which focuses on

consumption. Quilters told about how they set goals for themselves, envisioning and then enacting a continuous cycle of creation, and considering themselves accomplished when they met these self-defined goals. Making something of one's own through investments of self was valued; making something from a kit or simply following someone else's pattern patch-for-patch, color-for-color, was not. Awards and recognition from within the quilting world were mentioned by a few as validation, but were not the primary means of such. Over and over, the stories they shared were of joy in their own creativity and that of fellow quilters.

Most interviewees learned to quilt through classes, books, magazines, and friends; they exhibited the familiar pattern where their mothers were the generation which skipped quilting, but most had grandmothers who quilted. Many were concerned that there will be another skipped generation, as the proportion of younger people in their families becoming quilters was low. Most became interested in quilting because of a friend or relative's engagement in it, so that initial motivation was often social as well as creative. Another common source of initial inspiration was family—to make a quilt for a new baby or other celebration of a major life event. Most came to quilting after their children reached adulthood or they themselves neared retirement from paid labor. They reveled in this new time in life to do what they wanted to do when they wanted to do it. Many spent time in other creative and constructive interests, such as other sewing, gardening, other arts or crafts, and reading. Many also were active in community activities, volunteering for various civic groups and maintaining memberships in organizations and networks for community action.

While none of my interviewees actually quilted with other quilters in the sense of the quilting bee of earlier days, many engaged in some form of collaborative quilting. These included round robin projects, where each person in the group adds a part to a quilt as it is passed around to all members, and projects where each person makes a piece separately of what then is made into a whole quilt, with various levels of pre-agreement on who will do what. Another popular activity was participating in challenge quilts, where a set of rules and concepts are accepted by a group, and each person completes a quilt utilizing their particular interpretation of these guidelines. All interviewees were members of quilt guilds, and most also participated in smaller, self-organized quilting groups, often based on friendship circles or affinity for a particular style or technique. These smaller groups were especially important in supporting and stretching quilters' creativity and productivity, providing inspiration, feedback, new knowledge, and accountability.

Only a few interviewees actively worked to sell their quilts, and those who did generally did so through art galleries. Most made quilts as gifts, for use within the family, to donate to an organization for use or sale as a fundraiser, or simply because they felt driven to make them.

Quilting, Capitalism, and Art

As discussed in Chapter 2, quiltmaking is more than just gendered leisure; it is a form of gendered labor. However, quilting as practiced by my interviewees did not simply fit into constructs considered under the division of labor by gender. It was neither a form of pre-industrial labor within a home and family-based economy nor a form of

wage labor. Although quilters were involved in consumption, in that they participated in and supported a massive quilting industry of fabrics, machines, and tools, quilters' activities were not simply determined by this culture industry, and quilting could not be conflated with the quilting industry; quilters insisted on extensive agency in their work as cultural producers. Quilting, as described by my interviewees, was a non-alienated form of labor.

Threads of these concepts and concerns could be seen in stories from interviewees across social locations of class, race, and gender, with no clear pattern according to these positions. Several quilters noted that quilting had become an "expensive" pursuit. Some quilters talked with pride about their special and costly quilting tools, particularly sewing machines, or their massive fabric stash. Others shared stories of how many classes they had taken, or quilting retreats they enjoyed annually, where the consumption was not in purchasing an object, but an experience. Several told about travelling to distant parts of the world and engaging in activities connected with their quilting as they journeyed. There also was no clear pattern between social location and the purpose of quilting; whether a quilter chose to create for use or gifting, as a wall hanging, to store away and occasionally display as an heirloom or treasure, or for a mix of these purposes was highly individual.

Quilters valued, in their cultural production of objects, warmth (if functional), tactile sensuality, uniqueness and self-expression. They saw quilts as satisfying a human need, both for their maker and their receiver. Quilting was a central part of their identity, a place where the joy of life was fully present, and where the individual contributed to

this life while also being sustained by it. Quilting was active love. As Joy joked, quilters sought to spread love, one quilt at a time, sending quilts out into the world like their own children.

But society's structures intruded into the world of quilting, and this ideal was stretched and pulled in different directions. The strongest strands of this pulling were seen in discussions of quilting as a folk art/craft and as an art. Here, class status was often reflected, along with issues of gender status, in how various positions were articulated and what goals were pursued.

Interviewees shared a wide range and complexity of thoughts on these issues, but a few patterns emerged. Quilters who made functional quilts they described as traditional tended to utilize techniques and technologies (such as longarm quilting, even if this meant paying another person to complete this task) to make production faster, and they aimed for precision, but they also were critical of quilts that were too simple. Their goals included efficiency and mastery of certain skills, particularly in piecing together the quilt top. The quilter who used recycled fabrics, in contrast, worked more intuitively and did not care for precision. She did, however, describe herself as being still a learner, and not yet ready for complex piecing. She quilted her own work, using a wide-throated free motion home sewing machine.

Several art quilters who said they did not make traditional quilts because they did not like the process involved, particularly the repetitiveness of piecing, also talked about how they enjoyed traditional quilts made by others, and several described them as abstract art. Quilters who described their work as art tended to have advanced education,

although their monetary class status ranged from middle-class to upper middle-class. These art quilters described the feeling of and valuing of being in control of their own creative process as their own definition of art, rather than (primarily) using the language of the art world to describe aesthetic and formal aspects of their work.

Most interviewees supported the idea that art quilting had strengthened quilting and brought in new quilters, especially younger ones. A common theme was that there was something within quilting for everyone, and this was one of the ways quilting continues to be both accessible and relevant as a creative activity.

It seemed the definition of art and being an artist held by interviewees was more self-determined than that of the general art world. It was a self-empowering, self-actualizing vision, where the artist was an artist because she created, not because she had been trained and validated within the art world. Collins (1991:103) declares, “art is emancipatory because it fuses thought, feeling, and action and helps its participants see their world differently and act to change it.” The first part of this view of art was commonly expressed by most interviewees, while the latter was expressed by women of color.

Race, Class, and Community Work: Charity or Change

The orientation of quilting groups towards work within their communities also demonstrated varying conceptions of charity and social change. Predominantly white guilds engaged primarily in acts of charity rather than work towards change in social structures and material inequalities. Power relations are inherent in acts of charity (see Frankenberg 1993). One notable exception seemed to be views about veterans.

Providing quilts for families of wounded or killed soldiers, for returning soldiers, and for veterans in various kinds of rehabilitation programs was a common activity in predominantly white guilds. Here, narratives of patriotism reign. Rather than perceiving the veterans as responsible for their own situation, they were seen as heroes deserving of respect and gratitude.

Gender and Resistance: Women's Space

Conceptions of gender as socially constructed, enacted (West and Zimmerman 1987), and performative (Butler 2006) allow us to look beyond gender roles in the heteronormative family. In many ways, quilting seemed to be a “women’s space” (see Wearing 1998) where gender was less salient than in other areas of life, because this space was not organized around, reflecting of, or in response to masculinity—it was at least partially outside of the binary construction of masculine/feminine.

Although my interviewees generally expressed a re-defining of womanhood, a valuing of women as active, creative, accomplished, and adventurous agents in cultural production in both the community and the family, their quilting practice also was deeply tied to family. The women I interviewed did not feel themselves constrained by time or money or as having any challenges with juggling their own desires with the demands of their families and homes; in fact, several thought this notion was funny when I asked about it. And yet, many aspects of heteronormativity and expected femininity were enacted in their lives and quilting.

Half (five) of the women interviewed seemed to mostly follow expected roles of femininity in their lives and families. Two women seemed to accept some aspects of

these expected roles and challenge others. Three women entirely talked of themselves as self-determining; two of these were currently unmarried, although both had been married to men previously and had adult children.

Some women interviewed consistently used the term “women” in our conversations, while others used “ladies” or a combination of the two terms. The women who seemed to mostly conform with gendered expectations used “ladies”, except for one. Nancy described herself as scheduling her activities around her husband’s, as she was retired and he continued to work; but she consistently used the term “women”, and expressed how important her group of close women quilting friends was in her life and how this group supported each other. Maude used the term “ladies” when speaking about women around her age (70s) or older, but used “women” when talking about younger women. Barbara was consistent in her use of “ladies”, and was the only interviewee whose use of the term seemed to have some harking back to the values of the 19th century cult of true womanhood for middle and upper-class white women.

The women who seemed to challenge dominant expectations of women’s role in the family tended to use “women.” Kay mostly said “women”, but switched to “ladies” when talking about her closest friends; she also expressed significant pride in her grandmother, showing me her receipt for poll tax paid to vote in 1922. It was not just that her grandmother voted, but that she was a Black woman voting as soon as she was legally able to, claiming her right. The men interviewed used a mix of “ladies” and “women.”

Many of the women shared stories about how the quilting groups they have been a

part of are respected in the community. Not a single interviewee told about any experience of feeling devalued in connection with being a quilter. A few mentioned the use of needle skills to judge a woman's worth in times past; while they continued to see these skills as important and worthy of learning, they rejected any notion that these were appropriate measures of womanhood.

Interviewees did say that quilting is a means of caring, and endorsed the ethic of caring as important for themselves. But they did not speak about womanhood in essentializing terms, as if being a woman was intrinsically connected with this caring. Rather, they endorsed caring as a value which should be intensified in our communities and society. In this, they demonstrated resistance. The ethic of caring is only devalued if we accept the values associated with white masculinity as the premises of society. Pushing for the ethic of caring to be embraced not as a trait of femininity but a value of society is working to subvert the dominant values. Quilters held this value as essential. Interviewees were generally comfortable talking about quilting and gender relations or how important the gendered space of quilting was to them.

While dominant expectations of femininity were often challenged by women interviewees, heterosexuality was not. There was an underlying, unquestioned, unseen assumption that women have husbands. In fact, several mentioned that they thought not having a husband might be a barrier to being an active quilter, a reason that might have been holding some women back from becoming quilters, particularly younger women. Although I am quite certain there are lesbian quilters, all of my interviewees were heterosexual; this is a major limitation in my research, in that it narrows my discussion

and possible findings. It seems that the heteronormativity present in many quilting-related groups may make them unattractive spaces for socializing for women who do not share this assumption in their lives.

In contrast to the heteronormativity amongst women interviewees, all three men interviewees identified themselves as gay, and as enjoying socializing with women. All three described themselves as partaking in other activities usually gendered feminine as well, such as cooking, reading romances, or watching musicals. Two considered themselves feminists, and these same two talked about a general challenging of gender binaries in their lives and our society. One commented on the falseness of gendering various activities and labors, while the other used a construct of female and male personality types, with both being descriptive and flexible rather than ascribed based simply on physical bodies. None of the men hid their sexuality in the quilting groups to which they belonged, and one told of how he had become a resource for fellow guild members, helping them to learn more about possibilities beyond heterosexuality. None of the men were concerned about hegemonic masculinities (Connell 1998). Still, their engagement in subversion of gender expectations was complex. They expressed themselves as being “one of the ladies”, thus at least partially engaging in the gender binary, just locating themselves outside of the expected masculinities. This may have had connections with age, as these men had moved into living as openly gay in a generation where this was highly stigmatized within our society as a whole, well before concepts of queerness became common.

Quilting and Race/Ethnicity

“While those feminists who argue that sexual imperialism is more endemic to all societies than racial imperialism are probably correct, American society is one in which racial imperialism supersedes sexual imperialism (hooks 1981:122).”

Although gender-related issues were generally a fairly comfortable part of discussions in interviews, with comments often originating from interviewees rather than as a response to my questions, race and ethnicity were not brought up by any of my white interviewees. When I asked questions about these areas, white participants utilized primarily tactics of avoidance, occasionally of “niceness”, and sometimes even of essentializing difference. In contrast, African American and Native American interviewees readily engaged in discussions of race and ethnicity.

Race is created and maintained through social and historical process of structures as organizing mechanisms and representation and signification to construct meaning (Omi and Winant 1994). Race remains highly salient in our society because of the unequal distribution of resources and life chances. As the groups most impacted by colonization, conquest, and enslavement, African Americans and Native Americans continue to be the most marginalized, carrying the heaviest costs of racial inequality. In order to change this, we need to examine how history carries forward into our present in all aspects of our lives, including within the world of quilting. African American and Native American quilters I interviewed had much to say on this, while other quilters generally had little. This is an example of how whiteness works within our society to obscure the impact of race.

Becoming.

For quilters of color who are in the borders of the racial formations of the United States, as immigrants or descendants of immigrants of non-African origin, quilting seems to be a positive avenue for constructing a life in the border zone. I am not speaking of assimilation; it is important to note that the two interviewees in this group did not speak of themselves as having left behind their identity as women of color, or of any desire to become more like white Americans. They seemed to have a sense of self as living in more than one culture, a kind of hybridity, an ability to build their own racial and ethnic identity over time, with different aspects of self prominent in various situations, environments, and activities. This may have been strengthened by the fact that both had married and had children with white men.

The white male interviewee who had become a traditional Hawaiian quilter and considered himself “almost kama’aina [Native]” raises other questions. Can white people leave whiteness? Michael had fully engaged in learning Hawaiian quilting, language, and culture in the Hawaiian way. Hawaiian culture includes the value of aloha, love and sharing, as foundational, and in spaces such as Hawaiian language immersion schools and hula halaus, people of any racial and ethnic heritage are welcomed to participate. Native Hawaiians are a numerical minority in their own land, while whites, although less than half the population and thus technically a minority, are the largest group numerically and control most of the state’s wealth. Yet there is a common expression in Hawaii that a person not of Native blood can be or become “Hawaiian at heart”, through the kinds of processes that Michael had embraced. It seems that deep

engagement in a cultural activity where whiteness is decentered may be a path for white people to enter a borderland, and this borderland may be an effective place from which to act back upon whiteness, challenging the racial hierarchy dominant in our society. But this borderland is murky, as it is also so easy for a white person to seemingly move into this space, while still enjoying all the privileges of whiteness. I will return to this question in my final chapter.

Being and remembering.

Quilting, for African American and Native American interviewees, was cultural production supporting knowledge about and pride in heritage. These interviewees were highly active in teaching within their communities as well as the general public about history and the present, functioning as cultural navigators and ambassadors between their own communities and whiteness. Aesthetics expressed in cultural production were aligned with cultural heritage. African American and Native American quilters talked of quilting as healing, relaxing, and spiritual as well as connecting them to ancestral roots (see also Hood 2000; Mazloomi 1998). Healing is not just individual, but communal; the individual needs to heal to strengthen the community, and the community needs to be healed to strengthen individuals.

This linking of individual and community is evident in how quilts are displayed, and who the intended audience is (see also Hood 200). African American and Native American quilters I interviewed chose to concentrate showing their quilt works in venues based in their communities and heritage. Grace, a California Native American woman, was thrilled to be asked to exhibit her art quilts in a special show of all Native artists

organized during September, the proposed (a bill is currently pending before the 2013-14 California State Legislature) California Native American Heritage Month. The African American guild sponsored small exhibits in libraries and other public places in the community during February, Black Heritage Month, and held their biennial guild show in a church or other location in one of the historically Black neighborhoods of their area. African American and Native American quilters often chose to donate their quilts for sale to raise funds for organizations working within African American and Native American communities, rather sell them within mainstream art channels.

Pictorial quilts made by African American and Native American interviewees tended to carry a message in what they depicted, while pictorial quilts made by white quilters tended to be neutral, simply featuring a landscape or other aesthetically pleasing scene. Quilts featuring shape-based compositions made by African American interviewees often also carried an indirect cultural message of cultural resistance, as they consciously utilized abstract elements related to an African aesthetic (see Barkley Brown 1989; Collins 1991).

Native American and African American communities often view art and aesthetics in a different manner than Western culture does, as a communal expression rather than simply individual, and as a means of constructing positive new identities (Hood 2000; Bedard 2011). Both African American quilters interviewed enjoyed using African fabrics in their work. For the Native American quilter, the lack of commercially available fabrics featuring a California Native aesthetic spurred her to create her own;

although this was more demanding of her personally, it was also more culturally appropriate.

African American and Native American interviewees told stories both of how they navigated within predominantly white quilting environments and how participating in quilting groups where members were predominantly African American or Native American was important to them. One aspect of this was a desire to be part of a group which valued similar aesthetics. Similar stories are told in Freeman (1996). One African American interviewee, Kay, identified this need for creative freedom as a reason she did not want to participate in predominantly white guilds which met nearer to her residence than the African American guild of which she is a member. Bea, also African American, was not interested in precision in lining up her patches, as she felt was valued in traditional white quilting. Both did visit quilt exhibits or shows put on by predominantly white groups. In a sense, the technical standards developed within predominantly white quilting groups as well as some of the aesthetic practices valued by them acted as a sort of controlling image (Collins 1991; Hood 2000) pushing Black women towards the frames and narratives of the dominant group. African American women quilters in my study chose self-definition instead, and found a space for this in an African American-centered guild.

Across all racial and ethnic groups, my interviewees used similar concepts to explain why quilting was important to them and how it supported them as creators and connected them to their heritage. For quilters of color, this heritage included memories

of white oppression, while for white quilters this heritage was remembered using mythologized versions of history which centered and celebrated whiteness.

Whiteness: fear, fascination, and aesthetics.

Color-blindness and power-evasiveness dominated in perspectives on race by white quilters. Whiteness remains the hidden norm against which difference is measured, and inequalities distributed according to race are not seen. What is not seen will not be changed. This perspective carries over into attempts to build a multiculturalism which is celebratory without acknowledging or working to address inequalities. Colorblindness claims not to see race; we do not talk about what we do not see. White people tend to see only intentional, explicit, and essentialist racial discrimination as racism (Frankenberg 1993:139), and whiteness remains the hidden center of cultural activity, with Others marginalized or exoticized. The pattern in certain scholarly realms of viewing quilting through a lens of whiteness was reflected in the general tone of unawareness of race I found in my conversations with white quilters.

There is a long history of white women's movement groups not allowing the participation of Black women, and of white women aiming to move into paid labor viewing Black women as competition for work opportunities (hooks 1981). This history has carried over into second wave feminism in the use of comparisons of white women's feeling of oppression to the black experience despite drastic differences in the two, and the seeking of changes that benefited white, middle-class/upper-class women, focused on access to the privileges of the white male capitalist patriarchal system (hooks 1981). The

maintenance of separate women's groups by race means white women do not have to confront racism or learn about the lives and needs of women of color.

Color-blindness and power-evasiveness also serve to support the claim that predominantly white groups are inclusive and welcoming, without their actually becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. Whites continue to overwhelmingly live in neighborhoods which are mostly white, socialize predominantly with whites, and express fear of spaces where whites are not numerically dominant. De jure segregation may have ended half a century ago, but de facto segregation continues. Whites perceive people of color as self-segregating *more* than whites, but this is not shown in studies (Bush 2004:145). Similarly, white quilters I interviewed seemed to have never considered attending a quilting group which was not predominantly white, and expressed some perception quilters in these groups were self-segregating from whites rather than the reverse. The fact that Native American members of a predominantly white guild tended to sit together and have close bonds with one another also was seen as reflecting a somewhat self-segregating choice on the part of these women.

While white quilters tend to participate in predominantly white quilting groups, demonstrating separation by race in public and social environments, their quilts sometimes depict Others or use, at least partially, aesthetics from other groups. Is this embracing of aesthetics but not the people and context of these aesthetics a step away from white self-segregation, or is it another facet of centering whiteness?

When difference becomes exoticized, culture is seen as abstracted from the context of the everyday lives of the people who live within it. Power is both deployed in

the act of abstraction and hidden, so that difference can be *seen* as benign. Sallee (2003:10-11) includes a mild discussion of the common interest in and sometimes imitation of Other quilting and fabric traditions by white, middle-class quilters in her study of a guild. She points to the number of how-to books on this topic, and explains how this interest seems to function for the white quilters:

[M]any contemporary quiltmakers share the Piecemakers' passion for learning about "other" quilters and traditions, whether or not these traditions are authentically—or even respectfully—represented in such sources. In Los Alamos, interest in these forms of quilting is, perhaps, a familiar and non-threatening way for white women in a community lacking a great deal of racial, ethnic and class diversity to explore commonalities and differences with quilters of other races (Ibid.:11).

Sallee recognizes that this interest and imitation may not be respectful to those it treats as Others, but she seems to accept it, as it may be beneficial for white women, allowing them to explore racialized difference in the abstract, where they have no reasons to fear since they do not actually leave their self-segregated space. Whiteness remains centered, and multiculturalism is an add-on to this, with whites benefitting while Others remain Othered.

The quilters in Sallee's (2003) study often used what they saw as they traveled as inspiration for their quilts. Several of my interviewees reported also doing so, including quilters of color. One white quilter, Nancy, showed me a quilt she had made with African fabrics and explained that she liked their brightness. Ray, a white man, used African fabrics fairly often in his quilts, particularly those that featured pictorial elements he was looking for to personalize a quilt for a specific recipient; for example, a print of tires to remember someone who owned a tire store. Ray also created quilts with political

messages, including his strong support of President Obama. Dora, a Filipina, made a few quilts featuring African fabrics after having traveled there. She bought the fabrics on her journey. One white quilter, Barbara, almost entirely used Asian fabrics, and explained this as an aesthetic preference. She had traveled to Japan on a quilting and textile-related tour. Although there are certain elements of exoticizing present in this use of fabrics from Africa and Asia, two of these quilters (Ray and Dora) also expressed some engagement with challenging whiteness, both as social distancing and active racist discrimination in daily life and racialized inequality through our political systems.

The interplay of appreciation and appropriation is complex. Quilters are drawn to visual and tactile features of fabric and quilt design, and find inspiration for their own quilting practice in the world around them. Quilting has always involved the blending and adapting of visual elements from the various cultural heritages present in the United States—from European, African, Native, and Asian roots. Appropriation is based in self-interest and profit, and perpetuates systems of dominance through whiteness. Appreciation is based in love and positive esteem—but needs to move beyond the level of the abstract to being connected with real people in context and active work to change power structures and social representations which perpetuate inequality, if it is to challenge rather than maintain whiteness.

The art world of Western culture claims to operate from a universal aesthetic. In claiming universality, mechanisms of color-blindness and power-evasiveness operate, and whiteness is supported. This becomes complicated when art includes elements which are clearly different from this “universal” or express cultural resistance. In the first case,

mechanisms are often used to re-make the aesthetic or devalue it as not art; in the latter, resort is often made to the view that aesthetics are pure, separate from systems of power, and so challenges to power do not fit the desired qualities of art. Art remains centered around white aesthetics, and white artists benefit. If white aesthetics are universal, then the use of elements from any culture is assumed as a given possibility or right of the artist. Quilting offers many challenges to the whiteness apparent in “high art” aesthetics, yet maintains other aspects of this whiteness. Because of its unique location, quilting can be a place where issues around aesthetics and their connections to racialized and gendered power systems can be discussed and creatively addressed. Rather than devaluing aesthetics and worldviews outside of whiteness, we can learn from them and use this learning to de-center whiteness. But this requires conscious engagement in questioning our society’s racial structures and active collaboration across racial groups.

Touchstones: Gee’s Bend or African Aesthetic quilts, remembering slavery.

In the views of my African American interviewees, despite the many areas which were problematic, there was much that was positive in the phenomenal attention given to the Gee’s Bend quilt exhibits. Poor Black women were celebrated as artists, cultural creators of beauty; and their creations were recognized *for* their differences from the traditional white American style of quilting. This difference was both seen, in the patronizing view which used white aesthetics as its center, as a mysterious affinity to certain modern art and, in the view of others as evidence of the retention of African aesthetics, a testament to survival despite slavery and all of the other ways that those of African heritage in the United States have been oppressed. From this latter view, the

inclusion of this aesthetic within American culture was something that had been a long time coming. Just as art quilting had broadened and strengthened the appeal and practice of quilting as well as its reception by the non-quilting public, so did embracing rather than devaluing an African American aesthetic.

But there is a story specific to Gee's Bend and quilting, too. In 1965, a white priest involved in the Civil Rights movement became fascinated with quilts he saw in the area around Gee's Bend. After trying to sell some of the quilts through various means, he decided a more productive method would be for the women to form a cooperative—and thus the Freedom Quilting Bee began, with the goal of providing work opportunities and income sorely needed in the area. The priest's wife at the time, a student of Art History, said,

What distinguished Gee's Bend quilts from all other American quilts I had ever seen was their bold patterns. They had self-confidence. They were aggressive patterns. What grabbed initially was the boldness, the aggressiveness, the assertive patterns so different from white Appalachian quilts that are tight, sometimes tedious and seem introverted. These were extroverted quilts. The contrast was evident immediately. The Gee's Bend quilts reminded me of the school of hard-edge geometry, painters such as Frank Stella and Barnett Newman. They did not conform readily to anything in traditional art other than paintings (Callahan 1987:42).

Within a few short years, though, these very characteristics were de-valued, as the Freedom Quilting Bee quilters were encouraged by their mostly white advisors and marketers to standardize their quilting and aim it towards certain audiences, rather than continue to develop their own creativity. In her book telling the history of the Freedom Quilting Bee, white historian Callahan celebrates the achievement of this standardization. "Two decades later, the Freedom Quilting Bee is like a butterfly that has left its cocoon.

Its contemporary quilts are flawlessly executed in proper, machine-washable polyester (Callahan 1987:29).” The Freedom Quilting Bee fumbled along, never making real income from these coerced quilts. So the “discovery” of the Gee’s Bend quilts in the late 1990s was actually a second round of outsiders both celebrating the Benders’ creativity and harnessing it for their own intentions.

One positive outcome of the Gee’s Bend exhibits was that in many of the places where the exhibits were shown, local African American quilters became involved in being docents, demonstrating quilting to museum-goers, and otherwise helping stage the exhibits. They then received respect and recognition from exhibit viewers. Further, they formed new networks and connections amongst themselves, supporting each other in their pursuit of quilting and celebration of creativity.

This leaves us with many questions and few solid answers. Does public recognition, such as of the Gee’s Bend quilts, translate later to closing of social distances and narrowing of inequalities? Is it an opening or decentering of whiteness? Or does it help to sustain whiteness, demonstrating an additive model of multiculturalism, where whites feel they have done something good but there is no change in material circumstances of inequality?

The second touchstone within the quilting world where issues of race often came to the fore was the attention which had been given to the question of whether or not quilts were used as codes on the Underground Railroad. The core of this debate is whose story is history; how do we remember slavery, and what is at work in formulating this remembrance?

Stories of this use of quilts as codes had come from African American families and communities, passed down as oral histories. This was one of the major arguments used by those who claim that this cannot be a historical fact; although these arguments emphasized that there were no material traces, just oral histories, my African American interviewees questioned if the fact that these oral histories were from the African American community was actually more of what led to this doubting. Root (1996:113) notes a similar disavowal of stories that arise from Native communities.

Just as the Gee's Bend quilt exhibits marked, finally, a positive recognition of African American women as cultural producers, the Underground Railroad Quilt Code and its representation in several highly popular children's books marked a change in our remembering of slavery. Turner says these children's books "represent a long-awaited moment in which narratives of black life are deemed relevant and worthwhile stories for all American children (2009:146)." In confirming the agency of slaves in securing their own freedom, she explains, "[t]hese are stories of liberation, not escape (Ibid.:162)."

In the final chapter, I will offer some thoughts on how we can work to challenge dominant conceptions of gender, class, and race within the world of quilting.

CONCLUSION

“We need more light about each other. Light creates understanding, understanding creates love, love creates patience, and patience creates unity.” –Malcolm X

I received these words of Malcolm X’s about 20 years ago, on a post card bearing his picture. It was sent to me where I was then living in rural Hawaii, the Ka’ū district of the Big Island, where I was becoming a parent. It came from my friend Jerusalem who was then becoming a nurse practitioner at Yale. I think about this quote daily, and each day I find something new within it.

Quilting is a major positive force in many lives, and quilters organize their social activities around this passion. In these social activities, and in the cultural products (quilts), social relations of race, class, and gender are reproduced and sometimes challenged, at both individual and group levels. Cultural activity and production must grapple with the social relations of the culture within which it occurs.

Quilting is practiced by women, and some men, across racial and ethnic groups in the United States. Just as there is no unitary essence that is “woman,” there are a multitude of ways in which quilters relate their quilting with their gender identity, in an ongoing and complex manner. Quilting is both acknowledged and appreciated as being a women-centered form of cultural production and is a space where quilters construct their own ways of being women and enjoying being with other women. For my interviewees, it is not primarily socializing with women that is the attraction to taking part in quilting groups, but the being together with other women who value creative, material, cultural production in common.

So where do we go from here? Can this common passion and pursuit become a space where social relations of gender, class, and race are actively addressed, a space where friendships and alliances are formed across these divides? I will briefly discuss some thoughts and possibilities in these directions, focusing on relations of gender and economics, models of power, race, and whiteness as a mechanism bringing these together.

Cornel West calls for a “genealogical materialist analysis” in local places as well as at the societal, structural level to bring to light ways by which inequality is organized and maintained by race as well as resisted in social life (in Lipsitz 2006:180). I hope that this research is a step in this direction, encouraging white Americans to rethink our perspectives on difference and become race-cognizant in all aspects of our lives, actively challenging and changing the structures built through our constructions, not just in areas of economic and political inequality, but of cultural inequality. Distances are maintained through our self-separation, our unawareness of the maps in the mind we use to navigate social spaces and activities. What better place and media through which to come together than quilting? Nearly half a century after the Civil Rights movement, social and leisure activities, as well as our neighborhoods, those areas we choose in our lives, remain spaces where whites tend to self-segregate.

How can we form ongoing commitments to overcoming whiteness and building collaborations? This experience of stepping outside of one’s own racial group is a daily occurrence for many people of color in the United States, a necessity when going to work, school, and numerous spaces of leisure, business, and public services. But few

white people experience this entering into spaces where people are predominantly of color, and most white people are able to choose to avoid doing so if they so desire. The common thread is the need for autonomy rather than separatism, where whiteness will not be the determiner or center, and actual cross-group solidarity and respect can grow. As social inequality is lessened, we can work to change material inequality.

Within our capitalist economy, class and consumption are closely connected with notions of gendered labor. Quilting has a mythologized but also real history as a cultural production by women of all classes, with even those creating from scraps recognized as making beauty and warmth, bringing together function and aesthetics. In the present, quilting as encouraged by its culture industry is a relatively costly activity, and quilters tend to be middle-class and higher in terms of household income. The culture industry of quilting targets women as consumers and ties quilting to a consumer-oriented economy. How can we work to expand and re-claim quilting outside of this class status and away from consumption?

The gendering of labor and its impacts vary also by race and ethnicity. For women of color in the United States, the family and home are often a space of safety and self-fulfillment, while the public sphere, dominated by whiteness, is not. The needs and desires for change, then, of women of color are not simply or necessarily the same as those of white women as portrayed by many white feminists. Collins (1991) describes work by African American women in the family and home as a site of creativity and resistance to oppression, based in love rather than money; normative white constructs of class, gender, family, and labor often do not “fit” the experiences of women of color.

How can quilting become a space supporting labor-related and economic concerns of women? Could childcare and fabric-exchange or sharing networks be formed around quilting-centered groups? Quilting cooperatives might be a means to sell quilts, combining elements of capitalism, community-based economics, and self-determination. The Freedom Quilting Bee included many of these aspects, but its cultural production was overly determined by outsiders aiming to please a mainstream white market. Quilters know the power of quilts and quilting. We form much of our lives around these. Perhaps we could extend this to making quilting a kind of community center. This could encourage more younger people, both men and women, as well as children, to become quilters.

In the broadest sense, what I am suggesting is a re-visioning of power and worldview. As hooks (1981:156) explains, “Women’s liberationists, white and black, will always be at odds with one another as long as our idea of liberation is based on having the power that white men have. For that power denies unity, denies common connections, and is inherently divisive (hooks 1981:156).” Collins (1991) calls for a conception of power as creating and conserving culture rather than authority and hierarchy, where ethics and values are based in love, community, and justice. She envisions social change as occurring through a combination of change in the consciousness of the individual and institutions. Collins’ concept of self-definition includes a self in relation with others, connected with family, community, and the world, with self-valuation, respect, independence, self-reliance, and persistence. These are the same values expressed by quilters I interviewed; they explained their quilting practice as

a form of self-actualization. As individuals and groups speak from their standpoints, dialogue, listening and responding, can be entered to facilitate this change (Collins 1991). This is a humanizing discourse between subjects. Knowledge is constructed communally. Everyone speaks, everyone listens, everyone responds; this is what it takes to build a community where power dynamics are addressed and whiteness is decentered (Ibid.:237).

Quilter Allyson Allen's storytelling of the African American experience are an example of the openings for this dialogue which have already been made within the world of quilting, a place of shared passion for creative cultural production. The question is, what are we producing? Will we enter into this dialogue?

An example of a framework to begin this dialogue and collaboration is seen in The Native Quilting Research and Exhibition Project, which became the basis for the first major travelling exhibit of Native-made quilts, *To Honor and Comfort* (1997). The Project set clear goals for itself, which included showing "how quiltmaking is a living, dynamic tradition within Native communities" and working "to counter stereotypes about Native American and Hawaiian cultural traditions in general, and material culture in particular, as historically depicted through the media (MacDowell and Dewhurst 1997:205)." They also established explicit guidelines for collaborative work which would ensure the honoring and centering of Native epistemology and cultural practice:

1. Each partner brings significant strengths/insights to the undertaking;
2. The goals of each can be complementary and actually supportive;
3. Multiple perspectives are valued and would be incorporated in the planning and development of the exhibition;

4. One must seek to understand and respect the complex cultural context, often a ceremonial occasion, in which quilts are used/presented to effectively present quilting traditions;
5. The Native voice must be clear and present during all phases of the project to convey the complexity of the nature of quilts in the community; and
6. All knowledge gained/shared should be shared among the partners based on their particular goals/needs (Ibid.:207)

These guidelines can be a model for other collaborative multiracial work in material culture, particularly public exhibitions.

Along my research journey, I found some glimmers of change, examples of engagement in cultural production which challenges inequalities and social relations of race, class, and gender. Grace's work organizing quilting and talking circles with Native women, young and old, to create community, share stories, and make expressions of cultural identity and visions of a world of beauty is an example of strength and rebuilding.

A similar project is *Hilos de la Vida* (Threads of Life), begun in 2005 in a rural California agricultural area, which combines the making of story quilts with support for learning English and parenting children who attend English language schools. Participants are women who are mostly new immigrants from Mexico, who bring their children, so that the quilting group is also an extended family and community. The group has exhibited their quilts in a variety of places around their area, as well as formed a cooperative to sell their work through a website, although it is not clear how successful this latter venture has been. They receive most of their funding from grants, both from community and other foundations, as well as government-funded initiatives like Even

Start Family Literacy and First 5, and maintain close connections with their county adult education program. The women, who had never quilted before, make “folkloric story quilts” of their children and families, dreams, and experiences, including life in Mexico and the perils of crossing the border, often without documents. They are loaned sewing machines to use at home. The women testify in interviews that they are honored to be considered artists, and they are happy they have had this way to share their stories with Americans, who they feel know so little about their lives as immigrants and agricultural workers (Anderson Valley Artists and Molly Johnson Martinez 2009).

The Black Heritage Month community quilting event, organized by the “African American” guild I visited, was unique—free and fun, with a sense of active community-building. In the heart of an area of the city which was the new home of many African Americans moving westward in the years around World War II, but now blighted by political and economic policies from then to now, about 60 people gathered, mostly women; the guild members greeted those who wanted to learn to quilt, gave each of us a bag with all the materials prepared and ready for us to hand-stitch together a nine-patch mini-quilt. We were asked to sit at tables around the room. The women of the guild made sure each learner had individual assistance as needed, with at least one guild member sitting at each table. As I looked around, I saw a wide range of learners—Black, white, Asian, and multiracial; children with parents and grandparents; women from early adulthood to elders; women who came alone; and women who came with friends. As each new quilter finished her mini-quilt, they were brought to the front of the room and celebrated for their work. Youth were especially recognized, and directed to take their

work around to show all the people around the tables, so that each of us could personally give compliments and encouragement. Everyone was invited to return for future guild meetings. Fabulous gift baskets of quilting supplies as well as self-rewards such as skin care products and gift certificates were given out to the lucky holders of winning numbers in the door prize drawing. Each learner left with a beginning quilting kit, ready to embark on their own next quilting adventure. They also left having experienced guidance and support from African American women, acting as community othermothers.

I also found several articles, particularly in magazines for quilters, about the growth of quilting projects in prisons, for both men and women, where the prisoner-quilters are able to benefit from the meditative and healing aspects of the quilting process and use their quilted product as a beginning to rebuild connections with their families, communities, and the world beyond their walls. Quilting projects with school children seem to be growing as well.

In my own view, there is nothing more human and honorable than working to make beauty around us, caring for others in our homes and families, our communities and society. This, for me, is not a facet of being female or feminine, nor of any particular race, ethnicity, or class, but a value and worldview, a way of sensing, knowing, creating, acting, being—of making culture. We live and create within a historical legacy which continues to shape our present, but we also are able to shape our future.

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APPENDIX. INTERVIEW GUIDE

Opening: Tell me a little about yourself and your life---what's important to know about you? This might include something about your family, education, work, where you live and have lived, or other things you think are important.

Transition: Tell me a little about your quilting practice—how did you become interested in and learn to quilt, how has your quilting changed over time, and what does your current quilting process include? What do you do with your quilts, and how do you make this choice?

Key questions:

- 1) What quilting groups do you belong to, and how are they important to you? What activities are you involved in in these groups? How do you choose a quilting group to belong to?
- 2) What do you think is important or special about quilting?
- 3) How do you see quilting within our society/culture? What roles do you think quilting plays in our society/culture?
- 4) How do you think quilting is seen by others in our society/culture?
- 5) What do you think will be the future of quilting? What do you hope will be the future of quilting?

Is there anything else you would like to add?